CHAPTER 1

Introduction: literary fiction in the Berlin Republic

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On 19 April 1999 the parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was convened in the Reichstag (assembly building) in central Berlin as an all-German body for the first time in fifty-eight years during a ceremony to mark the transfer of the capital from the west German city of Bonn. The same occasion also celebrated the conclusion of Sir Norman Foster's dramatic renovation of an edifice which, in 1894, had been inaugurated as the seat for the congress of the first unified German state created in 1870–1, and which had witnessed some of the key moments in the drama of German history during the Wilhelmine period, the First World War, the Weimar Republic and the Nazi dictatorship. Some eight and a half years after the unification of 3 October 1990, the symbolic return to Berlin, marked in a historic structure which had remained derelict since the nation's defeat in 1945, confirmed for many of those watching that the Berlin Republic had finally come into existence.

Norman Foster's innovative redesign for the Reichstag proclaims the values that are to be associated with the 'new' Germany. The glass cupola set upon its nineteenth-century skeleton containing galleries from which the public is able to peer down into the debating chamber thus symbolises a very contemporary commitment to the ideal of democratic transparency. At the same time, the preservation of physical traces of the fighting that had raged around the building during the final days of the Second World War formalises an undertaking to integrate the past, and especially the Nazi period, into the historical consciousness of the present. The Berlin Republic, it seems, is to be characterised by an awareness of the failings of German history, to be sure, but also by the completion of the post-war project for a free, sovereign nation that, in one reading of the history of the 'old' Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany), had been thwarted by division and the Cold War.

The extent to which post-unification Germany has lived up to its promise to realise democratic rights, tolerance and inclusiveness for all may be questioned, of course. Indeed, many of the texts discussed in this volume do precisely that: literary fiction is uniquely suited to probing and subverting a public-political discourse which is itself fashioned out of clever words, seductive images, convenient metaphors and institutionalised slogans, whether by means of careful deconstruction, an instructive pleasure in the paradoxical, juxtaposition, subtle irony, mocking parody, biting satire, or even hyper-imitation. In the age of the internet and digital revolutions and against the background of the media obsession with the soundbite, it would be going too far to claim that literature – that is, books – can act as a fail-safe guarantor of democratic principles, but it can serve to deflate overblown rhetoric and to undermine official representations of reality. Or, more modestly, literary texts may explore more subjective processes often marginalised within dominant constructions of a society's political, philosophical and cultural self-understanding, such as the relationship of private memory to public remembrance, the significance of different ethnicities and heritages, or the role of gender and sexuality in shaping personal identity.

One of the most obvious indicators of the way in which culture remains at a distance from a mode of characterising social reality which establishes periods relating to the 'before' and 'after' of key political events or to categories shaped by political and cultural institutions, commerce or the media is its disregard for the terms employed by these discourses. Politicians, then, might speak of a new dawn in Germany's relationship to its history or of its new global role. Or, journalists and social commentators might use labels such as the Berlin Republic and imagine that these define distinct shifts, particular moments when individuals began to experience their reality differently. Yet fiction deals first and foremost with those turning points that are significant for its characters, its plot and its aesthetic coherence; the issues which exercise its protagonists may well be related to debates seen as defining for an era, but these debates are inflected in ways that destabilise or even entirely erase their parameters. Literary texts, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, may happen to be written *in* something that scholars choose to call the Berlin Republic – though, more often than not, fiction anticipates trends that academic observers later distill into frequently reductive tags, e.g. 'restoration', 'Bonn Republic', 'post-unification', and so on – but these do not constitute the literature *of* the Berlin Republic.

INTEGRATION, NORMALISATION AND GLOBALISATION

Certainly, a great many German-language texts written in the first half of the 1990s in anticipation of an entity dubbed the Berlin Republic, or, following the widespread perception that such a thing might now actually exist, from the middle of the decade onwards, *do* engage with three key terms which, arguably, have defined public-political discourse in the period, namely integration, normalisation and globalisation. A number of the chapters in this volume, correspondingly, relate works of fiction to the categories established by these terms. Narratives by writers from the east, for example, are explored with reference to a particular understanding of the challenges of 'incorporating' the former GDR; in a complementary chapter, texts by *west* German authors are read as alluding to ruminations on the legacy of the 'old' FRG. Alternatively, other contributions refer to debates on the question of whether the Nazi era can be 'normalised' or 'historicised', that is, viewed with the same empathetic understanding as any other period in the past – this issue has implications for the Berlin Republic, of course.[1] And finally, several chapters examine the way a range of writers reflect on the manner in which welfare reform and economic liberalisation are presented as inevitable and necessary within a globalised, neo-liberal marketplace.

