Uncertain Identities in German-language Novels since 2010

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in Modern Languages (German)
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Για τον Γιόνας

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Abstract

Literary authors in the German context have a high degree of public visibility, but performatively enact their public role in different ways. Whether they are actively involved in broader social and political debates or simply trying to maximise, through their public presence, the impact of their work, their identities inevitably take on a political dimension, which in turn affects the reception of their work in complex ways. This thesis explores experimental identity narratives in five recent German-language novels, arguing that these texts nuance, question, or destabilise their authors' own public identities. Through a detailed discussion of five texts published after 2010 – Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013), Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* (2011), Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* (2014), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012), and Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012) – it explores how fictional identities within these texts renegotiate authorial identity constructs beyond them. They all centre around narratives of individual and collective identities which are blurry, fragmented, or elusive. By using narrative elements such as narrative voice, focalisation, and order of narration in experimental and often disorienting ways, they generate uncertainty about the identities – collective and individual, contemporary and historical – which they present. The novels discussed in this thesis exemplify and yet resist recent debates about authorship and identity politics. By combining a study of contemporary performative models of authorship within the German *Literaturbetrieb* with narratological readings of the aforementioned five novels, this thesis shows that a profound ambivalence concerning models of identity is characteristic of twenty-first-century fiction and its underlying expectations of authorship.

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Abstract

My thesis explores experimental identity narratives in five German-language novels published after 2010. It argues that these novels, which feature fragmented, blurred, or ambivalent identities, renegotiate the clear-cut models of identity often used in public debates about literature and authorship. The five novels discussed are Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013), Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* (2011), Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* (2014), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012), and Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012). All of these texts experiment with the possibility of narrating a life, a sense of self, a sense of belonging to a family or community. By using a range of experimental narrative devices, such as unusual narrative voices, shifting focalisation, and a counterintuitive plot structure, they convey a sense that the identities at their centre, whether individual or collective, are fragmented, ambivalent, and elusive. Since they resist coherent narratives of identity, I argue, these texts are often read – by both by *Feuilletons* critics and academic readers – through the lens of their author's publicly performed identities. This does not mean that they are read biographically, but rather that the terms by which they are discussed are in part derived from what is known about their respective authors, by the debates about identity in which their authors partake in the public domain, and by the roles which their authors choose to play in the contemporary literary scene.

The starting point of my thesis is the question of *why* authorial identities are drawn into the discussion of recent texts featuring recalcitrant, fragmentary, or elusive protagonists (or narrator-protagonists). This question raises two others: *why* is so much known about contemporary authors writing in German in the first place, and *how*, specifically, do recent narratives express ambivalence about identities? In my examination of the performative and public nature of twenty-

first-century authorship in the German context, I argue that the post-war German tradition of political authorship and public literary debates, combined with a heavily mediatised literary field, has given rise to a model of very *public* authorship in Germany which is very different from prevalent models in the UK and US. Contemporary German-language authors are public persons who express (and are called upon to express) opinions on political, social, and cultural matters. In addition, they are expected to 'back' the promotion of their literary work through a range of public appearances, interviews, and, in some cases, an online presence. Contemporary German authors performatively enact their authorial role in public, and in this way they shape, whether willingly or reluctantly, the reception of their work.

To answer the second question, I paid close attention to how recent novels experiment with narrative voice, perspective, and structure. The five novels I discuss are all quite different from one another in terms of subject matter and style, but they make for indeterminate, uncomfortable, and confusing reading in similar ways. All focus on individual and collective identities which cannot be read in conventional or linear ways: they are narrated from unusual perspectives, in an unusual order, or by a questionable narrative voice. In each case there is a unique combination of narrative techniques which creates uncertainty on the level of reading. Unstable focalisation is central to *Quasikristalle*, *Sand*, and to some extent *Vor dem Fest*, for instance; a counterintuitive narrative order to *Quasikristalle* and *Aller Tage Abend*; a suspect narrative voice in *Sand*, *Vor dem Fest*, and *Hoppe*. The latter, like *Sand*, also creates confusion through the heavy use of real and invented intertexts. All texts are highly self-reflexive, and demand patience and attention of their reader, though they do so to different degrees. The five chapters of this thesis, each of which focusses on one text and author, are ordered from the most conventional and realist of the five texts, Menasse's *Quasikristalle*, to the most demanding and experimental one, Hoppe's *Hoppe*. This order best brings out both the similarities and differences between these texts.

These two relatively separate lines of inquiry are linked by the issue of reception, by an exploration of how the reception of these narratives shapes and determines their meaning in intricate ways. This reception includes academic scholarship but more prominently their reception

in the press and other media. A comparison of these five novels reveals a number of patterns and recurring features which shape their discussion. The most striking of these is that, in each case, the discussion of the text itself is tied to the discussion of its author him- or herself. Not only is the new piece of work contextualised within their existing body of writing, but it is also mapped onto the identity of the author, an identity which is often highly politicised. In this way the politics of identity enters into considerations of recent fiction, especially recent fiction which is itself uncertain about notions of identity.

*Quasikristall*e, for example, a multi-perspectival narration of a half-Jewish, Austrian woman's life, is linked to Menasse's own public role as a half-Jewish, Austrian, and feminist journalist. *Sand*, a confusing, meandering adventure novel which culminates in scenes of extreme violence and suffering, is inevitably read alongside *Arbeit und Struktur*, the blog on which Wolfgang Herrndorf chronicled his life and work with an advanced brain tumour. The discussion of *Vor dem Fest*, meanwhile, a first-person-plural narrative about a village community on a former GDR territory, centres (in complex and, as I argue, misguided ways) around Stanišić's own migrant background. *Aller Tage Abend*, the discontinuous life story of a Galician woman who dies and is revived within and by the narrative five times before dying in old age in reunified Berlin, is read, by virtue of Erpenbeck's own GDR past and family history, as a novel about the fall of communism and the philosophy of history. *Hoppe*, finally, is a fictional biography of a character named 'Felicitas Hoppe', edited by a narrator named 'fh'. The novel cemented the Büchner Prize-winning author's reputation for self-referentiality and playfulness, which commentators link in complex ways to her small-town background. My parallel readings of these novels and their reception in this thesis aim to highlight the ways in which fictional and authorial identities, i.e. identities within the fictional texts and in the context of their writing and reception are in dialogue with each other.

Chapter One argues that Menasse's *Quasikristalle*, relativises, by juxtaposition, different perspectives on gendered, Austrian, and Jewish identities. The chapter begins by discussing the reception of Menasse's writings, and of *Quasikristalle* in particular, as 'women's literature'. It examines how Menasse's journalism contributes to her public persona as a feminist, Austrian, and

half-Jewish intellectual. The central part of the chapter analyses how the orderly sequence of dissonant or clashing perspectives generates uncertainty on the level of reading, especially surrounding the novel's protagonist, Xane. Finally, the chapter shows how this succession of perspectives starkly relativises the very identities by which Menasse defines herself as an author and public person. More specifically, it argues that gendered, Austrian and Jewish identities are shown to be much more nuanced and ambivalent in the novel than they are in Menasse's journalism and public statements.

Chapter Two argues that *Sand* ultimately conveys a sense of nihilism which alienates both its reader and, as Herrndorf comments on his blog, the author himself. First, the chapter examines useful and problematic ways in which the reception of *Sand* draws on *Arbeit und Struktur*, a highly performative text which allowed Herrndorf to publicly project an authoritative, prolific image despite his debilitating illness. The second part of the chapter looks at the novel's experimental use of narrative voice, perspective, and intertexts to confuse and disorientate the reader, while the third and final part addresses how these devices first elicit but subsequently frustrate the reader's empathy with the amnesiac protagonist, who is subjected to extreme, seemingly unmotivated violence. Ultimately, the chapter shows that *Sand* pushes the limits of authorial intention and control, and thus undermines Herrndorf's efforts, in *Arbeit und Struktur*, to appear in control of his own image and work.

The central argument in Chapter Three is that the first-person-plural narrative voice in Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* stages the inherent tensions within a community which perceives itself as historically homogeneous. The first part of the chapter examines the reception of the novel as the work of a 'migrant' author. The discussion in this first part centres on Maxim Biller's review of *Vor dem Fest*, which exemplifies the problematic assumptions underlying the term *Migrationsliteratur*. The second part looks more closely at how the collective narrative voice both generates uncertainty as to its own identity and shows its own profound uncertainty about the individual perspectives it encompasses. Finally, the chapter argues that the novel foregrounds the village community's problematic past and present in ways which point to the shaky nature of all

collective identities and homogeneous communities, including literary communities such as are implied in the term *Migrationsliteratur*.

Chapter Four centres on the way the protagonist's life narrative in Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* is simultaneously extended and reduced, causing historical traumas which are constitutive of the protagonist's family and personal identity to be lost. In light of Erpenbeck's own identity as the descendant of a family of East German intellectuals, the novel is often read as being about the fall of the Berlin Wall, or, alternatively, as an anti-teleological historical narrative. I argue in this chapter that these readings gloss over the consequences of the novel's highly experimental, stop-start structure. The protagonist's repeated deaths and hypothetical resurrections paradoxically allow her narrative, which is at heart a narrative of grief and mourning, to carry on. In this way, however, the narratives of other characters, such as her family members who perish in the Holocaust, get repressed, lost or interrupted. Ultimately, the chapter argues that *Aller Tage Abend* demonstrates how history fractures individual and collective identities and by extension also shows Erpenbeck's own identity as a GDR-born author to be a fragile construct.

Chapter Five, finally, argues that, by collapsing the distinctions between author, narrator, and protagonist, *Hoppe* creates confusion around Felicitas Hoppe's real identity, making it impossible to disentangle reality from fiction and invention. The first part of the chapter is concerned with Hoppe's reception as a 'difficult' and demanding author with a characteristically elusive way of inhabiting her authorial persona. Because of the latter, and her distinctive, highly self-reflexive style of writing, she is sometimes seen as embodying a model of 'strong' authorship. *Hoppe* essentially responds to the author's reception and takes the formal complexity for which she is known to self-defeating extremes. The central part of this chapter discusses how the novel's authoritative narrator 'fh' gradually reveals herself to be identical both to the protagonist whose biographer she ostensibly is, and to the author Felicitas Hoppe herself. The final part of the chapter looks at how the novel ultimately parodies not only Hoppe's authorial identity, but also more broadly the model of public authorship prevalent in the contemporary German literary scene.

As the above summaries of the individual chapters suggest, my thesis has a dual focus throughout, on authorial identities on the one hand and fictional identity narratives on the other.

My aim is not to simply write against *Feuilleton* criticism or against scholarly categories such as 'migrant literature', 'women's literature' or 'literature by GDR-born authors', which help us orient ourselves in the increasingly diverse literary field of contemporary German literature. Neither is my aim to simply reject biographical readings, which are widely considered of little value to literary criticism. Rather, my own approach is a combination of two different methodologies. On the one hand, I use authorship studies and recent studies of impact to show how authors' identities (rather than their biographies) are public and politicised. On the other hand, I use narratological terms to analyse the techniques used to generate uncertainty about identities in each novel. More specifically, the so-called 'unnatural' approach to narrative, which foregrounds forms of narrative which use conventional narrative techniques in unusual, counterintuitive, or 'unnatural' ways, offers a useful vocabulary to discuss the experimental elements of the texts in my corpus. Together, these two approaches allow me to combine readings of fiction with readings of its context, and to discuss in a fruitful way the ways in which texts and context interact with and challenge each other.

With its dual focus on texts and their contexts, fictional and authorial identities, my research fits in best within the field of German cultural studies, rather than more traditional literary criticism. However, I hope to contribute with my findings to a range of ongoing discussions about German literary culture. Primarily, I hope to make an addition to the study of very new literature in German, which Lyn Marven usefully refers to as 'ultra-contemporary'. While the scholarly study of *Gegenwartsliteratur* is well-established and increasingly popular in universities in the German world, the available material on twenty-first-century German novels in English is limited. There is, however, a vibrant community of researchers working on recent German and Austrian literature and culture across UK universities. It is this community with which I wish to engage in this thesis. Even beyond German departments, however, I hope that students and researchers interested in twenty-first century discourses about identity, as well as contemporary models of authorship, will benefit from the discussions in my thesis.

Considering the increasing politicisation of minority (and majority) identities across the twenty-first century German public sphere, the present study of how identity politics affects

literary authorship and how fiction responds to it is, I think, particularly timely. This thesis makes the case that uncertain identities in recent fiction reveal problematic dynamics within the German literary field – dissonances between reception and authorship, authors and their fiction, and within authors themselves, who assume public and politicised identity positions. These dynamics in turn point to a broader sense of discomfort with and uncertainty about the perceived role of literature in twenty-first German culture. To what extent is it a public, or indeed political, affair, for example? How do commercial concerns affect it? In what ways does it provide new ways of understanding twenty-first-century identities? What models of identity does it negotiate? This thesis suggests that uncertainty is perhaps the most 'relevant' model of identity in German culture of the last decade.

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List of Abbreviations

Q	*Quasikristalle*
S	*Sand*
AS	*Arbeit und Struktur*
VdF	*Vor dem Fest*
H	*Herkunft*
F	*Fallensteller*
ATA	*Aller Tage Abend*
KR	*Kein Roman*
H	*Hoppe*

Introduction

Performative Authorship and Experimental Identity Narratives in Recent German-language Novels

Three decades after the reunification, German literary culture is thriving.[1] In recent years, authors with different generational, educational, and cultural backgrounds writing in German have contributed to a literary mainstream that is increasingly diverse. Whether in the traditional print media or online, literary debates about new publications are frequent and lively. There are more prestigious literary prizes, scholarships, and institutions now than ever before, as well as erudite and influential reviewers and a broad, educated readership for literary fiction. The themes and styles of recent novels have also noticeably diversified. While the questions of national identity, of historical trauma and responsibility, and of Germany's role in Europe and the world that featured prominently in novels before and after the millennium continue to be discussed, more fundamental concerns about the value of individual and collective identities are increasingly present in twenty-first-century novels. These concerns are often played out on two distinct levels: within the fiction itself, and on the level of its reception. In other words, many recent novels thematise a sense of unease about how identities are narrated, a sense of unease which is reflected in the process of reception, in public discourses about literature, and in the person of the author.

Literary authors have a uniquely public role in the German context. As shall be discussed below, this has to do with a specifically German twentieth-century tradition of political literature which gave authors a certain moral authority concerning public matters. Today, it is increasingly authors' own identities, rather than their public discourse or writings, which are politicised. Female, migrant, Jewish, Muslim authors, or authors with a working-class or provincial

[1] While some of the arguments put forth in this thesis could be made about the other German-speaking countries as well, and indeed Austrian and Swiss sources will occasionally be cited in the course of the thesis, my focus will be primarily on the German context. I will, however, refer to 'German-language' authors or literature 'in German' when I believe that certain observations can be extended to other German-speaking countries without need of further evidence.

background, to name but a few examples, are assumed to represent specific political positions because of these identities.[2] The rise of the populist right with the emergence of Pegida and the Alternative für Deutschland since 2013, the ongoing refugee crisis and the integration of predominantly Muslim refugees into the country, the near-collapse of the Eurozone, and the loud resonance of the MeToo movement in Germany[3] have recast such identities as political positions in and of themselves. In this thesis, I will argue that the politicisation of authorial identities affects the way contemporary novels are received. I will also show, however, that recent novels preemptively engage with the terms by which their authors are received by challenging the very notion of coherent identity narratives.

