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Introduction: The novel in German since 1990

Stuart Taberner

THE PROBLEM WITH THE GERMAN NOVEL

In his *The German Novel*, published in 1956 and for a long time a standard reference work in the English-speaking world, Roy Pascal averred that even the very best of German fiction was marred by a 'sad lack of the energy and bite of passion'. It was impossible to deny, the British critic claimed, that there was 'something provincial, philistine' at its core. Indeed, he concluded, German writing was strangely lacking – 'Altogether the characters in the German novels seem less alive, less avid of life, less capable of overflowing exuberances, than those of the great European novels.'[1]

Pascal's oddly damning assessment of his object of study might today be merely of historical interest as an example of the supposition of a German *Sonderweg* (special path) apart from other European nations, widely promulgated in the countries that had defeated Nazism only a few years earlier, if it were not for the fact that similar indictments feature throughout the 1990s in a series of debates on the German novel's post-war development. These more recent criticisms, however, were voiced not by critics outside Germany seeking to identify its 'peculiarity' but in the Federal Republic itself. While scholarly attention has focused, then, on Ulrich Greiner's attack on Christa Wolf's alleged cowardly opportunism in waiting until the collapse of the GDR before publishing *Was bleibt* (*What Remains*, 1990), an account of the way the East German security service had hounded her composed ten years previously,[2] of greater interest here are the broader criticisms of the German novel elaborated by Greiner and his fellow conservative critic Frank Schirrmacher around the same time with regard to its 'provinciality'[3] and its bland, post-Nazi 'aesthetics of political conviction' (*Gesinnungsästhetik*).[4] As if echoing Pascal's comment of three decades earlier, Schirrmacher declared that contemporary German fiction was 'lifeless, lacking in confidence, copied; in short: lacking in originality'.[5]

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Unlike Pascal, however, Greiner and Schirrmacher direct their criticism exclusively towards the German novel's development after 1945 – they would certainly reject his dismissal of its exemplars from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795–96) to Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*, 1924). What's more, they identify a very different cause for its failings. Pascal, then, betrays his Anglo-Saxon prejudices by moving swiftly from the intriguing assertion that the German novel is best appreciated 'in relation to the metaphysical aspiration, the longing for night and death, which was formulated most comprehensively by German Romanticism' to the bizarre conclusion that it 'fails' because, with the exception of Goethe, the private lives of German writers are incapable of generating what F. R. Leavis had defined as the strength of the great English novelists – that is, their 'vital capacity for experience'.[6] For Pascal, it seems, the German novel is not 'English' enough. For Greiner and Schirrmacher, on the other hand, the German novel, in its contemporary manifestation at least, is insufficiently 'German'. Thus the timid parochialism *they* identify results, they insist, not from a surplus of metaphysical reflection but from a lack of national self-belief, caused by Germany's belated emergence as a nation-state, its lack of metropolitan centres to rival Paris or London, and, after 1945, a self-flagellating obsession with the Nazi past and the emergence of an aesthetically neutered moralism.[7]

Other, left-liberal commentators such as Martin Hielscher and Uwe Wittstock appeared in the mid-1990s to echo Pascal more directly, unwittingly, of course, and with a twist to match present-day realities: German writing needed to become not more 'English' but more 'American'. According to Hielscher, then, 'American literature was a synonym for what is missing in German fiction'.[8] For Wittstock, reanimating the *Sonderweg* thesis, German writing was 'other-worldly' and ill-fitting with the Western democracy now firmly anchored in the Federal Republic.[9] A 'new readability' (*Neue Lesbarkeit*) would require 'German' ponderousness to mutate into an 'Anglo-American' delight in story-telling, plot and character development. A good start had been made in the 1980s, Wittstock argued, with Patrick Süskind, Sten Nadolny, Klaus Modick, Michael Krüger and Christoph Ransmayr, but a large gap remained. Indeed, twenty years after unification, international successes such as Bernhard Schlink's *Der Vorleser* (*The Reader*, 1995) and Daniel Kehlmann's *Die Vermessung der Welt* (*Measuring the World*, 2005) are still rare.