What German-language literature in the Berlin Republic does most effectively, however, is to reconceive and reposition such terms in a manner which detaches them from the abstractions of public-political discourse and confronts them with the lived experience of the people with whom they purport to be concerned. In a number of texts, then, the rhetoric of integration and social solidarity employed by politicians and social commentators with regard to the former East Germany[2] is both disrupted and nuanced by an insistence on individuals' ability to reimagine and resituate their biographies within changed circumstances. Ingo Schulze's bestseller *Simple Storys* (1998), with its deliberately 'misspelt' title and its series of snapshots of life in the 'east German province', might be taken as illustrative of this trend. Elsewhere, however, a focus on subjectivity, memory and diverse traditions deconstructs the narrow emphasis within the public-political sphere on the ex-GDR. A variety of recent narratives undermine the homogenising aspirations of the integration imperative not in respect of the former East Germany but with regard to ethnic minorities perhaps, or to different groups of immigrants. Here, we might mention *Gefährliche Verwandtschaft* (Perilous Kinship, 1998)[3] or *German Amok* (2002),[4] by

Turkish-German authors Zafer Şenocak and Feridun Zaimoğlu respectively, or the short novel *Esra* (2003) by Maxim Biller,[5] a German-Jewish writer born in the former Czechoslovakia, all of which explore the triangulation of Christians, Jews and Turks within (west) Germany's liberal yet stubbornly non-multicultural 'consensus'. Or, we might draw attention to authors with roots in eastern European countries such as Herta Müller, Richard Wagner, Libuše Moníková, Carmen-Francesca Banciu and Terézia Mora. Once again, a focus on the often tangled interaction of individual life-stories, heritages and cultural contexts blurs the parameters of established discourses.

Similarly, contemporary literary texts may allude to the ongoing discussions in the public-political sphere of the need for a 'normalisation' of Germany's relationship to its past and of its role in world affairs. Thus they often reference the newly elected SPD–Green coalition's decision in early 1999 to join NATO's intervention in Kosovo or, for example, the controversies surrounding the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, the exhibition 'War of Annihilation: Crimes of the *Wehrmacht* 1941–1944', author Martin Walser's 1998 *Friedenspreisrede* (Peace-Prize speech) attacking the 'instrumentalisation' of Auschwitz 'for present-day political purposes',[6] or the re-emergence of interest in 'German wartime suffering' at the end of the 1990s. F. C. Delius's *Die Flatterzunge* (The Flutter-Tongue, 1999), Ulla Hahn's *Unscharfe Bilder* (Blurred Images, 2003) or Uwe Timm's *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (In My Brother's Shadow, 2003) might be cited here. Yet, once more, an emphasis on memory and identity explores the significance of the Nazi era for 'real people' rather than simply its function as a foil to the legitimacy of the Berlin Republic. Different questions materialise which engage with more profound issues regarding human nature, the balance between empathy and forgiveness, conscience and the problem of perspective. In other texts, in contrast, alternative 'normalities' emerge. Memories of life in the ex-GDR, as presented in Falko Hennig's *Alles nur Geklaut* (Everything is Stolen, 1999) perhaps, or of a youth spent in the West Germany of the 1980s, as found, for example, in David Wagner's *Meine nachtblaue Hose* (My Night-blue Trousers, 2000), might thus seem more important than the legacy of Nazism.

Finally, relating to the prevailing public-political discourse on globalisation, a substantial corpus of today's German-language writing sabotages the rhetoric of the necessity of a particular form of economic liberalisation by emphasising the durability of memory, once again, and the immediacy of the local. Some contemporary literary texts, then, subvert global capitalism's demand that local populations adapt to its dictates and emphasise

their ability to shape their own appropriation of a seemingly homogeneous 'American' culture in a manner which is creative and playful and which preserves a degree of subjective integrity.[7] Schulze's *Simple Storys* might be tendered again, as might Georg Klein's *Libidissi* (1999). In *Libidissi*, the natives of a mysteriously indeterminate metropolis – east Berlin, perhaps – fashion a profitably hybrid culture out of their canny (mis)appropriations of the offerings of global capitalism and their own heritage.[8] Or, we might make mention of writers linked to the so-called 'Trash' and 'Slam' scenes of the early 1990s, or to the 'new' German pop literature of the second half of the decade, such as Karen Duve, Elke Naters, Alexa Hennig von Lange, Tanja Dückers, Sibylle Berg, Christian Kracht or Silvia Szymanski. The self-conscious simulation of Anglo-American slang to be found in the work of younger pop authors, hinting, in fact, at the hollowing-out of identity, may paradoxically insinuate a very local, creative response to the self-alienation associated with global consumer culture. In the city and in the province, then, and amongst groups at the margins as much as amongst those who, superficially at least, appear most 'incorporated', different modes of aesthetic, intellectual or cultural resistance or moments of productive hybridity challenge globalisation's supposed erasure of local identities and the individual's sense of rootedness.