The five chapters of this thesis propose readings of five novels published after 2010. In all cases there is a dual focus, firstly, on how individual authors' performatively shaped public identities dominate the critical discussion of their writing and secondly, on how their novels themselves nuance and challenge the models of identity which underpin this discussion. This introduction will outline the literary field within which the authors in this thesis are enmeshed. First, it will trace the shift from the model of political authorship prevalent from 1945 until the *Wende* in 1989/1990 to the current model of authorship as a kind of public performance. It will then contextualise this shift within current developments in the *Literaturbetrieb* and within scholarly discussions of performative authorship. This overview of how the role of literary authorship in the German-speaking context has evolved in recent years will help us better understand how authors' identities are used in critical and scholarly discourse as a means of mapping newer authors onto the contemporary cultural landscape. The heightened attention paid to

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[2] See e.g. Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, eds, *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2019). This very recent collection of essays by a group of young, mostly female, German-speaking authors with a migrant background is, I think, paradigmatic of how twenty-first-century authors' identities are politicised. Max Czollek's *Desintegriert Euch!* (Munich: Hanser, 2018) and Sophie Passmann's *Alte weiße Männer* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2019) are also worth mentioning in this context.

[3] In Germany, as elsewhere, the 'MeToo' debates found resonance in the centre-left media. *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel*, in particular, have sizeable archives of articles on the topic, a significant part of which relate the debate to the German context specifically, rather than reporting on the movement's development in the US or UK. See e.g. '#MeToo: Ein Hashtag und die Folgen', *Zeit Online*, https://www.zeit.de/thema/metoo and 'Thema #MeToo: Alle Artikel und Hintergründe', Spiegel Online http://www.spiegel.de/thema/metoo/ [both accessed 9 September 2019].

authorial identities today, I argue, is a heuristic response to the increasing diversification of literary production in German, as well as to the fundamental disciplinary uncertainty which comes with the study of *Gegenwartsliteratur*.

The texts in this thesis, as I will shortly explain in more detail, were chosen not only because they question the very identity labels by which their authors are received, but because they experiment in complex ways with the possibility of narrating individual and collective identities. Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013), Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* (2011), Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* (2014), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012), and Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012) are all in some ways structured around elusive identities. While none of these texts is programmatic or ideological, they are all undercut by doubt about the politics and ethics of specific identities, identities which in all cases relate either directly or indirectly to their author's public persona. The last part of this introduction will discuss in some detail how a narratological approach to experimental narratives helps illuminate how uncertainty around identities is generated and how it operates on the level of reading. More specifically, it will show how each of the five texts in this thesis can be read as an experimental narrative, which narrative elements in each text contribute most to the cultivation of a sense of uncertainty, and how this sense of uncertainty relates to the fictional identities in these novels. My aim is to draw attention to how such uncertainty opens up possibilities to rethink notions of identity and authorship in contemporary German literature.

The Particularity of German Literary Culture in the Twenty-First Century

Though individual and collective identities are increasingly politicised in the US and UK as well, the correlation between uncertain identity narratives and the politicisation of authorial identities which this thesis explores is unique to Germany. This is because literature, especially what is considered 'high' literature, has traditionally been a public (and therefore also a political) matter in the German context. The particularities of German literary culture become clearest through comparison, especially with that of the US.[4] According to Patricia Herminghouse, the greatest

[4] Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminghouse, 'Introduction: German Literature in a New Century: Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations' in *German Literature in a New*

difference between the two cultures lies in the role ascribed to literary authors. While in Germany, authors are often seen as public intellectuals and invested with a considerable degree of cultural and moral authority, in the US authors are first and foremost private individuals and usually reluctant to take a stance on public matters.[5] In the US, as in the UK, scholars rather than literary authors tend to take on the role of public intellectuals. This relates partly to a divergent conception of 'criticism' in the two literary cultures. As Sean McIntyre explains, 'Americans do not make the same distinction that Central Europeans do between an academic form of literary criticism and the kind of literary criticism one often encounters in the *Feuilleton* pages',[6] the features section in daily and weekly newspapers. The existence of the latter, non-academic kind of *Literaturkritik* is indeed one of the particularities of the German context that also distinguish it from literary culture in the UK.

Yet the most fundamental difference between American and German conceptions of literature, McIntyre argues, is a difference in how the two cultures conceive of and value the political, understood in broad terms as the relationship between the individual and the state. Unlike in German-speaking Europe, McIntyre claims, in the US 'the classical liberal and pragmatic distinction between the private (self) and the public (citizen)'[7] persists. Literature in the US is a private affair and distinct from politics. In Germany, more so than in the UK and in most other European countries with the possible exception of France, literature is a public matter, both in the sense that literary authors are in the public eye, and in the sense that there is a broad-based public discussion of literature beyond the confines of academic criticism.

Political Authorship Before and After the Reunification

Century: Trends, Traditions, Transitions, Transformations, ed. by Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminghouse (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008), pp. 1-12.

[5] Patricia Herminghouse, 'Trends: Literature in the Public Sphere', in Gerstenberger and Herminghouse, *German Literature in a New Century*, pp. 13-16, here p. 14.

[6] Sean M. McIntyre, 'The Literary Public Sphere: A Case for German Particularity?', in Gerstenberger and Herminghouse, *German Literature in a New Century*, pp. 17-33, here p. 21.

[7] Ibid., 25.

These differences between the way literature is traditionally perceived in Germany and the way it is perceived in the UK and US have only been accentuated by developments in the German media, the domestic book market, and the institutions supporting literary production in the past thirty years. It is impossible, however, to discuss these recent developments which shaped the role of authors as public figures in Germany today without considering, at least very briefly, the influence of the earlier model of 'engagierte Autorschaft' or political authorship prevalent from 1945 onwards. Forms of political authorship had existed in Germany prior to the twentieth century, but after the Second World War a generation of younger German authors, in particular those associated with the so-called *Gruppe 47*, which included figures such as Günter Grass, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Heinrich Böll, saw it as their moral duty to intervene in the political discourses emerging in the new Federal Republic.[8] The model of political authorship practised by this group still to some extent shapes twenty-first-century expectation that authors be involved in the country's political life.[9]

Yet political authorship in Germany underwent several shifts and crises from the 1960s onwards. In the aftermath of the 1968 student protests, the *Gruppe 47* were deemed by a new generation of left-wing intellectuals to be regressive and formulaic, disconnected from the revolutionary urgency of the era.[10] In the 1980s, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who was initially associated with the *Gruppe 47* and then became one of the leading theorists of the 1968 student movement, argued that in the increasingly diversified public sphere of the Federal Republic it was impossible for individuals to claim the kind of universal moral and political expertise claimed by earlier generations of authors.[11] In fact, the diversification and fragmentation of the German public

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[8] For a history of political authorship in Germany from the early twentieth-century to 1968, see Thomas Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion: Politisches Schreiben in der Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), pp. 21-6.

[9] Sabrina Wagner, *Aufklärer der Gegenwart: Politische Autorschaft zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts – Juli Zeh, Ilja Trojanow, Uwe Tellkamp* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), pp. 39-40 and Frank Finlay, 'Literary Debates and the Literary Market since Unification', in *Contemporary German Fiction: Writing in the Berlin Republic*, ed. by Stuart Taberner (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), pp. 21-38, here pp. 28-9.

[10] Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion*, 27.

[11] See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Das empfindliche Ungeheuer: Eine Wahlkampf-Unterhaltung aus dem Jahre 1987 mit Hellmut Karasek', in *Mittelmaß und Wahn: Gesammelte Zerstreuungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 227-44.

sphere was exacerbated by the collapse of the GDR and the German reunification. The gradual 'normalisation' of German public life in the course of the 1990s[12] and the coming-of-age of younger, '"unverkrampfter" Generationen'[13] were accompanied by demands for a public discourse free from the ideological burdens of the previous decades and a literature removed from the *Gesinnungsästhetik* , the imperative to offer opposition to dominant social and political values, which had ostensibly been the norm in both the former East and West.[14]

In response to these calls for fiction to reflect contemporary social realities rather than political views,[15] there emerged, from the mid-1990s onwards, new forms of seemingly apolitical literature by younger authors inspired by the engaging storytelling of their Anglo-American literary role models.[16] This trend was subsumed, in the late 1990s, under the label of 'Neue Lesbarkeit' or 'new readability'. Proposed by author Matthias Politicky, this label ultimately came to stand for two quite distinct trends in new writing: the mainstream, accessible kind of storytelling sometimes referred to as 'neues Erzählen' on the one hand, and the more provocative, irreverent brand of 'pop literature', which proliferated around the millennium, on the other.[17] Authors associated with either the more narratively conservative or the more progressive strands of 'Neue Lesbarkeit', such as Julia Franck, Judith Hermann, Christian Kracht, Maxim Biller, Daniel Kehlmann, and Jenny Erpenbeck, the latter of whom is discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis, were heavily criticised for their perceived (or self-proclaimed) apolitical stance.[18]

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[12] For an account of the processes subsumed under the term 'normalisation' see Ruth Wittlinger, 'Introduction: A Different Republic After All?', in *German National Identity in the Twenty-First Century: A Different Republic After All?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 1-16.
[13] Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion*, 46.
[14] Ulrich Greiner, 'Die deutsche Gesinnungsästhetik', *Die Zeit*, 2 November 1990. https://www.zeit.de/1990/45/die-deutsche-gesinnungsaesthetik [Accessed 9 September 2019].
[15]See Stuart Taberner, 'Introduction: Literary Fiction in the Berlin Republic', in Taberner, *Contemporary German Fiction*, pp. 1-20, here p. 7 and Finlay, 'Literary Debates', 32-3.
[16] Leonhard Herrmann and Silke Horstkotte, *Gegenwartsliteratur. Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2016), p. 66. For a more detailed account of the phenomenon see Benjamin Schaper, *Poetik und Politik der Lesbarkeit in der deutschen Literatur* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2017).
[17] Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion*, 62.
[18] It is worth noting that their defenders were also numerous and sound. See Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion*, 81; Herrmann and Horstkotte, *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 55; and Wagner, *Aufklärer der Gegenwart*, 49-51.

By becoming the subject of such criticism, therefore, this less publicly oriented and more 'Anglo-American' model of authorship was quickly reabsorbed into a distinctly German discourse about the role of authors as public intellectuals. Yet in the context of the 'new readability' trend, the moral and intellectual authority of authors gradually became a less valuable currency than the (vague) notion of 'relevance' – the sense that authors were attuned to the climate of their time. Indeed, the turn of the twenty-first century saw a decisive shift in the way literary authors were publicly represented and perceived, a shift which brought authors' individual lifestyles and, I argue, personal identities into the public eye. In the course of the 2010s, moreover, these identities have been a given distinctly political dimension; though their texts are no longer viewed as exerting any kind of 'gesamtgesellschaftlich wirkende moralische Kraft',[19] authors are often called upon by the media to position themselves within specific debates, on the basis of their particular expertise, which is more often than not tied to their personal identity. They are what Thomas Ernst describes as 'spezifische Intellektuelle', experts in 'verschiedene Formen von Mikropolitiken',[20] which relate to their own gender, class, political, professional or generational identity, their culture of origin, or their mother tongue, in cases where this is not German.

Authorship in the *Literaturbetrieb* of the 2010s

The media have played a major role in transforming the traditional figure of the author as political authority into a spokesperson for specific interests on the basis of their public persona. Not that political authorship and media exposure are fundamentally incompatible; on the contrary, they often go hand in hand. As Rebecca Braun notes, the *Gruppe 47* were not only paradigmatic 'engagierte Autoren' but also the first group of public intellectuals to attract widespread 'media coverage and controversy' and to build close ties with and produce content for the mass media.[21] Authors today, however, tend to be even more strategic in their use of media attention to promote

[19] Ernst, *Literatur und Subversion*, 70.
[20] Ibid., 34.
[21] Rebecca Braun, 'Cultural Impact and the Power of Myth in Popular Public Constructions of Authorship', in *Cultural Impact in the German Context: Studies in Transmission, Reception and Influence*, ed. by Rebecca Braun and Lyn Marven (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), pp. 78-96, here p. 83.

themselves and their writing. This is consistent with a shift in literary criticism towards a performative conception of authorship, which seeks to understand how authors construct their own public image in relation to their literary work.

Performative approaches to authorship are so widely accepted, in fact, that in his influential study of the German *Literaturbetrieb* Bodo Plachta writes that 'heutzutage interessiert nicht, *ob* sich ein Autor, sondern *wie* er sich inszeniert oder inszeniert lässt'.[22] I would add to this the questions of *why* authors choose or are made to perform a version of themselves and *for whom*. Of the five novelists with which this thesis is concerned, none is prone to incendiary statements or literary feuds, though, as we shall see in the individual chapters, some have on occasion been drawn into public arguments by others. Yet they are all undeniably public figures, about whose personal histories and opinions much is known, either volunteered by the authors themselves, or revealed by their publishers, reviewers, and interviewers in the media.

This information is often used not only to make authors 'visible' and situate them within the literary landscape, but also, more problematically, to discuss the identities which feature in their fiction. The problem with this approach is not so much that their texts are subjected to biographical interpretations, since the minutiae of the authors' private experiences are rarely brought into focus in interpretations of their work. Rather, the problem is that the *vocabulary* which professional readers such as reviewers and scholars use to discuss an author's approach to identity in their fiction is derived from that author's public identity, with little regard of how and why this identity is performed. It is worth noting in this context that when we speak of 'authorial perfomances' we refer to two distinct but related phenomena: authors' own *Selbstinszenierung* or self-performance on the one hand, and their *mediale Inszenierung* on the other,[23] that is, their framing in and by the media, primarily for marketing purposes. From whatever angle we look at authorial performances, however, by accepting that an author's public image is performatively

[22] Bodo Plachta, *Literaturbetrieb* (Paderborn: Fink, 2008), p. 24; my emphasis.
[23] For the distinction, see Doris Moser, 'Frame and Fame: Literaturvermittlung als Medienkommunikation am Beispiel von Helene Hegemann und Aloxotl Roadkill', in *Doing Contemporary Literature: Praktiken, Wertungen, Automatismen*, ed. by Maik Bierwith, Anja Johannsen and Mirna Zeman (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), pp. 191-216, here p. 191.

constructed, we implicitly subscribe to two fundamental theoretical assumptions: that the empirical author is worth bringing into the discussion of fiction in the first place, and that the performative nature of authorial identities does not suggest that they are inauthentic, but rather points to how authors deliberately (and publicly) assume positions of agency.