Throughout the 1990s, other writers and critics ranged over similar terrain. Maxim Biller, then, claimed that German fiction was about as

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'sensuous' as the 'city plan of Kiel' (1991),[10] whereas Iris Radisch identified an East–West split, with an authentically 'German' aesthetic from the former GDR drawing on the 'metaphysical traditions of the German cultural tradition' contrasting with 'American pragmaticism' in West German texts: 'The East is tragic, the West is comic.'[11] Matthias Politycki, alternatively, complained that the 'fixation on "readability"'[12] had set German authors off on 'the wrong track, an *American* track',[13] and Biller railed against a 'limp-dick literature' incapable of taking a moral stance.[14] To be sure, the contestants mostly divided along generational lines (the wartime generation; former '68ers; vocal '78ers; the post-*Wende* 89ers; and faux-sociological constructs such as the 'Generation Golf') and politics (conservatives versus 'old' West German left-liberals versus self-consciously apolitical younger writers), although they were strikingly homogenous in terms of provenance and gender. (Almost all were men, excepting Radisch, and from West Germany, and amost none were from ethnic minorities, excepting Biller, who is of Jewish-Czech origins.) Yet the concerns remained the same. Is there a German *Sonderweg* which condemns German fiction to remain provincial, navel-gazing and unmarketable abroad? Is German writing too philosophical, or too moralistic, or simply too dull? Is the German novel *too* German – or not German enough?

FROM THE GERMAN NOVEL TO THE NOVEL IN GERMAN

Two key blind spots in these debates are insinuated above. First, that Wittstock's favoured writers are all men might appear to imply that the German literary tradition is created by male authors alone. Do women writers, then, have different (more trivial?) concerns to the profoundly philosophical issues raised by men? Second, does the framing of German literature as an instance of a German 'otherworldliness' or, more recently, as an exclusively *West* German discourse mean that minority (or East German) authors cannot participate *per se*? Biller may occupy the traditional Jewish role of insider/outsider (he is 'almost white'), but are we to assume that other minority writers have nothing to contribute to German fiction, or to German culture?

Scholarship since the late 1980s has amply demonstrated the centrality of both women writers and minority authors to German literature past and present. Moreover, the existence of multiple states in which German is a majority language and of writers who are, or once were, members of German-speaking populations in other countries (in Poland or Romania,

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for example) has always complicated the easy assumption of an 'ideal' correspondence between today's (Federal Republic of) Germany and German writing. Indeed, rather than *The German Novel*, it is surely better to speak of *The Novel in German*. A survey volume such as this, therefore, would certainly be woefully lacking if women authors did not appear alongside their male peers, but it would also be deficient if former East Germans were not present, or key Austrian and Swiss writers. (Christian Kracht was born in Switzerland, but Peter Bichsel, Peter Stamm or Zoë Jenny may be more representative – indeed, as Julian Preece argues in this volume, his *Faserland* (*Frayed-Land*, 1995) may even reject the Swiss tradition.) The same is true of writers of Turkish origin, and the present book is certainly less complete for its lack of chapters on authors with other migration histories, for instance, Libuše Moníková (Czech), Carmen Francesca Banciu (Romanian), Terézia Mora (Hungarian), Ilija Trojanow (Bulgarian) or Sasa Stanišić (Bosnian), all exemplars of what Brigid Haines has called the 'eastern turn'[15] in recent German-language writing. Of comparable significance are writers with a Jewish background, some born nationals of a (defunct or existing) German-speaking country and still living in one (e.g. Katja Behrens, Esther Dischereit and Robert Schindel) whereas others are resident abroad (e.g. Barbara Honigmann), and some migrants with complicated 'migration routes' (e.g. Biller and Vladimir Vertlib) or 'returnees', from Israel or the United States for the most part (e.g. Rafael Seligmann and Ruth Klüger). Still others self-identify as something different than Jewish: Wladimir Kaminer, for example, who projects himself as 'Russian'. All these writers add to the transnational reality of the German-language novel, as do authors such as Herta Müller, winner of the Nobel Prize in 2009, and Richard Wagner, both from the German-speaking Romanian Banat. And, self-evidently, identities may intersect, overlap or diverge in the same person. Monika Maron, for example, is part-Jewish (thematised in *Pawels Briefe* (*Pavel's Letters*, 1999)) yet she also consciously foregrounds her experience as an East German and, in *Endmoränen* (*End Moraines*, 2002), as an ex-GDR *and* a woman writer unsure of her relevance in the post-*Wende* order.