MEMORY, POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, GENERATION AND GLOBAL CULTURE

Much of what is most characteristic about German-language literature in the Berlin Republic emerges from what has been detailed above. Above all, contemporary writing in German, almost irrespective of the subject matter of individual texts, explores the lived experience of its protagonists and examines issues of subjectivity, memory and identity in a manner that is only indirectly contingent on a particular political context or an ideological or philosophical position taken with respect to this context in earlier decades. If large parts of what has become the widely accepted canon of post-war German-language literature had previously explored subjectivity first and foremost in relation to the imperfect democracy of the FRG or the autocracy of the GDR, the circumstances of the Cold War, division, the arms race, the destruction of the environment, or, perennially, the burden of the Nazi past, literary fiction in the Berlin Republic instead emphasises the importance of memory and personal identity as important issues in their own right. We might think here of Ralf Rothmann's *Milch und Kohle* (Milk and Coal, 2000), with its focus on working-class life in the 1950s,

or of Michael Kumpfmüller's *Hampels Fluchten* (The Adventures of a Bed Salesman, 2000) and its absurdly affectionate image of the opportunism of its protagonist, Heinrich Hampel, who quits the GDR for West Germany and becomes a bed salesman before living up to his name as a 'jumping Jack' (the meaning of 'hampeln') who flees his creditors and the women he routinely seduces and betrays. Or, we might think of Kathrin Schmidt's *Die Gunnar-Lennefsen-Expedition* (The Gunnar Lennefsen Expedition, 1998), which explores both memory and female identity. Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (Strange Stars Stare Toward Earth, 2003), alternatively, exposes the layers of sedimented history both visible and invisible in Berlin in a narrative that creates an affective bond between the protagonist's idiosyncratic experience and the reader's own sensibility. We might also think of the impressive wave of autobiographical works since 1990, including Ludwig Harig's *Weh dem, der aus der Reihe tanzt* (Woe Betide He who Dances Out of Step, 1990), Uwe Saeger's *Die Nacht danach und der Morgen* (The Night After and the Morning, 1991), Ruth Klüger's *weiter leben* (Still Alive, 1992), Günter de Bruyn's *Zwischenbilanz: Eine Jugend in Berlin* (Interim Balance: A Youth in Berlin, 1992) and *Vierzig Jahre: Ein Lebensbericht* (Forty Years: A Life-Report, 1996), Günter Kunert's *Erwachsenenspiele: Erinnerungen* (Games for Grown-ups: Memories, 1997), Christoph Hein's *Von allem Anfang an* (Right from the Beginning, 1997), Grete Weil's *Leb ich denn, wenn andere leben* (I Live When Others Live, 1998), or Günter Grass's *Mein Jahrhundert* (My Century, 1999), which are set in the Weimar period (de Bruyn's *Zwischenbilanz*), the Nazi era (de Bruyn's *Zwischenbilanz*, Harig, Klüger and Weil), the GDR (Saeger, de Bruyn's *Vierzig Jahre*, Kunert, Hein) or the FRG (Grass) but frequently also ruminate on a variety of other, more subjective concerns.[9] Indeed, modern-day German-language writing moves back and forth with greater facility than ever before between its immediate context and more universal themes such as the texture of individual life-stories or the relationship between memory, self-knowledge and conscience.

To an extent, this development may be seen as a continuation of a shift in the 1980s towards a greater attention to story-telling in both East and West Germany – once again, the influence of the political caesura of 1989–90 should not be overestimated. Nevertheless, the *Wende* (political turn) in the GDR in November 1989 and unification just under a year later *did* boost the credibility of those who had long been complaining of German fiction's knee-jerk engagement with its immediate social and political context, and raised hopes of a new start for an all-German literary culture. The 1990 *Literaturstreit* (Literature Debate), sparked by the condemnation of Christa