Roughly until the millennium, German literary scholarship largely took for granted the theoretical debunking of the author figure attempted, by different means and with slightly different goals, by Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault in the late 1960s.[24] In 1999, however, literary scholars Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matias Martinez, and Simone Winko published an influential collection of essays arguing for the 'Rückkehr des Autors'.[25] These scholars recognised and encouraged what had, in effect, long been common practice despite Barthes' proclamation of the 'death of the author': referring to what is known about a text's empirical author, as well as to the author as an abstract figure, in order to legitimise, or reject, particular approaches to it. Julia Schöll usefully comments in this context that the 'return of the author' as an empirical figure is not a reactionary gesture. It does not entail the renewed use of authors' biographies for textual interpretation, nor the rejection of the notion that authorship is a construct. Rather, it builds on, rather than reversing, the 'death of the author' by proposing a 'Neukonstruktion der auktorialen Subjektposition, die auf der vorangegangenen Entmachtung des Subjekts beruht und diese genuin voraussetzt'.[26]

The more or less consensual theorisation of authorship as a performative construct, as the result of practices of *Inszenierung*,[27] in recent years seems to be largely indebted to the theoretical

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[24] The three main texts associated with this attempt are the following: Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Liteature and Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), pp. 64–91; Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142–8; and Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubion, trans. by Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1998), pp. 205-22.

[25] Fotis Jannidis, Gerhard Lauer, Matias Martinez, and Simone Winko, eds, *Rückkehr des Autors: Zur Erneuerung eines umstrittenen Begriffs* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1999).

[26] Julia Schöll, 'Entwürfe des auktorialen Subjekts im 21. Jahrhundert. Daniel Kehlmann und Thomas Glavinic', in *Das erste Jahrzehnt: Narrative und Poetiken des 21. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Johanna Bohley and Julia Schöll (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), pp. 279-92, here p. 280.

[27] See, in order of publication: Christine Künzel and Jörg Schönert, eds, *Autorinszenierungen: Autorschaft und literarisches Werk im Kontext der Medien* (Würzburg: Königshausen &

shift effected by the 'Rückkehr des Autors'. The performative model of authorship allows us to pay attention not only to authors as real individuals, but also to their role within a social, cultural, political, and media setting.[28] A performative approach to authorship, moreover, is fundamentally concerned with the interrelation between identity and textuality. Ute Berns describes the 'performative turn' in all areas of cultural analysis as a new way of reading identities, a move 'beyond the study of texts as representations[,] as expressing pre-existing meanings or identities' and towards a consideration of how texts 'take part in the performative processes of making meaning and of shaping identities'.[29] By bearing in mind that authors' public identities are performances shaped by their own texts, among other factors, rather than solely by attributes tied to their personal experiences, we recognise the authors as powerful agents within the literary landscape, rather than merely its products.

Selbstinszenierung and *mediale Inszenierung*: Forms and Platforms

We can indeed assume that many authors are aware of theories of performativity and consciously inhabit their public role as performers.[30] The scholarly background of a number of contemporary authors may also help explain the popularity of *Poetikdozenturen*, fellowships at German-speaking universities roughly equivalent to writer-in-residence schemes at some UK universities. During these fellowships authors are expected to hold a series of lectures explaining their approach to writing to an academic and non-academic audience. One of the most common tropes in these

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Neumann, 2007); Gunter E. Grimm and Christian Schärf, eds, *Schriftsteller-Inszenierungen* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2008); Christoph Jürgensen and Gerhard Kaiser, eds, *Schriftstellerische Inszenierungspraktiken: Typologie und Geschichte* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2011) and Sabine Kyora, *Subjektform Autor: Autorschaftsinszenierungen als Praktiken der Subjektivierung* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014).

[28] Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoor, 'Authorship as Cultural Performance: New Perspectives in Authorship Studies', *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik. A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture*, 60.1 (2012), 5-29, here 9; see also Kyora, *Subjektform Autor*, 11-2.

[29] Ute Berns, 'Solo Performances: An Introduction', in *Solo Performances: Staging the Early Modern Self in England*, ed. by Ute Berns (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2010), pp. 11-30, here p. 14. See also Ute Berns, 'Performativity', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg UP, 2014), http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/performativity) [accessed 9 September 2019].

[30] Herrmann and Horstkotte, *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 108.

lectures, which Joanna Bohley sees as a genre in and of itself, is a form of self-deconstruction, as it were, 'ein Versuch, das Autor-Ich als autofiktionale Erfindung […] dem Nichts anzunähern', which runs counter to the author's physical presence in the room.[31] As a platform for such complex and self-reflexive authorial *Selbstinszenierungen*, these lectures are less an interpretative tool for an author's literary work than an integral part of it.

In addition, however, such lectures also serve authors' economic interests, amongst which the maximisation of public 'impact'[32] is a major concern. The rise of the social media, as well as the proliferation of other online literary platforms, has radically multiplied the possibilities for cultural influence open to authors as public figures. Most authors today are present online. Much like *Poetikvorlesungen*, online platforms allow them to engage with, extend, or influence interpretations of their published work and to inhabit their public identities as what Anke Biendarra calls a 'fortlaufendes Erzählprojekt'.[33] Such platforms also give them the freedom to play with their own image in a way which complements or subverts their own publishers' marketing strategies, examples of which will be discussed in the next subsection below. In many cases, authors' websites serve as sober online 'Visitenkarten'[34] rather than as spaces of creativity and interaction with their readers. Yet many contemporary authors choose more interactive forms of online presence, such as blogs or profiles on social media, which they use to share parts of their published work or news of upcoming events and projects.[35]

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[31] Johanna Bohley, 'Zur Konjunktur der Gattung Poetikvorlesung als "Form für nichts"', in Bohley and Schöll, *Das Erste Jahrzehnt*, p. 227-44, here p. 239.
[32] See Braun, 'Cultural Impact'.
[33] Anke S. Biendarra, 'Autorschaft 2.0: Mediale Selbstinszenierung im Internet (Deutschland/USA)', in *Globalisierung und Gegenwartsliteratur. Konstellationen-Konzepte-Perspektiven*, ed. by Wilhelm Amann, Georg Mein and Rolf Parr (Heidelberg: Synchron, 2010), pp. 259-80, here p. 266.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Saša Stanišić's Twitter account is open to the public, for example: https://twitter.com/sasa_s?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor [Accessed 3 October 2019]. While the other authors discussed in this thesis are not active on Twitter, hashtags with their names do exist, helpfully collecting in one place any material posted about them by other Twitter users.
Wolfgang Herrndorf's now-disactivated blog 'Arbeit und Struktur', meanwhile, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, links to a website created and managed by Herrndorf's widow, author Carola Wimmer. This website consists of a short biography of the author superimposed on various photos of him and his belongings, as well as paintings by him as a young art student. See https://www.ueberwolfgang.de [Accessed 3 October 2019]. The *Inszenierung* of

Such forms of online presence not only contribute to the performative construction of the authors' public image but also, as Sabine Kyora points out, allow authors to inhabit their economic role, their 'Autorschaft als Label oder Marke'[36] more transparently. In his introduction to the 2002 volume *Recasting German Identity* Stuart Taberner argues that the Federal Republic's ever-increasing integration into the millenial global capitalist order entails that 'identity, whether national, regional or metropolitan, is marketed as a brand'.[37] Considering the examples discussed so far, I argue that in the present context it is *authors'* identities that are marketed as brands, both of the authors' own accord and in response to the shape of the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb*.

The 'Business' of Literature

The term *Literaturbetrieb* is hard to translate into English. As *Betrieb* encompasses the ideas of 'business', 'activity', and 'establishment', the terms 'literary market', 'literary establishment' or 'literary scene' seem to only render part of its connotations. The vagueness of the term in German adds to this problem. Plachta approaches the *Literaturbetrieb* as a phenomenon or group of phenomena surrounding the writing, publication, promotion, sale, reading, and critical discussion of written or performed texts in scholarship and in the media.[38] His conception of the *Literaturbetrieb* is akin to the notion of a collective's 'literarisches Leben', as broad and dynamic as Pierre Bourdieu's 'literary field', which refers to the complex web of relations of power and influence amongst individuals and institutions, relations defined by the participants' economic and symbolic capital.[39] The fact that all these related terms see literary scholarship as being as much a

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Herrndorf on this webpage is not only a tribute to the deceased author but also a way of administering his public image in his absence and of pointing readers to new, posthumous publications of his work.

[36] Kyora, *Subjektform Autor*, 14-15. See also Stefan Neuhaus, 'Der Autor als Marke. Strategien der Personalisierung im Literaturbetrieb', *Wirkendes Wort*, 61 (2011), 313-28.

[37] Stuart Taberner, 'Introduction', in *Recasting German Identity*, ed. by Stuart Taberner and Frank Finlay (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), pp. 1-18, here p. 6.

[38] Plachta, *Literaturbetrieb*, 9-15. In an even more recent publication, Steffen Richter defines the *Literaturbetrieb* with more emphasis on its relational nature as 'ein Beziehungsgeflecht mit variablen Akteuren'. See *Der Literaturbetrieb: Eine Einführung: Texte – Märkte – Medien* (Darmstadt: wbg Academic, 2011), p. 8.

[39] Plachta, *Literaturbetrieb*, 13. For the concept of the 'literary field' see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

part of the *Literaturbetrieb* as *Feuilleton* commentary is particularly significant in the context of this thesis. My aim, in discussing the ways in which authorship is performatively constituted by third parties within the *Literatubetrieb* as well as by authors themselves, is not to critique either my fellow academics or *Literaturkritiker*, who are in turn all too often, unfairly, the object of academic snobbery. Rather, my aim is to examine the way both newspaper critics and scholars of literature, and indeed any other professional readers including authors themselves, discuss contemporary authorship and approach texts which are evasive about identities.

Of the many phenomena subsumed under the term *Literaturbetrieb*, two, I think, contribute the most to shaping authors' identities in the public eye: literary marketing events on the one hand and a culture of literary debates or *Literaturstreite* on the other. The proliferation of literary festivals, book fairs, and the *Literaturhäuser* which have emerged across German-speaking Europe in the past two decades funded in part by publishers and booksellers,[40] have not only opened up new physical and social spaces for literary exchange, but have also contributed to an increasing orientation of German literature towards events.[41] The emergence of 'interactive' events such as book presentations accompanied by a drinks reception, or improvisational *Lesebühnen* and poetry slams, was initially met with disdain by the 'Kulturkritik bildungsbürgerlicher Tradition',[42] for whom such events impoverished and commodified literature.[43] Yet increasingly, newspaper critics and scholars appreciate such events for bringing new, hybrid, and more participatory modes of literary communication to the public. Even the award ceremonies of prestigious literary prizes such as the Georg-Büchner-Preis are 'hochgradig ritualisierte Medien-Event[s]'.[44]

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[40] *Literaturhäuser* are centrally housed institutions in major German-speaking cities which have been set up to host events such as writers' meetings, readings, book presentations, exhibitions, or retrospectives. See Rainer Moritz, 'Ein Forum für die Literatur', in *Literaturbetrieb in Deutschland*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold and Matthias Beilein (Munich: text + kritik, 2009), pp. 123-9 and Sonja Vanderath, 'Zwischen LitClubbing und Roundtable. Strategien von Literaturhäusern', in *Literatur.com: Tendenzen im Literaturmarketing*, ed. by Erhard H. Schütz and Thomas Wegmann (Berlin: Weidler, 2002), pp. 172-5.
[41] Stephan Ditschke, '"Das Publikum hat getobt!"', in Arnold and Beilein, *Literaturbetrieb in Deutschland*, pp. 307-21, here p. 308. See Gerstenberger and Herminghouse, Introduction, 15.
[42] Ditschke, p. 317.
[43] See Herrmann and Horstkotte, *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 200.
[44] Ibid.

Such book prizes are usually awarded by juries consisting of professionals in the literary field such as authors, publishers, and, often, newspaper critics. The latter are also largely the ones to set the tone for the discussion of authors and their work. Often, they do so by instigating debates about specific works or authors, debates which often turn into a marketing tool in their own right. Indeed, the German culture of *Literaturstreite* is unique in its intensity, long tradition, and influence on the perception of authors' identities.[45] As a phenomenon, these debates are related to, but also distinct from, the German tradition of political authorship discussed above. After 1945, authors as public intellectuals would frequently provoke such debates as a way of making political statements, and conversely these debates would define their public role. Yet the German culture of literary debates did not wane with the falling out of fashion of political authorship. On the contrary, they have increased in both number and intensity in the three decades since the German reunification, in part a result of the increasing diversification of the media landscape in the digital age.[46]

Interestingly, it is increasingly authors rather than newspaper critics who, often in opinion pieces in the mainstream press, spark debates about other authors. As shall be discussed in the relevant chapters of this thesis, the authors Rainald Goetz and Maxim Biller, both of whom have tended to their public image as *provocateurs* for decades, made incendiary but, as I will argue, ultimately vapid comments against Herrndorf and Stanišić respectively. Conversely, Eva Menasse has stepped in to defend her colleagues' freedom of speech even while openly challenging their views, as when, in 2014, author Sibylle Lewitscharoff voiced concerns about the ethics of reproductive medicine.[47] Together with contemporary authors' presence at literary marketing events, such debates and controversies play a significant role in shaping individual authors' public identities and, by extension, the reception of their work.

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[45] Robert Weninger, *Streitbare Literaten: Kontroversen und Eklats in der deutschen Literatur von Adorno bis Walser* (Munich: Beck, 2004), p. 9. See also Plachta, *Literaturbetrieb*, 44-9 and Finlay, 'Literary Debates', 25.

[46] For an introduction to the most influential literary debates since the *Wende* see Herrmann and Horstkotte, *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 15-25. For a more detailed account of individual debates see Weninger, *Streitbare Literaten*.

[47] See Eva Menasse, 'Unheilige Wut', *Die Zeit*, 13 March 2014, https://www.zeit.de/2014/12/eva-menasse-sibylle-lewitscharoff [Accessed 25 September 2019].

Authorial Identities and Fictional Identities

The *Literaturbetrieb*'s focus on the marketability of authors' public identities, their 'image', is being heavily debated within the *Literaturbetrieb* itself.[48] Literary authors occasionally complain about the commodification of their work and their prescribed role in the *Literaturbetrieb*.[49] By discussing the role of the media and of *Feuilleton* critics in shaping authors' identities, my aim is not to add to the ceaseless lament about the state of contemporary German literature (nor to lament this lament). Rather, I see such phenomena of the *Literaturbetrieb* as authors' media exposure, the popularity of literary marketing events, and *Feuilleton* debates as conducive to pluralising and democratising German literary discourse. They bring new texts to the attention of a broad readership, shape a new, more inclusive canon, and fuel a broad critical conversation across a range of platforms.