Diversity, as I have noted elsewhere, is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary German-language literature, and not just in terms of the variety of authors writing in German today, but also in relation to theme, form, technique and style.[16] Yet this diversity does not mean that we need shy away from identifying key characteristics of German-language novels as a corpus of texts produced in interaction with certain social, political and cultural discourses. It simply means that we must be

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more subtle, more differentiated, and certainly more cautious. Thus the focus on the German-language novel's metaphysical bent, the dilemmas of national identity, and the aesthetic value of 'engaged literature' is not entirely misguided. What needs to be more fully grasped, however, is the complex interaction between these 'structures of feeling' (Raymond Williams) and a much wider range of authors as they inflect discourses of self, identity and 'posture'[17] within local contexts and in relation to the broader transformation of the world in an age defined by globalisation, religious and ethnic confrontation, and astonishing shifts in social, political and economic power. Some authors complicate these discourses from perspectives within, adjacent to, or traversing 'the German tradition'; some 'migrate' into them but also bring different, parallel and overlaying experiences to bear; and still others seek to restate, deconstruct or re-invent them entirely, although they never quite succeed, of course.

In this introduction, I survey three aspects of the novel in German since 1990. These relate to its depiction of the social change in the present, modes of representing the past, and engagement with today's transnational reality. Along the way, key aesthetic features are also referenced. In my brief discussions of a range of recent texts, I hope to exemplify some of the issues described above and to show something of the present-day diversity of a novelistic tradition that remains as relevant to the contemporary moment as it ever was.

THE NOVEL IN GERMAN AND THE PRESENT

On 3 October 1990, East and West Germany were reunified, marking a key moment in the end of the Cold War. Almost immediately writers set about re-mapping not only the enlarged Federal Republic but also the broader social, political and cultural transformations in the German-speaking countries and beyond as a new era in world history began. Twenty years later many of these texts are forgotten but a number stand out for their compelling engagement with societal change. Of these, plenty have to do with the upheaval in the former GDR, but numerous others focus on the erection of new borders (some actual, others cultural, psychological or economic) and, in the course of the 1990s, on the global phenomena of mass migration, religious and ethnic confrontation, and the opening up of markets, lifestyles and cultures.

The novel, of course, has always typically spoken of its age. Indeed, it is the literary form most closely associated with the rise of Western modernity, emerging at around the same time as the 'rational state' and

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a large and assertive middle class to depict the unpoetic realities of massification and the conflict between individual and society. This is no less true of the German-language novel since 1990, which inflects this general understanding of the genre in dialogue with internalised and/or imagined traditions and sensibilities linked to the contexts of its production and reception. Immediately striking about key texts relating to German unification, accordingly, is their tendency to go beyond 'sociology'; that is, beyond a more or less realist portrayal of the structural transformation of the *Neue Länder* (the 'new states' of the former GDR), or, for that matter, the 'old' states in the West, and their propensity to frame the end of the GDR and the beginnings of a unified Germany in distinctly – and traditionally – metaphysical terms as the loss of (the dream of) a utopia never actually achieved: 'What I never had, I will forever miss.'[18] Christa Wolf's *Leibhaftig* (*In the Flesh*, 2002), for example, sends the author's hospitalised *alter ego* on a descent into fantasy through a labyrinth of tunnels running beneath the building sites of the new unified Germany to excavate the GDR's utopian ideals. Similarly, Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (*Strange Stars Turn to Earth*, 2003, the title a quotation from the German-Jewish poet Else Lasker-Schüler alluding to exile and cosmopolitanism) offers a wistful account of the Turkish actress's border-crossings between East and West Berlin, the idealistic commitment of East German colleagues, and the political romanticism of West German flatmates.