Wolf by newspaper critics Ulrich Greiner and Frank Schirrmacher[10] and by Schirrmacher's subsequent 'taking-leave' of the literature of the 'old' FRG[11] and Greiner's dismissal of post-war fiction as *Gesinnungsästhetik* (aesthetics of conviction),[12] thus initiated a discussion of German writers' 'unhealthy' obsession with political themes. Both Greiner and Schirrmacher had been influenced by Karl Heinz Bohrer – 'the most important thinker of the aesthetic' in the German-speaking world according to Jan-Werner Müller[13] – who, from the mid 1980s, had been attacking West German writing's provinciality and lack of ambition. A few years later, commissioning editor Uwe Wittstock's plea for more entertainment and for a literature capable of competing with Anglo-Saxon bestsellers and their emphasis on characterisation and plot prompted reflection on the need for German authors to adapt to an international market.[14] Greiner and Schirrmacher's call for artistic complexity and a focus on the 'big' themes of literary fiction – the individual and society, the conflict between good and evil, or the tortured soul of the sensitive outsider – thus contrasted with Matthias Politycki's call for a *Neue Lesbarkeit* (new readability) to mirror the sounds, sensations and styles of the modern-day consumer universe.

The solutions offered by Greiner and Schirrmacher on the one hand, and by Uwe Wittstock and writers such as Matthias Politycki and Matthias Altenburg on the other, appear to be diametrically opposed: a return to the difficult, aesthetically demanding engagement with individual psychology and society typical of German Romanticism and Modernism or an altogether 'lighter' narrative fiction written for, and in order to ruminate upon, contemporary society. This contrast reflects, in part, different views on what a 'normal', unified Germany should look like. For critics of the supposed superficiality of the present-day FRG, what is needed is a return to the self-confident, 'European' metropolitan culture of the late nineteenth century; for those who bemoan German culture's lack of dynamism, what is required is an embrace of the Anglo-American present. Yet both visions of the future of German literature intersect in their fundamental censure, whether implied or explicit, of the institutionalisation of social engagement and critical thinking as the guiding principles of (West) Germany's intellectual and cultural consensus since the late 1960s.

This brings us to a second significant trend in contemporary German-language writing: a pervasive engagement with so-called political correctness and with the leading role played by the generation of '68 in shaping the intellectual and political conventions of both the 'old' FRG and the present-day Berlin Republic. The 68ers' focus on the Nazi past, their insistence on

the lessons to be drawn from German perpetration of the Holocaust, and their claim to have embedded values of transparency, critical engagement and tolerance – all of these were challenged by conservatives (and not just by the intellectual New Right which caused such a furore in the early 1990s),[15] by the 78ers, that is, the generation that had grown up in the shadow of the student movement, and by a younger cohort variously known as the 89ers, the Generation Golf or the Generation Berlin.[16] Above all, the 68ers' tendency to focus on institutions, structures and the normative effect of power relations in both the Nazi period and modern-day society, and on abstract moral and philosophical principles, was subverted. In novels relating to the Nazi past, as already indicated, this often entails an empathetic presentation of 'real' peoples' limited perspective. Martin Walser's 1998 *Ein springender Brunnen* (The Springing Fountain), which relates the story of a young boy growing up between 1934 and 1945 in almost total indifference to the broader context of National Socialism, is a crucial example of this.[17] In present-day pop literature, alternatively, we find a provocative lack of interest in larger ethical issues and an often over-the-top affirmation of a status quo defined by consumerism, life-style, fads and fashions, and self-indulgence.

More important than specific political caesurae, therefore, although clearly influenced by the broader social and cultural impact of such turning points, is the centrality of the dialogue – or conflict – between the generations to today's German-language writing. This is apparent in the pervasiveness of 'intergenerational literature', that is, novels which both enact and reflect upon the 'memory contests' described by Anne Fuchs and Mary Cosgrove as characteristic of contemporary German culture and society.[18] The challenge to the purported dominance of the 68ers emerges, without a doubt, from a uniquely German constellation in which successive cohorts are distinctively and differently moulded by the fact of being born during the Nazi period, in the immediate post-'45 era, in the wake of '68, or perhaps in the years leading up to unification. Yet the desire to unsettle the values institutionalised by one particular generation, to reconnect with the biographies of grandparents about to pass away, or to proclaim the 'modern' values and attitudes of one's own generation, is by no means unique, in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, to writing in the Berlin Republic. Once again, literary texts in the period examined in this volume frequently face both ways at once. On the one hand, they respond to the concerns of their immediate setting. On the other hand, they also address other, more universal issues to do with family dynamics in the modern-day world, the

acceleration of shifts in social mores, sensibilities and fashions, and the apparent absence of shared, broadly accepted understandings of a given society's past or even its present.