Moreover, that professional readers of contemporary literature centre their discussions of recent fiction on authors' public identities is not to be understood as proof that German literary reviewers and scholars have succumbed to a cult of celebrity, as it were. Rather, the attention to authors' identities should be seen as part of broader critical efforts to make sense of the increasingly vast and increasingly diverse landscape of what Lyn Marven, writing in 2011, calls 'ultra-contemporary' literature'.[50] In the chapters which follow, I explore the extent to which the identity categories used by both the *Feuilleton* and the scholarly reception of these texts can be helpful, and the ways in which they are problematic in view of the fundamentally uncertain identities at the heart of these texts. How do these uncertain fictional identities reflect on and nuance the public stylisation of the authors' identities? And vice versa, is there a correlation, a

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[48] See e.g. Jens Jessen, 'Verdirbt der Literaturbetrieb die Literatur? Vorbemerkung zu einer Diskussion', *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, 51 (2007), 11–14.
[49] See Biendarra, 'Autorschaft 2.0', 263.
[50] Lyn Marven, 'Introduction: New German-Language Writing since the Turn of the Millenium', in *Emerging German-Language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), pp. 1-16, here 10. The term used by Marven describes the time period with which I am concerned with in this thesis well, not least as it helps delineate this period (i.e. the second decade of the twenty-first century) from the much vaster (and variously defined) category of *Gegenwartsliteratur*.

tension or an opposition between authors' public personas and the identity narratives in their texts? By means of which narrative strategies do these texts problematise notions of identity? And finally, what are the political and aesthetic effects of such narratives?

These questions run through the following chapters. The five novels discussed in these chapters were chosen since, despite their obvious differences in genre and subject matter, they all feature central figures whose identities are blurry, obscure, or radically fragmented. These fictional identities create a sense of uncertainty in the reader, which also reverberates on the level of authorial identity constructs, which, as discussed above, are not only public but also politically charged. There seems, then, to be a mutual questioning between the way identities are constituted within and around these novels. All five texts play with and consistently frustrate the reader's expectation that the fictional identities within them can be mapped onto categories such as gender, race, class, and (national) origin, categories which also underpin wider debates about (authorial) identities.

By complicating unequivocal or monolithic conceptions of identity, these texts not only nuance or challenge the very premises on which (authorial) identities are constructed within literature and beyond, but also ask important questions about the possibility of identity narratives more broadly. By showing how fictional and authorial identities interact, reflect on each other, and clash, I am not talking about authors' intentions; whether or not uncertainty surrounding fictional identities in these recent novels is a deliberate choice on an author's part is a moot point. What matters is that, whether intentionally or not, fictional and authorial identities are brought into interaction within these novels in complex ways.

Methodological Considerations

By foregrounding the fraught interaction between authorial identity constructs and problematic fictional identities, that is, between identities in texts and in their context, I am in effect combining two distinct, but not entirely unrelated, strands of narrative theory: a cultural studies approach to narrative on the one hand and the so-called 'unnatural' approach on the other, which focusses on antimimetic, strange, and experimental modes of storytelling. The cultural studies approach pays

attention to the context of literary narratives, the conditions of their production, promotion, and reception.[51] As Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer explain, this approach views literature both 'als Symbolsystem und als Sozialsystem'.[52] It places literary texts within their contemporary media landscape[53] without assuming them to be more important than other, non-literary discourses.[54] In addition, it treats literary texts as sources of information on the society which brought them forth, on mentalities and discourses prevalent at the time of their production and reception. As Astrid Erll specifies, for instance, this view entails that 'specific forms of narrative voice, focalisation, and plot […] hint at pre-existing cultural constellations'.[55] This approach therefore allows me to establish a connection between narrative and contextual elements, between identity narratives in recent fiction on the one hand and the identity constructs in its real-life context on the other.

The idea that narrative forms can and should be considered within their cultural context also implicitly underlies the 'unnatural' approach to narrative on which I selectively draw in my discussion of experimental narratives in the following chapters. 'Antimimetic' or 'unnatural' narratology[56] seeks to extend categories of classical narratology such as voice, focalisation, and plot, all of which were developed on the basis of mimetic, i.e. realist narratives,[57] so that they can be used to study nonrealist texts or text elements. Brian Richardson in the United States and Jan Alber in Germany, as well as a group of Scandinavian narrative theorists including Henrik Skov Nielsen and Stefan Iversen in Denmark, are at the forefront of this relatively new paradigm. Unlike theorists of narrative in previous decades, who primarily used nineteenth-century realist novels to

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[51] Astrid Erll, 'Cultural Studies Approaches to Narrative', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 88-93.
[52] Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer, 'Kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft: Disziplinäre Ansätze, theoretische Positionen und transdisziplinäre Perspektiven', in *Kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. by Ansgar Nünning and Roy Sommer (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 2004), pp. 9-29, here p. 16.
[53] Nünning and Sommer, 'Kulturwissenschaftliche Literaturwissenschaft', 19.
[54] Ibid., 20 and 26.
[55] Erll, 'Cultural Studies Approaches', 91.
[56] The terms 'antimimetic' and 'unnatural' are used interchangeably in recent publications.
[57] See the sections written by Brian Richardson in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts & Critical Debates*, by David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson and Robyn Warhol (Columbus, OH: Ohio UP, 2012), pp. 20-8; 51-6; 76-83, 103-10; 132-8; 155-9; and 176-84, here p. 23.

illustrate specific terms and concepts, these theorists frequently take texts by Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, and Franz Kafka, or more recent works by Salman Rushdie or Martin Amis[58] as their object of study.

Such authors, they argue, use unconventional narrative techniques which cannot be adequately described with the terminology of classical narratology, which, from the 1960s to the 1990s, built on the works of Franz Karl Stanzel and Gérard Genette. Stanzel and Genette each developed their own typology of narrative elements which reflected the very different theoretical traditions they were coming from. Among other notions, Stanzel gave us the distinction between first-person, authorial, and figural narration (i.e. narration from the perspective of a participant in the action), while Genette provided us with a rich vocabulary to discuss, among other things, focalisation, duration (i.e. the time elapsed in the story relatively to the length of the narration, the 'telling' of the story), narrative levels (e.g. in embedded stories or *Rahmenrerzählungen*), and paratexts, such as titles, chapter epigraphs, and authors' biographies. [59]

The 'unnatural' approach which I draw on in this thesis, however, is one of the four major 'postclassical' approaches to narrative,[60] alongside the rhetorical approach, which emphasises the communicative function of narrative, the feminist approach, and the cognitive approach, which looks at how narrative fiction can give access to the mind of others and thus make their experience communicable.[61] The latter approach is related to Monika Fludernik's influential argument that

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[58] In *Narrative Theory* Richardson uses an analysis of the 'unnatural' elements in Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1980) to illustrate the relation of unnatural narratology to other recent approaches to narrative, while Jan Alber twice uses Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* (1991) as his example, first in his influential article 'Impossible Storyworlds and What to Do with Them', *Storyworlds. A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 1 (2009), 79-96 and then in the introduction of *Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology*, ed. by Jan Alber and Rüdiger Heinze (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2011), pp. 1-19.

[59] For helpful summaries of the contributions of major classical narratologists, as well as indispensable and accessible definitions of key terms see Suzanne Keen, *Narrative Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 1-15 and Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology*, trans. by Patricia Häusler-Greenfield and Monika Fludernik (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 88-109.

[60] See David Herman, ed., *Narratologies* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 1999), pp. 1-33; David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 23-36 and Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik, ed., *Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2010), pp. 1-34.

[61] The co-authored volume by Herman et al. cited above explains in some detail the main tenets of each approach, as well as the differences and parallels between them. For more information see the

'narrativity', i.e. the quality which makes a representation count as a narrative, depends on 'experientiality', i.e. the quality of real-life experience with which it is invested.[62] Fludernik's premise is that 'natural' storytelling, that is, oral, conversational narratives, should be the prototypes for our understanding of all other types of narrative. 'Unnatural' narratology developed in response to this argument, seeking, however, not so much to debunk as to extend it.[63]

Indeed, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that the 'unnatural' in 'unnatural' narratology refers to the attention this approach pays to narratives which are nonrealist, that is, far removed from everyday discourse. Such narratives employ conventions and stories which are *not* used in everyday storytelling and therefore appear counterintuitive, confusing, or illogical.[64] Yet this does not mean that this approach only looks out for narratives that experiment for the sake of experimenting. Rather, as Richardson discusses, 'unnatural' narratives have aesthetic value as well as ethical and political significance. On the one hand, they often foreground their own constructedness, and thereby alert us to the expectations and desires which we bring into the process of reading.[65] On the other hand, they push the boundaries of what is real, plausible, or representable in a way which critically reflects on the reader's world beyond the fiction.[66]

The 'unnatural' approach to narrative is helpful for my readings of the texts discussed here as all five are fundamentally nonrealist narratives which ultimately present little, if any, scope for

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following entries from the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*: James Phelan, 'Rhetorical Approaches to Narrative' (50-4) Robyn Warhol, 'Feminist Narratology' (161-3) and Manfred Jahn, 'Cognitive Narratology' (67-71).

[62] Monika Fludernik, *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (Abingdon, Routledge, 1996), p. 12.

[63] See Brian Richardson, *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2006), p. 3 and Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, 'Introduction', in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, ed. by Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson (Columbus, OH: Ohio State UP, 2013), 1-15, here 3.
For more details on the relation of the two arguments, see Monika Fludernik's response to Richardson's *Unnatural Voices* entitled 'How Natural Is "Unnatural Narratology"; or, What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?' *Narrative*, 20.3 (2012), 357-70 as well as the collective response to the latter by Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, 'What Is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology?: A Response to Monika Fludernik' *Narrative*, 20.3 (2012), 371-81.

[64] Alber and Heinze, *Unnatural Narratives,* 1 (footnote 1).

[65] Richardson in Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, 176-84.

[66] Ibid., 178-9.

the reader's identification. However, it is worth noting that it is neither a unified approach[67] nor does it preclude the other 'postclassical' approaches with which it shares parentage. Rather, all four 'postclassical' approaches to narrative feed into each other, even though they differ in how communicative they believe literary narratives to be.[68] Among other things, 'unnatural' narratology gives further credence to my parallel readings of fictional and authorial identities. Though 'unnatural' narratologists generally accept the notion of the 'implied author' commonly used in the rhetorical approach,[69] Richardson has repeatedly pointed out that antimimetic or 'unnatural' texts can also collapse the distinction of implied and real author.[70] This recognition, namely that *real* as well as implied authors come into play in how a work of fiction is read, makes this approach compatible with the argument for the 'return of the author' discussed above.

Another advantage of the 'unnatural' approach for the purposes of my argument is that it draws particular attention to how narrative voice and perspective, i.e. the most common 'mediators' of identity in narrative, are used in nonrealist texts. 'Unnatural' narratives sometimes feature voices which are collective, impersonal or indeterminate. They can neither be attributed to specific characters or narrators, nor are they bound to a specific perspective from which the story is told. Earlier descriptive categories of voice such as unreliable narration, which relies on the

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[67] There is a disagreement between Richardson, who rejects the notion that narrative is always communicative (*Narrative Theory*, 237) and Alber, who uses cognitive models of reading to make sense of how readers make sense of texts which refuse to communicate ('Impossible Storyworlds', 80 and 82).

[68] The last section of Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, foregrounds the interactions between the different approaches. The fact that James Phelan, one of the main representatives of a rhetorical approach, is also one of the contributors to the volume by Alber et al., *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative* underlines the proximity between the 'unnatural' and the rhetorical approaches in particular.

[69] See Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* [1961] (Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1983). The term refers to the author figure not as a biographical, historical entity, but as an abstract figure constituted by a specific literary text. The concept is also crucial in the theorisation of unreliable narration. Wolfgang Iser proposes the notion of the 'implied reader' as a counterpart to the 'implied author' in *Der implizite Leser: Kommunikationsformen des Romans von Bunyan bis Beckett* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972). See also Ansgar Nünning, 'Implied Author' (239-40) and Ralf Schneider, 'Reader-Response Theory' (484-5) in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*.

[70] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, 5 and in Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, 52.

presence of a distinct narrator figure as well as an implied author, are not very helpful in describing how such narratives work.[71]

Apart from voice and perspective, the 'unnatural' approach also foregrounds how time, space, order, and causality can be used in nonrealist, counterintuitive ways. For example, it draws attention to narratives in which time and space are distorted or left indeterminate from the beginning; or to narratives in which plot progression, which depends on the order in which events are told and on their causal connection, is derailed.[72] Even though I will consistently be using narratological categories such as voice, space, time, and plot progression in the flexible way they are used in 'unnatural' narratology, I will avoid, as much as possible, referring to the five primary texts in this thesis as 'unnatural' or 'antimimetic' narratives in a general sense, preferring instead, for the sake of clarity, to address in detail what is experimental, strange or alienating about them.

Five Experimental Novels?

All five novels discussed in this thesis are self-consciously fictional, explicitly reflect on their own inconsistencies, and require some work on the reader's part, despite their, on average, rather conventional use of language. Yet each of these texts is 'strange' in its own way. The use of narrative voice and perspective is certainly one of the main sources of uncertainty in the novels by Wolfgang Herrndorf, Saša Stanišić, and partially also Eva Menasse. Yet other elements also come into play in each of these cases. In Herrndorf's *Sand*, the protagonist is persecuted and tortured for no apparent reason. The violence against him makes for particularly ambivalent and uncomfortable reading. The abandonment of natural, intuitive causality thus contributes to the generation of uncertainty in the novel at least as much as the unstable narrative voice and focalisation.[73] In Menasse's *Quasikristalle*, as also in Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend*, plot progression is also manipulated to create confusion: with its pedantically linear succession of different perspectives,

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[71] Ibid., 103-5.
[72] These elements, and some of the ways in which they feature in 'unnatural' narratives, are discussed in detail by Richardson throughout Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*.
[73] For more on causality in 'unnatural' narratives see Marina Grishakova, 'Natural Causality Denaturalised', in Alber and Heinze, *Unnatural Narratives*, 127-44.

Quasikristalle opens up more questions than it answers, while the narrative of Erpenbeck's heroine paradoxically progresses by means of regular hypothetical leaps into the past. In Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*, in turn, the effect of the mysterious first-person-plural narrator/protagonist is compounded by metalepses (i.e. 'frame-breaking') within and beyond the novel. For example, at one point in the novel a handwritten passage suddenly interrupts the neatness of the typed text, pointing to the existence of an extratextual reality beyond it. The narrative as a whole, meanwhile, continues beyond the end of the novel on a website containing extracts from the manuscript which did not make the final cut into the published version.[74] In the titular story in the collection *Fallensteller* (2016), moreover, the author himself supposedly visits the fictional village of *Vor dem Fest*. This blurring of the boundaries between fiction and reality is also the main source of uncertainty in *Hoppe*, as is the novel's excessive use of repetitions and intertextual references.

Despite the fact that each of these texts obscures the identities most central to it by means of a unique combination of narrative elements, however, they all share some characteristics. They all feature narrators, for instance, who make the category of unreliability seem insufficient. Stanišić and Menasse experiment with plural and multiple narrators respectively, silencing individual voices, or creating a deafening, disorientating kind of polyphony. Herrndorf's narrator is extremely ambivalent, at times aligned with the author himself and at times cynical and distant, while Hoppe is less subtle and more consistent than Herrndorf in challenging the distinctions between both author and narrator and author and protagonist.