Other novels, of course, are more narrowly conceived, such as Brumme's *Nichts als das* (*Nothing Other than That*, 1994), recounting his childhood in the East German village of Elend ('misery'); Kerstin Hensel's *Tanz am Kanal* (*Dance by the Canal*, 1994), portraying the sexual and economic exploitation of its itinerant protagonist before and after unification; Christoph Hein's *Napoleonspiel* (*Napoleon Game*, 1993) and *Willenbrock* (2001), in which the failings of the GDR are simply substituted for the anarchy of the free market; and the wave of Stasi-novels dealing with the security service's infiltration of the private sphere of GDR citizens.[19] At the same time, a series of similarly prosaic, if cheerier, texts present life in East Germany as a 'home' to be recalled fondly despite the hardships, including Thomas Brussig's *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (*At the Shorter End of the Sonnenallee*, 1999), and West Germans too wrote novels reflecting on what *they* had lost: for instance, Andreas Neumeister's *Ausdeutschen* (*Out-of-German*, 1994), Norbert Niemann's *Wie man's nimmt* (*How You Take it*, 1998), Politycki's *Weiberroman* (*Women-Novel*, 1993), Frank Goosen's *liegen lernen* (*Learning to Lie*, 2000), and Sven

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Regener's bestseller *Herr Lehmann* (*Berlin Blues*, 2001). These novels frequently invoke nostalgia (for 'togetherness' in the former GDR, or for the cosy provinciality of West Germany's consumer culture) as a response to abrupt social change – the best is Ingo Schulze's *Simple Storys* (1998), which reproduces the texture of life in the East German province while resisting, via the density of the relationships between its multiple narratives, incorporation into an all-German, or globalised, whole.

Of greater significance, however, excepting *Simple Storys*, is a series of brutally *dystopian* novels. It is certainly true that Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes Like Us*, 1995, see Saunders in this volume) channels a loss of faith in utopian promises into comedy – the impossibly named Uhltzscht claims that he brought down the Wall with his penis – as do Jens Sparschuh's *Der Zimmerspringbrunnen* (*The Indoor Fountain*, 1995) and Matthias Biskupek's *Der Quotensachse* (*The Quota-Saxon*, 1996), much as Volker Braun's *Wendehals* (*Wry-Neck*, 1995) transforms disillusionment with the alacrity with which so many GDR functionaries switched to serving the new capitalist order into a philosophically inflected satire. But other texts are far darker. We might point, then, to Ingo Schramm's *Fitchers Blau* (*Fitcher's Blue*, 1996), which reworks the Bluebeard legend in an unremittingly bleak portrayal of 'progress'; Thomas Hettche's *Nox* (1995), where the dream of German unification is parodied when the narrator's murderer is mounted by a dog on 9 November 1989; or Karen Duve's *Regenroman* (*Rain*, 1999), in which extreme violence penetrates the swamplands of the former East Germany. Or, turning to more global concerns, we might think of Duve's *Dies ist kein Liebeslied* (*This Is Not a Love-Song*, 2002, see Chapter 11), whose self-loathing female protagonist both exploits, and is exploited by, modern-day consumer culture; Julia Franck's depictions in *Liebediener* (*Love Servant*, 1999) of a loss of social solidarity in global cities; or Zoë Jenny's detailing in *Blütenstaubzimmer* (*The Pollen Room*, 1997) of the evacuation of the 1960s ideal of self-realisation by moral relativism. In the work of the 2004 Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek too, including *Gier* (*Greed*, 2000, see Chapter 10), the rhetoric of self-realisation is set against the degrading of the individual by patriarchy and racism, and Müller's novels from *Der Fuchs war damals schon der Jäger* (*The Fox Was the Hunter Even Then*, 1992) to *Atemschaukel* (*Everything I Possess I Carry With Me*, 2009) reveal the gap between the promise of emancipation and the reality of broken human subjects, during the communist period in her native Romania and after her move to the Federal Republic. Kracht's *Faserland* (1995, see Chapter 9) and Feridun Zaimoğlu's *German Amok* (2002), alternatively, indict the triumph of global brands

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over poetic transcendence (Kracht) and the commodification of art and individuality within a colonising capitalism (Zaimoğlu).