A fourth characteristic of recent German-language writing is its incorporation of the ceaseless relativisation, or, put more positively, questioning, typical of western societies today. A number of works might be described as postmodern, if this is taken to mean a scandalous disregard for the boundaries between truth and invention; Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (Heroes Like Us, 1995) might be cited here. Elsewhere, however, it is possible to discern a more apprehensive, and more consequential, concern with epistemological issues. Younger east German writer Ingo Schramm's *Fitchers Blau* (Fitcher's Blue, 1996) and *Entzweigesperrt* (Trapped in Two, 2002), for example, offer a complex engagement with the philosophical traditions of the Enlightenment after the implosion of utopian thought in the post-communist period.[19] More generally, the frequency with which photographs feature may be indicative of a profound anxiety regarding the desire to reconnect with a twentieth-century history which is more exhaustively documented and visually present than any previous era but which remains largely incomprehensible to us in its arbitrary horror. W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* (The Exiles, 1992) and *Austerlitz* (2001) are prime instances of this phenomenon. Both works feature 'original' images which purport to validate their reconstruction of the biographies of their Jewish (occasionally, non-Jewish) subjects but which appear disconcertingly isolated within the flow of the text.[20] A similar focus on the philosophical and existential uncertainty produced by traumatic memories is typical of texts ranging from Monika Maron's *Pawels Briefe* (Pawel's Letters, 1999), a fictional reconstruction of the life, and death, of the author's grandfather, a Polish Jew murdered by the Nazis, to Herta Müller's account of persecution by the Romanian security services in *Herztier* (Heart Beast, 1994), to Kerstin Hensel's *Tanz am Kanal* (Dance by the Canal, 1994). In *Tanz am Kanal*, as in *Herztier*, traumatic recall, invention and present-day reality all merge, this time in the novel's depiction of Gabriela von Haßlau, a young east German woman who, having been raped and otherwise generally abused in the ex-GDR, ends up sleeping under a bridge after the *Wende* and begins to write her life-story.

Other contemporary novels similarly explore the emotional and intellectual resonances of memories located outside Germany, with the aim of reflecting on the claustrophobia of the Berlin Republic or, alternatively, on the suffocating uniformity of global (read: 'American') consumer

culture. This is a fifth characteristic of today's German-language writing: its use of the world beyond Germany as a setting and its engagement with global influences. Examples range from Arnold Stadler's *Feuerland* (Fireland, 1992), in which the narrator travels to Patagonia only to find that things are exactly as at home, to Austrian writer Peter Handke's controversial travelogue *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* (A Winter's Journey to the Rivers Danube, Save, Morawa and Drina, or Justice for Serbia, 1996), which many read as a defence of Slobodan Milošević, to Judith Hermann's short story 'Rote Korallen', from her first collection *Sommerhaus, später* (Summerhouse, Later, 1998), which recreates the Russia of the Tsars in a tale of great passions, vivid colours, homesickness, melancholia and red corals. Stadler's and Hermann's work in particular reflect, in very different ways, on globalisation. In the title narrative of Hermann's second volume, *Nichts als Gespenster* (Nothing But Ghosts, 2003), Ellen and Felix travel across the vistas of the American west in the hope of finding release from the ambivalence of a modern German identity; in other stories, protagonists travel to France, Iceland, Sicily, Holland and the Czech Republic. In Katrin Dorn's *Tangogeschichten* (Tango Stories, 2002), narratives are set in Berlin as well as, unsurprisingly, Buenos Aires.[21] Elke Naters's pop novel *Mau-Mau* (2002), on the other hand, takes five friends on holiday to a paradise island where they compare suntans but are unable to conceal a more profound sense of emptiness.

In many ways, the ambivalence intimated in Hermann's 'Hurrikan (Something farewell)', from *Sommerhaus, später*, summarises the dilemma implicit in much of German language-writing in the Berlin Republic. A longing to escape the confines of German parochialism impels Kaspar, Nora and Cat to travel, once more, to a paradise Caribbean island where they can speak English, indulge in a self-satisfied celebration of ethnic diversity in their unequal flirtations with the local black population, and play a game of 'imagining a life just like this'.[22] Yet their fantasies of what it would be like to remain on the island cannot disguise the fact that Kaspar and Nora were unhappy back in Berlin or that Cat must soon return to Germany. The real story of which they had hoped to have been a part, moreover, has failed to materialise: the storm that threatens the island passes by and, again, nothing of consequence has happened in their lives. Even when Germans imagine that they might embrace the global consumer culture or imitate the unforced self-confidence of Anglo-American culture – as the narrative itself, with its allusions to Hemingway, affects to do – it seems that they nevertheless continue to experience themselves as onlookers.