Moreover, in all instances, focalisation, the use of perspective, is problematic.[75] It is particularly unstable in *Sand*, where it alternates between neutral omniscience, the limited perspectives of the characters, and an external, cynical narrative voice with seemingly no access to or regard for characters' interiority. *Vor dem Fest* includes an occasional animal focaliser,[76] a vixen whose perspective is sometimes juxtaposed with the villagers' own simultaneously limited and partly omniscient one. The juxtaposed focalisers of Menasse's *Quasikristalle* are too limited to

[74] See Chapter Three of this thesis, p. 124 (footnote 77).
[75] See Manfred Jahn, 'Focalisation', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 173-7.
[76] For a useful clarification of how different theorists have nuanced the term 'focaliser', see Fludernik, *An Introduction*, 144.

allow anything but the contours of a life story to appear, while the ostensibly omniscient perspective on the protagonist's life in *Hoppe* is undermined by the conflation of the author, narrator, and protagonist. None of the five novels offer any narrative closure, though *Vor dem Fest* does end with the long-awaited titular 'Fest', and *Aller Tage Abend* with the heroine's (final) death. Yet even these two seemingly neat endings are more arbitrary than they seem: as mentioned above *Vor dem Fest* is continued online, while the finality Erpenbeck's heroine's last death is undermined by the fact that up to that point in the novel death has been a reversible event.

The passing of time and the order of narration are also manipulated in ways which cause confusion in all of the novels discussed. In *Vor dem Fest*, time is radically slowed down during the narration of the events taking place in the hours before the feast. At the same time, it is also given historical and mythical depth through references to a top-secret village archive. In the novels by Herrndorf and Hoppe, repetitions of events and anachronies[77] abound, making it impossible, or at least very difficult, for the reader to gauge a sense of the plot. In Herrndorf, moreover, the main event, the event which would solve the central mystery and restore the broken chain of causality, is narrated so suggestively that it is almost incomprehensible to the reader. The novels by Erpenbeck and Menasse, finally, have a larger temporal scope, but both experiment with the order of narration in a way that overshadows the events narrated. Both texts are ordered according to a logic of their own, one which is far removed from the logic of everyday narratives.

Space is also invariably problematic in all five novels. The spaces of the protagonist's life in *Aller Tage Abend* are vague, almost impressionistically evoked, yet the sites of her deaths are rendered with exact, albeit entirely unrevealing, geographical coordinates. All settings of *Sand* meanwhile, the desert, oasis, mines, and slums in and around the imaginary North African metropolis Targat, are simultaneously indeterminate and maze-like. Fürstenfelde, the setting of *Vor dem Fest*, is also made up, quasi-mythical, a constant blend of symbolic, magical, and banal, naturalistic elements, as is Hamelin in *Hoppe*, a real space which is, however, invested with

[77] For a discussion of different kinds of anachronies (i.e. discrepancies between the time of events narrated and the order of their narration), as opposed to anachronisms, see Keen, *Narrative Form*, 101.

fantasy and myth. Though relatively clearly determined, space is also problematised in *Quasikristalle*, most notably in a chapter set in present-day Auschwitz.

Finally, all novels considered here converge in the kind of audience they address (insofar as they address a specific audience at all). My contention is that the reader of these novels is *meant* to feel puzzled, unsettled, and altogether uncertain about what is happening in them; it is impossible to read these novels without some degree of confusion and discomfort. In all five novels, however, the greatest source of uncertainty is not the plot or setting, but the figures at their centre. These figures are always *partly* known, partly there, and yet they are fragmented, opaque, unclear. It is, I think, this partial knowledge which makes them ambivalent or uncertain (rather than entirely unfathomable) and which constitutes the real challenge for the reader: to accept the suspension between knowing and not knowing, the incomplete, imperfect, unstable, *unusable* knowledge that is uncertainty.

This uncertainty brought forth in the process of reading is also deflected onto the authors' own identities: authorial identities, too, are only 'known' insofar as they are publicly performed, and therefore neither really known nor really unknown. It is in this way that uncertainty surrounding identities in fiction parallels the uncertainty surrounding the authors' own and on the politics that attend them. The texts discussed here, I will argue in the five chapters which follow, call for readings which tolerate, rather than resist, uncertainty. This ethics of uncertainty, in turn, is a response, and perhaps an antidote, to the politicisation of authorial identities in the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb*.

Structure of the Thesis and Chapters

The discussion of uncertain identities in recent fiction in this thesis begins, in Chapter One, with the most conventional of the five texts, Menasse's *Quasikristalle*. This text is the one which most deliberately cultivates uncertainty surrounding the central figure, but is arguably also the one most limited in its scope for narrative experimentation and psychological exploration. Chapter Two will move the discussion on to Herrndorf's *Sand*, which for all its strangeness and graphic descriptions of seemingly unmotivated violence is still compulsively readable. Chapter Three looks at

Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*, with its alienating, but still often amusing first-person plural narrator. Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* will be discussed in Chapter Four. Though this is an often affecting and lyrical text, its caesuras and manipulation of grammatical moods significantly obstructs the process of reading. I will conclude in Chapter Five with the most experimental of the novels, Hoppe's *Hoppe*, which most radically destabilises notions of identity and most overtly (and completely) involves the author's own public identity in the process. Each chapter will begin by discussing the patterns in the reception of each author and situating them within the wider *Literaturbetrieb*: the labels used to describe them, their own *Selbstinszenierungen*, the other authors they are compared to and the personal information about them which is used to make sense of their work. This discussion will lead to a discussion of the specific experimental elements used in each novel to generate uncertainty around the central identities within it. The third and final part of each chapter will look at the political and ethical implications of these uncertain fictional identities, exploring how they nuance or trouble the terms by which their authors' identities are constructed.

Chapter One

Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013): Questioning Female, Austrian and Jewish Identities

Introduction

Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013)[1] attempts to capture in narrative form the way individual identities are constituted as a sum of multiple, often contradictory, subjective perspectives. In thirteen chapters, the novel pieces together the story of a woman's life from adolescence to retirement. Most of these chapters are narrated in the third person, but each is focalised through a different character amongst the protagonist Xane's relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Only the seventh chapter in the middle of the novel is narrated from Xane's own perspective in the first person, while the thirteenth and final one consists entirely of e-mails to Xane by her grown-up son. In the chapters which frame Xane's own, she is often a peripheral figure, glimpsed only partially or fleetingly in the margins of others' stories. Yet even her own perspective is highly problematic and ultimately no more enlightening than those of others. In combination, the thirteen chapters ultimately give only a fragmentary and superficial sense of her identity and an impressionistic account of her life. Partly because of the indeterminacy of its central figure, *Quasikristalle* has been received almost entirely in light of Menasse's own, strongly politicised identity as a female author and as an Austrian Jew. Whereas Menasse's commentators and partly also Menasse herself in articles and interviews often resort to clichés about the meaning of these identities, *Quasikristalle* attempts, through its multi-perspectival structure, to evoke the elusiveness and complexity of individual identities. By rendering the protagonist's life story through a succession

[1] Eva Menasse, *Quasikristalle* [2013] (Munich: btb, 2014).

of non-recurrent, limited perspectives, it reflects on how narratives of identity are constituted – and undone – through shifting interpersonal relationships.

In Chapters Four and Five I will argue that Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* and Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* problematise women's biographies and identities in more sophisticated and complex ways than Menasse does in *Quasikristalle*. Both Erpenbeck's and Hoppe's protagonists live several different lives, whether, in Erpenbeck's novel, by surviving her multiple deaths, or, in Hoppe's text, by inhabiting a series of personas, each of whom embarks on their own unlikely adventure. By contrast, Xane's life narrative is rather conventional. Born to a middle-class, mixed (Jewish-Christian) family in the 1970s, she grows up and studies in Vienna, which she eventually leaves to set up a marketing business in Berlin. She marries a divorced German academic with two daughters, has a child of her own, and later also a grandchild. In the course of her life, she makes many friends, has admirers and affairs, eventually a number of employees. Despite the conventional story at its heart, however, *Quasikristalle* deserves to be read alongside the other experimental identity narratives in this thesis precisely because it problematises the notion of a 'normal', relatable life. All of Xane's relationships, the relationships which ultimately shape who she is, are shown to be fraught with contradictions and difficulties. As a half-Jewish activist, she does not feel that she fully belongs in conservative, Catholic Vienna, yet as a Viennese, she never fully belongs in Berlin. She also has ambivalent feelings towards her family and friends, her colleagues, her lovers. They, in turn, are ambivalent about her, simultaneously admiring and resenting her, at times envying her, often avoiding her. The constant change of narrative perspectives reflects the instability of both Xane's and others' positions and identities. Parts II and III of this chapter will respectively explore *how* and *to what effect* the multi-perspectival structure of *Quasikristalle* relativises the protagonist's identities as a Viennese-Jewish woman, identities which, Part I will show, are key to Menasse's *(Selbst-)Inszenierung*. Ultimately, I aim to show that despite its shortcomings, *Quasikristalle* succeeds in presenting a more nuanced understanding of gendered, Austrian and Jewish identities than both Menasse's non-fiction and journalism and her reception.

Part I

Eva Menasse as a Feminist, Austrian-Jewish Public Intellectual

Eva Menasse (1970-) is an experienced journalist and commentator on current affairs. Even though she is concerned with a broad spectrum of political questions, she is particularly outspoken when it comes to questions of gender, to the political situation of her native Austria,[2] and to the discussion of Jewish identity, Israel and the Holocaust in contemporary Germany. Her political concerns therefore reflect aspects of her own identity as a woman, an Austrian, and a half-Jewish author. As the protagonists in her fiction often share these identities and explicitly reflect on them, it is not unreasonable that commentators should also pay attention to Menasse's own politics when writing on her fiction. However, using Menasse's public persona and political commitments as a compass for reading her fiction risks being reductive. *Quasikristalle* is indeed often read as 'women's literature', simply because it was written by a female author and deals with the lives of relatively ordinary, non-exceptional female characters. Some reviewers also stress the supposedly typically Austrian, or even Viennese-Jewish, elements of the novel, presumably because Menasse herself often comments on these aspects of her identity. While the novel is undeniably concerned with female, Austrian, and Jewish identities, reading it exclusively or even *mainly* in terms of Menasse's own persona and (sometimes problematic) politics ignores the ways in which the novel reflects more universally on the relational and relative nature of identity.

Quasikristalle as 'Women's Literature'

Only few reviewers have seen the depiction in *Quasikristalle* of some of the less discussed experiences in women's lives, such as complicated friendships, difficulties conceiving, adultery, or mid-life crisis, as a welcome feature of the novel. These reviewers are notably women themselves, although, as will shortly be discussed, there are also female reviewers amongst those who are

[2] Hillary Hope Herzog, 'Viennese Jews from Waldheim to Haider and Beyond', in *'Vienna Is Different', Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siècle to the Present* (New York: Bergahn Books, 2013), pp. 220-70, here p. 256.

disparaging of the novel's 'female' focus. Catharina Koller, for instance, describes it as 'ein geschliffener Frauenroman', while Elke Schröder praises its 'brillante Reflexionen über weibliche Identität und Beziehungspflege'.[3] Most *Feuilleton* critics, however, suggest that the novel's emphasis on women's private lives and concerns and its setting within a privileged, upper-middle-class social milieu mark *Quasikristalle* as *Frauenliteratur*, that is, as 'light', and therefore trivial, reading. Indeed, the public discussion of literature beyond (and sometimes also within) academic circles still too often associates writing by women about 'ordinary' women's lives with 'lower', more popular forms of literature. In other words, 'women's writing' is all too often equated with *Frauenliteratur*, and the latter with *Trivialliteratur*.

Even though, as Hester Baer and Alexandra Hill point out, 'today women's literature is commonplace, mainstream, and widely accepted',[4] it still struggles to shake off the association with commercial literature which it acquired in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet commercial success alone seems to be a less important criterion when labelling fiction by women as 'trivial' than the simple fact that it is written by women. As we will discuss in Chapter Five, even Felicitas Hoppe, whose complex, self-reflexive style does not generally appeal to a broad readership, is sometimes unfairly viewed as writing frivolous, irrelevant 'Häkeldeckchenprosa'.[5] Menasse's fiction, which is generally more accessible than Hoppe's and more centrally concerned with gendered experiences and relations, is often unfairly pigeonholed as 'women's literature'. *Quasikristalle*

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[3] Catharina Koller, 'Das Leben durch ein Spiegelkabinett', *Cicero*, 5 May 2013, https://www.cicero.de/kultur/eva-menasse-das-leben-durch-ein-spiegelkabinett/53964; Elke Schröder, 'Ein Leben als Ansichtssache: Eva Menasse's Roman *Quasikristalle*', *Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung*, 15 February 2013, https://www.noz.de/deutschland-welt/kultur/artikel/146319/ein-leben-als-ansichtssache-eva-menasses-roman-quasikristalle#gallery&0&0&146319 [Accessed 16 September 2019].

[4] Hester Baer and Alexandra Merley Hill, 'Introduction: German Women's Writing Beyond the Gender Binary', in *German Women's Writing in the Twenty-First Century* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), pp. 1-17, here p. 1. See also Julia Karolle-Berg and Katya Skow, 'From Frauenliteratur to Frauenliteraturbetrieb: Marketing Literature to German Women in the Twenty-First Century', in *German Literature in a New Century* ed. by Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Herminghouse (New York: Berghahn, 2008), pp. 220-36, here pp. 221-2.

[5] Stefan Neuhaus, '"Geniestreich" oder "artige Häkeldeckchenprosa"? Positionen literarischer Wertung am Beispiel der Debatte über die Büchnerpreisträgerin Felicitas Hoppe', in *Finnische Germanistentagung 2012: Einblicke und Aussichten*, ed. by Irma Hyvärinen, Ulrike Richter-Vapaatalo and Jouni Rostila, Series: Finnische Beiträge zur Germanistik, 30 (Frankfurt a.M: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 293-308, here p. 298.

more specifically made many reviewers uncomfortable with its conversational, down-to-earth approach to questions of gender identities and relations.

For example, the late Christopher Schmidt of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* finds the 'Einsichten über das angebliche Verfallsdatum weiblicher Attraktivität' in *Quasikristalle* 'wenig anspruchsvoll' and the novel overall lacking in 'erzählerischer Verdichtung, an einer Sprache, die über sich selbst hinausweist'.[6] Despite his endorsement of the novel, Peter Mohr also inadvertently implies something similar when he praises Menasse's conversational use of language for making the 'gedankenschweren philosophischen Überbau' of the novel, its exploration of the nature of identity, easier to digest.[7] Though the two critics view the novel very differently, they both seem unable to dissociate lightness of tone and style from triviality. Surprisingly, however, female reviewers are also ambivalent about the novel's strong focus on women's lives and perspectives.[8] Most overtly disparaging is Christine Käppeler's review in *Der Freitag*. Käppeler warns that the reader must ignore the many platitudes in the novel in order to enjoy it and likens chapter seven specifically, which is narrated from the protagonist's perspective, to a 'Brigitte-Kolumne'.[9] In her eagerness to distance herself from what she dismisses as 'women's literature', Käppeler overlooks how, as I shall show in Part II below, the seventh chapter highlights Xane's inability to distance herself from the dominant social discourses about gender and gender relations.