Still more self-consciously 'metaphysical' are novels by cultural-conservatives such as Martin Walser, Botho Strauß, Peter Handke, Arnold Stadler and Martin Mosebach. Stadler's *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler* (*The Scrap Dealer*, 1999), for example, opens with the arrival of an asylum seeker who moves in with his wife while he attempts, in vain, to feel 'authentic pain', whether for this or his own loss of *Heimat*; his *Sehnsucht* (*Longing*, 2002), as the title suggests, wishes for 'something beyond' the mundane materialism and anxious political correctness of the Federal Republic – genuine experience, awe, redemption: divinity. In Strauß's *Die Fehler des Kopisten* (*The Errors of the Copyist*, 1997), poetic transcendence is set against a prosaic, unsentimental modernity, and Handke's *Eine winterliche Reise* (*A Winter Journey*, 1996) ignores Serbian atrocities during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in order to undertake a voyage of self-discovery through the region's awe-inspiring landscapes. And Walser – whose work is not as tongue-in-cheek as Stadler's, as self-important as Handke's, or as exhaustingly overdetermined as Strauß's – nevertheless impresses with the obstinacy of his protagonists: Alfred's mania for collecting objects from the (German) past in *Die Verteidigung der Kindheit* (*In Defence of Childhood*, 1991) is a heroic yet ineffective effort to transcend the inane presentism of modern society; the modern-day Kohlhaas-figure in *Finks Krieg* (*Fink's War*, 1995) refuses to be crushed by the self-serving bureaucracy from which he is unfairly dismissed, despite the overwhelming futility of his endeavours to assert his subjectivity; and Susi Gern, in *Lebenslauf der Liebe* (*CV of Love*, 2000), refuses to give up her naïve hope that love might enable her to transcend her own self and join with another even in a society as unremittingly bourgeois as post-1990 Germany. In the work of all these authors, as in Mosebach's *Die Türkin* (*The Turkish Woman*, 1999) and *Das Beben* (*The Quake*, 2005), set in Turkey and India respectively, the instrumental thinking of the present day is seen as an imposition of the victorious Americans (and British) that, having triumphed in Germany after 1945, is now well on its way to colonising the rest of the world via consumerism, free markets and the globalisation of US culture.

THE NOVEL IN GERMAN AND THE PAST

Other texts, of course, confront the contemporary moment by invoking the past. Most obviously, autobiographies feature heavily in post-1990

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German-language writing as authors reflect on the changing regimes through which they have lived: for example Ludwig Harig, Uwe Saeger, Klüger, Günter de Bruyn, Günter Kunert, Christoph Hein, and *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (*Peeling the Onion*), from 2006, by the 1999 Nobel Prize winner Günter Grass. In addition, other examples of 'life-writing' are marked by what Edward Saïd, drawing on Adorno, has termed 'late style': Uwe Timm's *Rot* (*Red*, 2001); Maron's *Endmöranen* (2002, see Chapter 6); Peter Schneider's *Skylla* (2005); Grass's *Ein weites Feld* (*Too Far Afield*, 1995, see Chapter 2), *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* (see Chapter 18) and *Die Box* (*The Box*, 2008); and Walser's reprise of the seventy-three-year-old Goethe's infatuation with the eighteen-year-old Ulrike von Levetzow in *Ein liebender Mann* (*A Loving Man*, 2008). In each case, narrators juxtapose earlier periods, or youthful passions, with their ageing present-day selves and explore a sense of being, as Saïd puts it, '*in*, but oddly apart *from* the present'.[20] Thus Timm and Schneider cast back to the revolutionary fervour of the late 1960s and ruminate on the material comfort and half-posed subversive sensibility that defines their lives today, whereas Maron and Grass hark back to the early Federal Republic, the GDR, or the Nazi period (and Fontane, in *Ein weites Feld*), and offer the 'irascible gesture of leave-taking' typical of late style, reiterating their self-stylisations as literary dissidents even as they acknowledge their redundancy.[21] Finally, Walser confirms late style as the older writer's prerogative, entailing the right to disrupt convention – for example his comments in his 1998 'Friedenspreisrede' (Peace Prize Speech) on the 'instrumentalisation' of the Nazi past – without care for the consequences.

More broadly, contemporary German-language novels dealing with the past crystallise a tension between fiction as a mode of historical *re-imagining* and fiction as an instrument of historical *interrogation* – once again, we return to a traditional concern with identity and with art either as a poetic transcendence of a flawed reality or as an immanent intervention in the same. Indeed, just as Grass's *Unkenrufe* (*The Call of the Toad*, 1992) sets itself against the 'metaphysical' investment in German unity typical of Walser (in *Dorle und Wolf*, for example, published two years before unification in 1988, describing Germans as 'halved people')[22] with a depiction of a German (re-)colonisation of eastern Poland enacted via the reburial of German expellees in their pre-1945 ancestral home, so might his *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* respond to Walser's determinedly mythologising *Ein springender Brunnen* (*A Gushing Fountain*, 1998, see Chapter 7) with a 'worked example' of how to approach the past critically. Whereas *Ein springender Brunnen* 'brackets out' Nazism to re-imagine Johann's

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(Martin Johannes Walser …) teenage years as a more 'pure' engagement with poetry, therefore, in *Zwiebel* Grass confronts his adolescent self with his *a posteriori* knowledge of German culpability in a cross-examination that locates his own youthful obsession with art as deeply implicated in the fanaticism of the time. (An alternative reading of *Zwiebel*, focusing on its late style, might view the text as an idiosyncratic *Künstlerroman*, or novel of artistic development.)

Other key novels mirror this divide between those seeking to re-imagine a past 'unburdened' by present-day knowledge – an 'authentic' past that 'would make itself available to us as if of itself'[23] – and those bringing a critical consciousness to bear. Frequently, these texts reflect a re-emergence of interest in 'German wartime suffering'. Grass's *Im Krebsgang* (*Crabwalk*, 2002), depicting the response of three generations to the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff* in early 1945 with the loss of thousands of German refugees fleeing the advancing Russians, is the best known example, but other authors also thematise this controversial issue. For example, Dieter Forte's *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen* (*The Boy with the Bloody Shoes*, 1995) and Walter Kempowski's *Alles umsonst* (*All For Nothing*, 2006, see Chapter 14) each conjure up an 'instinctive' community that transcends the outward conformity required by an 'alien' Nazi regime. In *Der Junge mit den blutigen Schuhen*, a multicultural mix of Germans with Polish names, Jews and forced labourers resists the Nazis *and* Allied bombing in Düsseldorf-Oberbilk; in *Alles umsonst*, centuries-old East Prussian ways of life are only finally destroyed by the invading Red Army. In contrast, Schindel's *Gebürtig* (*Born-Where*, 1992, see Chapter 1), Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene* (*Lost*, 1998), Marcel Beyer's *Spione* (*Spies*, 2000), Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (*In My Brother's Shadow*, 2003), F. C. Delius's *Mein Jahr als Mörder* (*My Year as a Murderer*, 2004, see Chapter 15), Dagmar Leupold's *Nach den Kriegen* (*After the Wars*, 2004), and Thomas Medicus's *In den Augen meines Großvaters* (*In My Grandfather's Eyes*, 2004) interrogate stories passed down within the family and official attempts to whitewash the past by juxtaposing these with historical accounts, original documents, photos, diary entries and letters.

Yet the desire to re-establish an intergenerational consensus may sometimes trump the critical acuity implied in this juxtaposition of sources and perspectives. In Ulla Hahn's *Unscharfe Bilder* (*Blurred Images*, 2003), for example, the narrator confronts her ageing father with evidence that he was involved in atrocities on the Eastern front but comes to share his self-image as the 'true victim'. In contrast, Michael Kleeberg's *Ein Garten im Norden* (*A Garden in the North*, 1998, see Chapter 8), on the other

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