Menasse as a Feminist Author

The fact that the female reviewers cited here do not question or reflect on their own ambivalence regarding the novel's portrayal of gendered perspectives is particularly problematic. By failing to

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[6] Christopher Schmidt, 'Eine Metapher macht noch keine Frau', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 February 2013, available at https://www.buecher.de/shop/berlin/quasikristalle/menasse-eva/products_products/detail/prod_id/40019306/ [Accessed 16 September 2019].
[7] Peter Mohr, 'Das Prinzip Hoffnung als Sterne-Menü: Über Eva Menasses Roman "Quasikristalle"', *literaturkritik.de*, 8 April 2013, https://literaturkritik.de/id/17695 [Accessed 16 September 2019].
[8] E.g. Christine Käppeler, 'Das Reden der Anderen', *Der Freitag*, 7 March 2013, https://www.freitag.de/autoren/christine-kaeppeler/das-reden-der-anderen [Accessed 16 September 2019] and Claudia Voigt, 'Am Ende des Sommers', *Der Spiegel*, 8 April 2013, https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-91871195.html [Accessed 16 September 2019].
[9] Christine Käppeler, 'Das Reden der Anderen'.

distinguish between writing which critically engages with gender stereotypes (as I argue below *Quasikristalle* does) and writing which advocates and endorses them, these reviewers inadvertently perpetuate the association of women's literature with low-brow literary forms. This tenacious association not only leads to certain female experiences, such as ageing or anxiety about motherhood and relationships, to be excluded from 'high' literature. It also leads many contemporary female authors in Germany to 'reject the notion of categorising their work as "women's literature" and even repudiate a connection between their gender politics and their writing'.[10] Unlike some of her colleagues, Menasse openly identifies as a feminist and puts particular emphasis on this identity, especially since her debut *Vienna* garnered criticism for ostensibly being a novel about men.[11] Ulrike Frenkel clarifies that Menasse 'stört sich nicht daran, dass sie von manchen Literaturkritikern in eine bestimmte Ecke [von Frauenliteratur] gestellt wird'.[12] Rather, considering that giant figures of world literature such as Alice Munro are also labelled this way, she sees it as an 'Ehrentitel'. Though in the minority, the female authors cited in the epigraphs in *Quasikristalle*, which include Natalia Ginzburg and Ruth Klüger, give an indication of the kind of women authors Menasse is proud to be associated with.

Her affirmation of women's writing is part of Menasse's broader public engagement as a feminist, which centres on the defence of women's reproductive rights. In a 2010 article for *Der Spiegel* entitled 'Zellhaufen mit Potenzial',[13] for instance, she argues against Angela Merkel's support of a ban on preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD, or *PID* in German), that is, the running of tests to detect genetic disorders in embryos *in vitro*. A year after the article appeared, a bill was voted through by a parliamentary majority allowing such tests to be run under specific

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[10] Baer and Hill, Introduction, 3.
[11] Eva Menasse, *Vienna* [2004] (Munich: btb, 2007). See also Eva Menasse, 'Normale Familie, Gespräch mit Eva Menasse', Interview by Matthias Prangel, *Deutsche Bücher*, 37.3/4 (2007), 185-202, also available at https://literaturkritik.de/id/11706 [Accessed 16 September 2019].
[12] Eva Menasse, 'Begegnung mit Eva Menasse: "Mögen Sie Ihre eigenen Figuren nicht?", Interview by Ulrike Frenkel, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 22 June 2013, https://service3.szarchiv.de/hh03/hh03.ashx?req=pagehtm&bid=STZ20130622S1774059.STZ.STZ.def.def.0..NT&uid=aspmyrt&ugr=ugroup%5Fabo%5Fstzstnmini&z=Z32435 [Accessed 16 September 2019].
[13] Reprinted as 'Nicht christlich, sondern krank: Zur Debatte um die Präimplantationsdiagnostik' in Eva Menasse, *Lieber aufgeregt als abgeklärt* [2015] (Munich: btb, 2016), pp. 26-34.

circumstances. Though Menasse's article was arguably thus made redundant, it is worth looking at more closely, as it contains important arguments about the divide between how reproductive medicine is experienced by women, and how it is discussed (or rather *not* discussed) in German public life and politics. As Part III of this chapter will show, these arguments are echoed and nuanced by *Quasikristalle.* In the *Spiegel* article, Menasse argues that the taboos surrounding the public discussion of reproductive problems are a prime example of institutional sexism, unacceptable in a country led by a woman:

> Vielleicht ist das [reproductive medicine] der letzte Bereich, wo unsere ach so fortschrittliche, aufgeklärte Gesellschaft, die ansonsten jeden Autounfall als traumatisierungsträchtig erkennt, noch zutiefst männlich geprägt und hundertprozentig frauenfeindlich ist. Es ist jedenfalls der einzige Bereich, wo es für Frauen geradezu verstörend ist, dass der Bundeskanzler konservativ und weiblich ist. Denn über Fehl- und Totgeburten redet man nicht. Es ist ein Tabu. Man redet auch nicht darüber, dass man die Hilfe der Reproduktionsmedizin in Anspruch nehmen muss, weil man auf 'normalem Weg' keine Kinder bekommen kann. Das alles sind 'Frauensachen', die umgehend 'weggesteckt' werden müssen.[14]

Sweeping anxieties surrounding pregnancy and the use of reproductive medicine under the carpet, Menasse points out, renders women vulnerable to relentless and unsolicited social critique for choices which concern them and their bodies.[15] With forceful language and a reference to her own experience of discrimination for resorting to reproductive medicine, she shows how harmful it is to describe certain topics as exclusively feminine or as only relevant to women of a specific age. Doing so, she argues, allows everyone else to wash their hands of uncomfortable moral debates that are ultimately relevant to the collective.

Though much of this essay is reasonable and fair, there are some problems with her account which ironically illuminate the much more nuanced representation of reproductive medicine and motherhood in the novel. For example, in the essay she dismisses the reasonable argument against potential eugenic abuses of reproductive technology by claiming, sarcastically, that

> konservative Politiker und leider inzwischen auch etliche andere, deren moralischer Kompass bei jeder etwas komplizierten Frage 'Hitler, Hitler' blökt, phantasieren seit Jahren von genetisch manipulierten 'Designerbabys': Wenn man erst einmal die PID erlaube, dann seien allen Wünschen Tür und Tor geöffnet, die Leute würden sich umgehend in Labors stauen, im

[14] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 26-7.
[15] Ibid., 31.

> dort schlanke, blonde und blauäugige Mädchen ohne Diabetes- und Brustkrebsgen zu bestellen.[16]

Even if we read this as only an argumentative slippage, the essay remains worrying, as it makes unnuanced, universalising assumptions about women's attitudes to motherhood. After describing at length the painful medical procedures involved in assisted reproduction, Menasse explains that 'Frauen tun sich das an, Frauen tun sich das immer wieder an, wie freiwillige Laborratten, nicht weil sie pervers sind, sondern weil ihre *Natur* ihnen sagt, dass sie ein Kind wollen'.[17] By attributing wanting children to a woman's nature, she ignores the social pressures and internalised expectations with which most women have been socialised, as well as the role of individual situation and choice. As shall be discussed below, *Quasikristalle* depicts more diverse perspectives on motherhood as well as complex and often difficult mother-child relations.

Menasse as an Austrian in Berlin

Apart from how prominent women's lives and perspectives are in the novel, professional readers also frequently note the way *Quasikristalle* represents Austrian, and more specifically Viennese, identities. Indeed, Vienna figures prominently as a setting in both of Menasse's novels. References to aspects of Austrian culture and Austrian intertexts also abound in both, as they do in her short stories.[18] While her debut novel *Vienna* focuses on the history of a half-Jewish Viennese family, however, *Quasikristalle* regards Vienna from a relative distance. Of the novel's thirteen chapters, only the first and third are entirely set in Vienna. The setting of the largest part of the novel in Berlin is significant, and not only because, as one reviewer points out, it allows Menasse to stage 'eine hübsche Satire auf die Wichtigtuerei der Berliner Kreativen'.[19] More importantly, Berlin

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[16] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 32.
[17] Ibid., p. 33; emphasis in the original. Menasse has made statements to the same effect elsewhere. In her interview with Frenkel, for example, she comments, 'ich glaube inzwischen sogar, dass Menschen, die keine eigenen Kinder haben, ein entscheidender Blick auf sich selbst fehlt'. Menasse, 'Begegnung mit Eva Menasse'.
[18] See also Marja-Leena Hakkarainen, 'Generationendialog und Erinnerungsarbeit: Eva Menasse's Erzählwerk', *Gegenwartsliteratur*, 15 (2016), 261-85, here 269.
[19] Martin Halter, 'Wer ist Xane?', *Badische Zeitung*, 23 February 2013, https://www.badische-zeitung.de/wer-ist-xane--69347394.html [Accessed 16 September 2019].

functions as a vantage point in the novel from which both Xane and Menasse reflect on their problematic home from a safe distance. Menasse, who has been living in Berlin since 2003, often refers to her experience as an Austrian in Germany and as a Viennese in Berlin in interviews and press articles. In one interview she even claims that the particularity of Austrian identities is nowhere as strongly felt, or as welcome, as in Germany.[20] However, some of Menasse's many accounts of cultural differences between Austrians and Germans are puzzling, as they resort to clichés about the two countries' respective 'national character' and, on the pretext of being impartial and finding merits in both, fail to question the assumption that there is such a thing at all.

In the essay 'Unter Piefkes: Als Österreicherin in Deutschland', for example, Menasse sets out to disprove the stereotypes that Germans and Austrians have of each other only to ultimately reinforce them. The proverbial West German arrogance, she writes, is simply due to the fact that West Germans are intimidatingly direct, 'bloß auf eine hocheffiziente, aber beängstigende Weise schnörkellos', whereas Austrians love ambiguity and 'scheuen die Eindeutigkeit wie die Motten das Licht'.[21] 'Im Blödeln und Witzeln, im Kalauern und dialektischen Relativieren sind wir Weltmeister,' she continues, sarcastically slipping into the first-person plural, 'und wenn wir damit anfangen, schaut der Deutsche verständnislos aus der Wäsche. Wahrscheinlich bringen wir deshalb unverhältnismäßig viele gute Schriftsteller hervor'.[22] In an essay about contemporary Vienna called 'Wasserkopf und Krone: Über Wien, die Heimatstadt' she again writes with fondness of her adoptive compatriots, whom she contrasts with the stilted Viennese, 'eine Bevölkerung, die ab dem Mai 1945 von nichts gewusst, keinen einzigen Nazi unter sich gehabt haben und weinerlich das erste Opfer gewesen sein wollte'.[23] In 'Raus aus dem Quadrat', a piece from 2013, finally, she caustically represents the Austrians as a people who tolerate 'rassistische, antisemitische, frauen-, schwulen- und deutschenfeindliche Witze, weil es ihrer Ansicht nach ein viel größeres Verbrechen

[20] Eva Menasse, '"Auschwitz ist zu oft Bezugspunkt"', Interview by Ulrich Wickert, *Die Welt*, 9 February 2013. https://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/literatur/article113501207/Auschwitz-ist-zu-oft-Bezugspunkt.html [Accessed 13 September 2019].
[21] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 69-79, here 73.
[22] Ibid., 74.
[23] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 80-91, here 87-8.

ist, keinen Schmäh zu verstehen, als jemanden zu kränken'.[24] The Germans, by contrast, are humourless, but 'ernshafter, gebildeter und seriöser als alle ihre Nachbarn', presumably, she adds, 'weil sie es so schwer mit sich selbst haben und nehmen'.[25]

By reproducing clichés of both Austrian bigotry and of the earnestness with which Germans have dealt with the Nazi past in her essays, Menasse positions herself within the Austrian intellectual tradition of *Nestbeschmutzung* or *Heimatbeschimpfung*. Authors within this tradition such as Thomas Bernhard and Elfriede Jelinek vehemently criticised the failure of post-war Austria, with its facade of Catholic respectability, to own up to its complicity in the Second World War and Holocaust.[26] Yet in her fiction, Menasse also ironises this polemic attitude, which has itself become something of a cliché. *Vienna*, for instance, both depicts and performs as a whole an act of soiling the Austrian nest, as it were, while at the same time suggesting that incessantly complaining about the failings of one's own home country without taking action to address them is an unreflected and fundamentally anti-democratic stance. Paradoxically, while German critics praised the novel, Austrian critics did not find Menasse's criticism of the Austrian reluctance to openly deal with the past quite strong-worded and indeed offensive enough to take seriously.[27]

As Part III of this chapter will discuss in greater detail, in *Quasikristalle* Menasse once again goes through the motions of Austrian *Nestbeschmutzung* only to show how formulaic it has become. As a young woman living in Vienna, the protagonist makes provocative political art to challenge the prim Viennese bourgeoisie amongst which she has grown up. Yet as Xane matures, she channels her idealism into founding an advertising agency for not-for-profit companies. Ijoma Mangold is therefore right in noting that though Xane has mastered the art of 'Österreich-Beschimpfung', she 'ahnt, dass diese Attitüde längst etwas Mechanisches hat'.[28] The same can be

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[24] Ibid.
[25] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 109-22, here 115.
[26] For more on the particularity of Austria's culture of remembrance see Katya Krylova, *The Long Shadow of the Past: Contemporary Austrian Literature, Film and Culture* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2017).
[27] Eva Menasse, '"Da hat sich Österreich letzlich nichts gutes getan!"', Interview by Stefanie Graf, Christoph Hassenzahl and Turid Weingartz, 4 July 2005, available at userpage.fu-berlin.de/~angewlit/Literaturkritik/Interview_Menasse.doc.
[28] Ijoma Mangold, 'Alles ist eitel', *Die Zeit*, 14 February 2013, https://www.zeit.de/2013/08/Eva-Menasse-Quasikristalle [Accessed 16 September 2019].

said of Menasse herself, who enjoys playing with stereotypes about Austrians and Germans in her essays and journalism but favours subtlety, wit, and irony over outright provocation in her fiction.

Menasse as an Austrian-*Jewish* author

Making Menasse's relation to her Austrian heritage more complicated still, reviewers and critics alike regularly point to her 'Wiener Schmäh',[29] her characteristically Viennese wit. Yet 'Wiener Schmäh,' as Marja-Leena Hakkarainen explains, is 'eine Kombination des wienerischen und *jüdischen* Witzes, die Lachen mit Schrecken verbindet. Charakteristisch für diesen Sprachwitz ist der schnelle Wechsel von Freundlichkeit zur Gemeinheit und die Überschreitung von Geschmacksgrenzen'.[30] The Austrian humour which Menasse is so ambivalent about in her essays, a humour which is often openly antisemitic, can also, paradoxically, be aligned with a specifically Jewish tradition. In Menasse's understanding, Austrian, or at least Viennese, humour constantly crosses the boundary between 'Freundlichkeit' and 'Gemeinheit'.[31] Menasse's own wit often shares this quality, balancing the fine line between good-naturedness and offensiveness, so that it does not seem unwarranted to describe it as 'Wiener Schmäh'. It is Menasse's humour, then, which both for Menasse herself and for her critics epitomises her Viennese origins and Jewish identity.

Yet like her Austrianness, Menasse's identification as (half-)Jewish is ambivalent, not least because she has a dual, Catholic and Jewish family heritage. According to Yannick Müllender, such ambivalence is relatively common even amongst second- and third-generation Jewish authors who do not have a mixed background. Austrian- and Viennese-Jewish authors in particular often resort to very individual ways of being Jewish, he explains, not necessarily defining it by reference to religious observance and traditions, but rather through 'Abgrenzung von der nichtjüdischen Umgebung' and '[einem] Beharren auf einem jeweils unterschiedlich

[29] Ibid.
[30] Hakkarainen, 'Generationendialog', 263; my emphasis.
[31] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 114.

ausgelegten und ausgelebten Jüdisch-Sein'.[32] Andrea Reiter concurs, explaining that Austrian-Jewish authors writing in the decades since the Waldheim affair of 1986 tend to be more outspokenly Jewish than previous generations, not least because being Jewish is no longer stringently defined on the basis of one's ancestry, as it is in Orthodox and Conservative Judaism.[33] In line with the contemporary performative understanding of identity, Reiter suggests, a Jewish author is whoever identifies as Jewish and participates in public discourse as Jewish, without needed to be 'interpellated' as Jewish, that is, externally recognised as belonging to a group defined in terms of genealogy, faith or religious practice.[34]

The way Eva Menasse assumes her Jewish identity, therefore, is quite typical of her generation. Her Jewishness is not defined by her ancestry or externally assigned to her but rather consciously performed, actively appropriated, and critically reflected on. In her own words, it is 'ein Basston, der mich ständig, mal lauter, mal leiser, begleitet'.[35] As she admitted in an interview, her knowledge of her family's Jewish history did not come from family traditions or conversations but was rather '[herausgefischt] wie aus einem dunklen See'[36] through her own in-depth research of her family history. In the same interview she explains that identifying as (partly) Jewish is a way for her to compensate for her father's life-long fear of standing out as a Jew after his early experience of persecution and exile via the *Kindertransport*. Yet Menasse's personal exploration and public discussion of her Jewishness in the wake of *Vienna* seems to be more than an effort to deal with family traumas or to distance herself from the Austrian mainstream. Rather, it is one of the central political concerns of her journalism and public persona, alongside questions of gender and the differences between Austrians and Germans discussed above. Although she does not write directly about issues relating to the Jewish community, she is particularly interested in how the

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[32] Yannick Müllender, 'Generationenkonzepte in zeitgenössischen österreichisch-jüdischen Romanen', *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 46.2 (2013), 23-47, here 25.
[33] Andrea Reiter, 'Introduction', in *Contemporary Jewish Writing: Austria after Waldheim* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 1-9, here pp. 6-7.
[34] Ibid., 7.
[35] Menasse, 'Begegnung mit Eva Menasse'.
[36] Ayala Goldmann, 'Den Namen weitergeben', *Jüdische Allgemeine*, 16 April 2015, https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/kultur/den-namen-weitergeben [Accessed 16 September 2019].

Holocaust and by extension how contemporary Jewish identities are discussed in the German media and politics, not least in comparison with Austria.

Menasse's Criticism of the German *Erinnerungskultur*

Menasse's main concern is that the political correctness surrounding the public discussion of the Holocaust in Germany, a political correctness which, we might add, has recently been challenged with the rise of the AfD,[37] stunts, rather than furthers, political and moral debates in Germany. She does not object, as the new extreme Right do, to the fact that the memory of the Holocaust plays such a central role in contemporary Germany's self-understanding as a liberal democracy. Rather, she takes issue with the way the Holocaust is instrumentalised to further some political causes, such as the ban on preimplantation diagnostics discussed above, or to silence opposition to others. One of her texts which thematises how the Holocaust shapes contemporary political debates is a speech entitled 'Wer den Mund aufmacht, macht sich angreifbar', which she held on the occasion of Günter Grass's eighty-fifth birthday.

Menasse begins by conceding that Günter Grass' controversial critique of Israel in his 2012 prose poem 'Was gesagt werden muss' was simply a 'Torheit', a foolish mistake, though she expresses deep sympathy for Grass as a person, author, and moral authority in German public life.[38] Grass and his contemporaries, she says, played an important role in stirring the German collective conscience in the post-war decades. In no other country, Menasse continues, are people as concerned with 'doing the right thing' as in Germany, 'in dem so angestrengt, verzweifelt, ja fanatisch nach dem moralisch Richtigen gestrebt wird. […] Leider hat [aber] jeder eine andere Vorstellung davon, was es ist, dieses Richtige, dieser Leitkultur- oder Post-Auschwitz-Ethik-Gral'.[39] Moral discourses in the post-Holocaust era, she argues, rarely allow for differences of

[37] AfD member Björn Höcke's description of the Holocaust Memorial in central Berlin as a 'Denkmal der Schande' in a speech to the Party Youth in Dresden on the 18 January 2017 exemplifies the AfD's provocative stance against the official German *Erinnerungskultur*. See 'Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut: "Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes"', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 January 2017, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoecke-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518.html [Accessed 13 September 2019].
[38] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 53-60, here 53.
[39] Ibid., 57.

opinion or real debate. In today's context, any opinion that deviates from the general consensus on moral questions is immediately shut down, perceived as an offense, a 'Mundtotschlag'[40] or silencing act, which must in turn be silenced. This explains why many rushed to censor Grass's critique of Israel in 2012. 'In diesem Netz' Menasse states, 'sind wir alle gefangen, die wir uns – wozu auch immer, besonders aber zum Nazi-Juden-Israel-Komplex – äußern'.[41]

In 'Raus aus dem Quadrat' mentioned earlier, she repeats her criticism of what she perceives as the Germans' exaggerated political correctness in all matters regarding Judaism or Israel, and of their tendency to take the moral high ground because of it.[42] As a Jewish public intellectual Menasse is arguably less vulnerable to being accused of antisemitism and therefore in a privileged position to critique the uses and abuses of Holocaust memory in the history of the Federal Republic.[43] As I will discuss in more detail below, the second chapter of *Quasikristalle*, which is set in Auschwitz, must be read in the context of Menasse's repeated critique of the German culture of Holocaust remembrance, rather than as foregrounding Menasse's (and the protagonist's) Jewish identity. What Menasse's public statements on this topic have in common with the novel, however, is that they are concerned with the Holocaust on a meta-level, i.e. with how it features in public discourse and collective memory, rather than with the challenge of depicting it.

As this section has shown, Menasse constantly weaves her political concerns into her fiction in a way that is sometimes misunderstood by reviewers as a 'key' to interpreting them. While it is true that these concerns feed into her fiction, I will argue below that the novel goes beyond them and reflects not so much on the politics of specific identities but more fundamentally on the possibility of coherent, unified identities which can be categorised in a particular way. Part II will now look more closely at how uncertainty about the protagonist's identity is generated through Menasse's experimental ordering of perspectives in *Quasikristalle*. It is this uncertainty,

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.
[42] *Lieber aufgeregt*, 119.
[43] Menasse, 'Auschwitz ist zu oft Bezugspunkt'.

as Part III will show, that nuances how the gendered, Austrian, and Jewish identities with which Menasse is concerned figure in the novel.

Part II

Order and Uncertainty in *Quasikristalle*

Quasikristalle as an Experimental Narrative of Identity?

As previously mentioned, *Quasikristalle* is the most conventional of the five texts discussed in this thesis in terms of its subject matter and mode of narration. Its plot and characters are to a large extent realistic, close to the reader's real-life experience. While all other texts in this thesis feature unusual or experimental narrators, narrators who are self-contradictory (as in *Vor dem Fest* and arguably also *Aller Tage Abend*), morally suspect (in *Sand*), or self-reflexive to a solipsistic degree (in *Hoppe*), the first- and third-person narrative voices in *Quasikristalle* seem unremarkable. Armin Weber concurs that the different characters' narratives are 'größtenteils zuverlässig'.[44] Yet while in his reading, the characters' hasty 'Schlussfolgerungen, Vermutungen und Erinnerungen [führen] gelegentlich zu kleineren Ungerechtigkeiten',[45] I would argue the interactions amongst the thirteen disparate perspectives in the novel do much more than that. They cause not only 'kleinere Ungerechtigkeiten' but rather significant gaps and discrepancies between the characters' viewpoints. Below, I argue that it is neither the fact that there are many focalisers in *Quasikristalle* nor their individual limitations which create areas of ambiguity and uncertainty around the figure of the protagonist, but rather their orderly succession on the one hand and the fact that each one only comes up once on the other. It is these two features which allow us to read *Quasikristalle* as an experimental novel despite its relatively conventional use of narrative voice and its realistic plot.

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[44] Armin Weber, '"Jedes einzelne Bild nur ein Mosaikstück"? Zur Funktion des Erzählens in Eva Menasses Werken', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 61.1 (2015), 46-62, here 53.
[45] Ibid.

The introduction of a new focaliser in each of the thirteen chapters make the novel relatively difficult to follow, as these limited perspectives on events and on the protagonist require the reader to constantly read back and forth between chapters to make sense of events, to piece together their temporal sequence, and to remember how each perspective relates to the previous ones. In other words, the novel requires a multidirectional reading rather than the kind of linear reading that conventionally realist novels usually require. Each chapter points to others, at times confirming them and at times contradicting them, ultimately conveying to the reader the characters' own sense that their knowledge and judgement are relative and unstable. Most of the novels' reviewers observe that the novel creates a sense of insecurity and instability,[46] but at the time of writing there is to my knowledge no detailed analysis of *how* it does so.[47] A summary of the tangled relations between individual chapters will show that it is their orderly sequence which, paradoxically, makes *Quasikristalle* disorientating to read.

Reading Back and Forth

Although the thirteen narrative perspectives in the novel are chronologically ordered, there are nonetheless gaps in the plot since successive perspectives are rarely directly related but are often separated by a temporal and/or geographical leap in the narrative. Most chapters, then, are in dialogue not with neighbouring chapters but with chapters which are several times removed from them. This forces the reader to read back and forth, as it were, to double-check details or references whose meaning is only retrospectively evident. The first chapter, for example, is

[46] E.g. alphabetically, Sandra Kegel, 'Eine Frau braucht viele Gesichter', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 Feburary 2013, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/eva-menasse-quasikristalle-eine-frau-braucht-viele-gesichter-12055858.html; Mangold, 'Alles ist eitel'; Klara Obermüller, 'Eine leidenschaftliche Frau', *Die Welt*, 23 March 2013, https://www.welt.de/print/die_welt/literatur/article114701900/Eine-leidenschaftliche-Frau.html; Wolfgang Paterno, 'Alterskrusten: Eva Menasse's neuer Roman', *Profil*, 22 February 2013, https://www.profil.at/home/alterskrusten-eva-menasses-roman-353180 and Voigt, 'Am Ende des Sommers'.

[47] Though the following study does look at the use of perspective in the novel, its focus is comparative: Alexandra Tischel, 'Polyperspektivismus und Pluralität: Die Perspektivenvielfalt der Gegenwartsliteratur anhand von Romanen Arno Geigers, Anna Katharina Hahns, Eva Menasses und Eugen Ruges', in *Neue Realismen in der Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. by Søren R. Fauth and Rolf Parr (Paderborn: Fink, 2016), pp. 53-69.

narrated from the perspective of Xane's schoolfriend Judith. At the end of the chapter, the two teenage girls grow apart, though it is only in chapter four, told from the perspective of Judith's younger sister Sally, who befriends Xane as an adult, that we learn that Judith and Xane subsequently lost touch. Yet Judith is mentioned again as one of Xane's oldest friends in chapter eleven, narrated from the point of view of Xane's friend Krystyna, who joined Xane's circle of friends when they were students in Vienna. In this chapter, Krystyna and Sally hold a grudge against the – now middle-aged – Xane, whom they perceive to be self-absorbed and ostentatious, and refuse to host her on her visit back to Vienna. This precipitates Xane's nervous breakdown, which she suffers after her business collapses. From Xane's embittered former employee Martin Kummer in chapter nine, we know that this business is an advertising agency for not-for-profit companies. Chapter nine and chapter eleven thus implicitly complement one another, despite being set several years apart.

As the eleventh chapter ends with Krystyna and Sally's act of disloyalty, however, it also echoes the fourth one, in which Sally reluctantly visits Xane in hospital after Xane miscarries. Chapter five gives a different, (albeit equally distanced) account of Xane's miscarriage, but also of her eventual success in conceiving, from the perspective of IVF specialist Heike Guttmann. Yet it is only in chapter six that her child Amos is first mentioned, when she tells Nelson, an ageing diplomat and genocide survivor with whom she has an intense platonic friendship, that she has one child, though she 'hätte gern mehrere gehabt' (*Q*, 288). The omission here of the fact that she has two stepdaughters from her husband Mor's first marriage is conspicuous, partly because this is already known to the reader from Sally's chapter, and partly because the girls play a prominent role in chapter seven.

Chapter seven, which will be discussed in more detail later on, is narrated by Xane herself as she is on the verge of a mid-life crisis. Her experiences, thoughts, and fears in this seventh chapter often jar with other characters' assumptions about her. Contrary to what Nelson assumes in chapter six,[48] for example, Xane claims at the beginning of chapter seven to be happily married, a

[48] 'Er nahm an, dass ihre Ehe unglücklich war' (*Q*, 298).

mother of three, with both her own parents still alive. At the same time, however, she is clearly ambivalent about her tidy, comfortable life and afraid of change. 'Es geht uns gut', she assures herself, 'die Lebensmitte ist sicher und berechenbar wie eine ungestaffelte Warmmiete. Befristet ist sie, klar, aber für wie lange? Da kann man nur hoffen' (*Q*, 319). Yet this self-reassurance is offset by her worries about her relationship with her husband Mor and her mixed feelings about motherhood.

Moreover, her difficult relationship with her teenage stepdaughters, Emmy, who, it is implied, has special needs, and Viola, 'dieses pubertäre Monster' (*Q*, 340), not only contradicts Sally's impression, in chapter four, that Xane is wholeheartedly devoted to them, but also nuances the eldest, Viola's, own account of their conflicted relationship in chapter eight. Xane's ambivalence towards Krystyna in chapter seven, who is having an affair with a colleague, reveals further inconsistencies both within Xane's perspective and between her perspective and those of others. On the one hand, her contempt for Krystyna[49] makes her refusal to admit to her feelings for Nelson seem hypocritical.[50] On the other hand, her suppressed envy for her friend's adventure[51] pre-empts the affair that Xane does end up having, as Krystyna reveals in chapter eleven, with a younger musician.

Already in chapter ten, however, which is narrated from Xane's father Kurt's perspective, Xane receives a long phone call from a 'spannenden jungen Komponisten' (*Q*, 460), anticipating Krystyna's revelation. Kurt's surprise at the change in his grandson Amos in this chapter suggests that many years have elapsed since chapter seven, when he was still a small child.[52] As shall be discussed below, Kurt's chapter is the only one to hark back, through the figure of the Holocaust survivor and Kurt's friend, Eli Rozmburk, to the novel's second chapter, which is set in Auschwitz. At the same time, as Kurt lives in an old people's home after his wife's death (another pointer to the passing of time since chapter seven), the tenth chapter also points forward to chapter

[49] '[S]o weit also schwankt die Niveau-Amplitüde einer intelligenten Frau' (*Q*, 332).
[50] 'Nein, nie […] Jedenfalls nichts Echtes, kein körperlicher Betrug' (*Q*, 323).
[51] 'Krystyna macht es besser, sie greift jetzt mit beiden Händen zu' (*Q*, 361).
[52] '[V]or geraumer Zeit war aus diesem vergnügten Engel ein schlaffer, melancholischer Junge [...] geworden' (*Q*, 462).

twelve, in which a journalist named Shanti investigates cases of abuse and murder in retirement homes.

Apart from this loose connection to the protagonist's father's experience of being in a home, Shanti's chapter is quite irrelevant to Xane's story. Yet Shanti is the only person who witnesses Xane's husband's death from her window. Confirming Krystyna's impression that she is self-absorbed, Xane is sitting beside her husband at the moment of his death, but is reading with her back turned to him. Xane's oblivion to her husband's death draws attention to the conspicuous absence of his own perspective in the novel. Despite presumably being the person closest to Xane, Mor does not get a 'voice' in the novel. On the one hand, this omission confirms the other characters' impression that Xane is self-involved. On the other, however, it comments on the (im)possibility of capturing the perspective of the most intimate relationships in writing.

The fact that it is Shanti, a complete stranger, who witnesses Xane's most private moment, her immediate reaction to her husband's sudden death, confirms that certain experiences can only be viewed from afar. At the same time, however, Shanti connects with Xane through this incident in a way that her grown-up son Amos struggles to do. His e-mails in the novel's thirteenth and final chapter betray his complex, conflicted relationship with his mother. He wonders about the atypical composure with which she handled her husband's death, questions her rash decision to move back to Vienna after decades in Berlin, and congratulates her on her new relationship. His tone is cautiously optimistic, kindly, but reserved. In this sense, Amos's perspective is paradoxically further removed from his own mother's than a complete stranger's. With Shanti's and Amos's chapters the novel seems to come to an end on a distant, detached note. In this way, it not only emphasises once more Xane's elusiveness, but also conveys a sense of resignation and disappointment about the possibility of really knowing or coming close to another person, even if we see them from several different angles. As we shall see in Chapter Two, Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* ends with a similar, albeit much bleaker, gesture of narrative distancing. Yet like *Sand*, the disengaged ending of *Quasikristalle* ends up also disengaging its reader, giving the entire novel the feel of an ultimately fruitless narrative experiment.

Quasicrystals: Metaphors of Symmetry and Irregularity

Indeed, the narrative self-consciously reflects on its credentials as an experiment throughout. The quasicrystals in the title announce the intended narrative structure: quasicrystals are crystals whose inner patterns are symmetrical within themselves, but aperiodic, that is, they either recur irregularly or not at all on the level of the entire structure. Indeed, each of the novel's thirteen focalisers only comes up once. The chapters are symmetrical insofar as they are given equal weighting regardless of their focalisers' relationship to Xane. They are symmetrically arranged to frame Xane's chapter in sequences of six, all cover a similarly limited stretch of time, and succeed each other in chronological order.

Yet the multiple temporal levels in each chapter, mostly introduced through the characters' memories of different time periods, create irregularities in the linear narration of events, and link the chapters to each other in the messy, irregular way described above. Chapters six, seven, and eight, moreover, which are narrated from Nelson's, Xane's, and Viola's point of view respectively, treat overlapping rather than successive time periods. These three 'middle' chapters all contain references to Xane's son being a young child at this time on the one hand, and to Nelson and Xane's final goodbye outside a hotel in Berlin, which Viola witnesses, on the other. The contemporaneity of these core chapters, which temporarily upsets the chronological succession of perspectives, gives a sense of how Xane experiences the long and tumultuous years of her 'Lebensmitte'.

By drawing out the 'middle' of Xane's life, in other words, the narrative attempts to mirror the structure of lived experience, suggesting that there is also a kind of symmetry between lived experience and biographical narration. From chapter nine onwards, however, the narration makes increasingly large temporal leaps into the future, in turn undermining the earlier parallelism between the temporality of Xane's experience and the temporality of its narration. These shifts in the narration of time offset the symmetrical and orderly arrangement of chapters. This not only confuses the reader, but also reveals the gaps in the characters' own understanding and knowledge.

This uncertainty which operates both on the level of reading and within the text itself is mirrored both in the novel's epigraph and in the epigraphs of individual chapters. The novel's

epigraph is an extract from John Donne's 1611 poem 'An Anatomy of the World', which evokes a disjointed, incoherent world; as all social positions and relations have lost their meaning, each man imagines himself, as the men and women in Menasse's novel, at the centre of this world.[53] The epigraphs of the individual chapters reinforce this worldview. All comment either on the fragmentary nature of knowledge or on the non-existence of a unified truth about the world, the unreliability of human perception and memory, and the instability and asymmetry of human relations. The epigraph of the penultimate chapter is a quotation by Daniel Shechtman, the Israeli physicist who, to the disbelief of the scientific community, discovered quasicrystals in 1984.[54] This quotation, together with the title of the novel and the Penrose tiling on the book cover, which is a visualisation of a quasicrystal as a kind of mosaic on a flat, two-dimensional surface, all evoke quasicrystals as a metaphor for the novel's symmetrical yet irregular narrative structure.

Reviewers and critics assess the chemical metaphor in the novel's title in different ways.[55] Some, like Schmidt, argue that 'naturwissenschaftliche Vergleiche' in narrative fiction after Goethe's *Wahlverwandschaften*, in which human relations are shown to be governed, like chemical elements, by involuntary, irresistible attractions, 'sind allzu oft ein Ablenkungsmanöver' which leads readers astray.[56] Others, like Klara Obermüller, engage more directly with how quasicrystals reflect the novel's narrative structure:

> Die Autorin sieht darin eine Metapher für das Leben, dessen Gesetzmäßigkeit, wenn es denn überhaupt eine gibt, auch nur im Nachhinein oder aus großer Distanz zu erkennen ist. In der islamischen Ornamentik treten solche Formen ebenfalls auf. Sie stehen dort für die Absicht des Künstlers, durch kleine Fehler und Unregelmäßigkeiten zu zeigen, dass alles Menschliche Stückwerk und Vollkommenheit allein Gott überlassen bleibt.[57]

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[53] The following is cited first in the original English given here and subsequently in German translation. ''Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone | All just supply, and all relation; | Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot, | For every man alone thinks he hath got | To be a phoenix, and that then can be | None of that kind, of which he is, but he'. As is the convention for epigraphs, no edition or page reference is provided for either the English or the German quotation.

[54] The quotation is given in the original English: 'The group of non-believers was very large in the beginning. In fact, it included everybody' (*Q*, 508). Unlike for the Donne quotation in the novel's epigraph, the German translation is not provided here.

[55] E.g. Tim Caspar Boehme, 'Das Leben als Penrose-Parkettierung', *taz.de*, 13 April 2013, https://taz.de/!498031/. See also Kegel, 'Eine Frau braucht viele Gesichter' and Hannelore Schlaffer, 'Stilgesten der Gegenwart', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 21 February 2013, https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/stilgesten-der-gegenwart-1.18013687 [All accessed 13 September 2019].

[56] Schmidt, 'Eine Metapher'.

[57] Obermüller, 'Eine leidenschaftliche Frau'.

In my reading, *Quasikristalle* does not evoke an unattainable sense of completion and perfection but rather attempts to do away with notions of biographical teleology and closure, the expectation that life narratives will ultimately make coherent sense. Yet Obermüller is right in pointing out that like an arabesque, the novel reflects through 'Fehler und Unregelmäßigkeiten' on the impossibility of coherence, certainty, and objectivity. Even the reader's perspective, which is the only one which provides the kind of 'großer Distanz' from which Xane's life narrative could imaginably take on shape and meaning, is ultimately as flawed and 'gappy' as the characters' perspectives in the novel. Indeed, the reader is constantly sidetracked by the characters' digressive accounts of their own lives, their desires, memories, 'Allmachts-' and 'Gewaltphantasien' (*Q*, 64 and 138), which frame Xane's own account in chapter seven.

Xane as a Blind Spot

It is because of the limitations of the other characters' perspectives that the character of Xane remains blurry and opaque, even as the details of her life are gradually revealed. There are numerous references throughout the novel which suggest that, like the reader, the other characters in the novel also struggle to understand her. Paradoxically, both references to her opacity and to her transparency to others, especially those who do not really pay attention to her, point in this direction. For her childhood friend Judith, for example, Xane has an attractive but dangerous 'ironische Distanz' (*Q*, 22) from others, which, it is later implied, she inherited from her father. However, Judith resents Xane's inscrutability, which keeps even her best friend at bay. 'Xane verstand eigentlich gar nichts', she thinks at one point, 'und wenn sie ehrlich war, verstand sie Xane auch nicht. Und trotzdem liebte sie sie' (*Q*, 49). As the two girls drift apart, Judith befriends another girl, Doris, who '[sah] durch Xane hindurch' (*Q*, p. 54), ignoring and excluding her from their group.

Yet to those who are most interested in her or who feel closest to her, Xane appears opaque. During their first meeting, Bernays, Xane's guide at Auschwitz, initially thinks he can read Xane well, that she is transparent to him. The more he drinks, however, the more he abandons

this illusion: 'ihr Gesicht schwamm lockend vor ihm durch die verrauchte Luft, aber die Bedeutung ihrer Blicke konnte er nicht mehr entziffern' (*Q*, 84). Later, he tries to understand her by forcing her into the position of his own 'Spiegelbild, nur fünfzehn Jahre jünger' (*Q*, 96). Nelson, who is older and less self-involved than Bernays, also struggles to understand Xane and share his experience with her. He and Xane remain 'undurchsichtig' (*Q*, 299) and 'unerforschlich' (*Q*, 309) to each other throughout the sixth chapter. Even Xane's own father and son regard her with incomprehension. Her father recalls his puzzlement at her 'Angstzustände' as a teenager, 'die sich niemand erklären konnte' (*Q*, 458). Yet out of tact or fear, he never asks her about them, though he wonders 'was sie schon für Geheimnisse haben [kann]' (*Q*, 459). After Xane's husband's death, finally, her son Amos struggles to understand her apparent inability to mourn. Unlike everyone else, however, Amos directly tells her that he finds her baffling: 'Ich finde', he writes to her in an e-mail, 'das sollte dir, bei allem Beharren auf deiner Souveränität, schon zu denken geben: dass ich, als dein Sohn, dich plötzlich vollkommen unverständlich finde' (*Q*, 557).

Because she appears incomprehensible to the people around her, Xane becomes a screen for their projections. Her employee Martin Kummer, for example, regards her with 'Bewunderung, die auf Unverständnis gründete' (*Q*, 417), and struggles to impress her with his plan for her business. Sally is initially infatuated with Xane and her comfortable middle-class life: 'es machte Spaß, Xane zu gefallen. Es machte warm und wichtig' (*Q*, 192). Soon, however, Sally's interest in Xane turns into jealousy. Annoyed at Xane's overbearing care for her after she is mugged in chapter four, Sally snoops around Xane's apartment, rummaging through her friend's most intimate belongings:

> Neben Fischölkapseln, Preiselbeerpastillen, Augentropfen, Aspirin, homöopathischen Globuli und einem Eisenpräparat hatte Xane Gleitcreme in ihrer Nachttischublade, erstaunlich in dem Alter. Auf Mors Seite nur Bücher und Baldriantropfen. […] Auf dem einzigen Stapel, der von seiner Umgebung halbwegs deutlich abzugrenzen war, lagen Rechtsanwaltsbriefe zum Thema Kinder: Unbestreitbar hat Ihr Mandant seine Wohnung erst kürzlich mit erheblichem finanziellen Aufwand renovieren lassen, daher fordert meine Mandantin… Beide benutzten Schuppenschampoo, oder einer von ihnen fühlte sich von seinen Schuppen so geplagt, dass er mehrere Sorten verwendete, von verschiedenen Herstellern. Xane trug nur schwarze und hautfarbene Unterwäsche, die paar ehemals weißen BHs waren graustichig und sahen kleiner aus. Sie schien nicht zu wissen, dass Männer hautfarbene Unterwäsche verabscheuen wie wenig sonst. (*Q*, 213-14)

Sally invades Xane's privacy (maliciously) hoping to crack her opacity. Yet what Sally finds in Xane's bedside table and bathroom fails to give Sally any real insight into Xane's life. In the fifth chapter a different kind of embarrassing intimacy is forced upon Xane when her gynaecologist Heike Guttmann gives a detailed description of Xane's fertility test results:

> Wie sich gezeigt hat, hat die Molin noch ein paar andere Probleme als den gesprengten Eileiter. Der Schleimhautaufbau ist nicht grandios, da rutscht ein befruchtetes Ei vielleicht glücklich durch, findet aber nicht ausreichend Nest in der Gebärmutter vor. Eine Zeitlang musste sie sich mit Östrogenpflastern bekleben. Und dann reifen die Eizellen meistens auf der falschen Seite, da, wo die Molin keinen Eileiter mehr hat. (*Q*, 245)

Up to this point the reader only has limited knowledge of Xane's miscarriage from Sally's description of her subsequent hospital stay. The medical account of her fragile reproductive system by her doctor compensates for the omission of the event itself from chapter four, but still fails to provide access to Xane's own experience. Neither the diagnosis of her reproductive dysfunction nor the inspection of her most private belongings compensates for the absence of her emotional perspective in these chapters.

Xane's Own Blind Spots

Xane's own narrative in the seventh chapter comes, as Weber suggests, 'zu einem Zeitpunkt, zu dem man als Leser schon längst nicht mehr damit rechnet'.[58] While Weber argues that the chapter 'rehabilitiert die Innenperspektive'[59] by giving Xane a voice, however, I think it only promises to do so, but ultimately fails to deliver. If anything, it further obscures her identity by showing her rather superficially as a 'type', sharing the worries, desires, and vanities (misogynistically) associated with a middle-aged female demographic. The change from the third- to a first-person narrative perspective in this chapter emphasises that Xane's viewpoint is subjective, limited, and often banal. Above all, however, the chapter conveys the impression that Xane is self-absorbed and lonely even as she is consumed by worries about her relationships with others. As I will argue in Chapter Five of this thesis, the protagonist of Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* is similarly shown to be self-absorbed to the point of becoming unfathomable to the reader. Xane in *Quasikristalle*,

[58] Weber, '"Jedes einzelne Bild"', 53.
[59] Ibid., 54.

however, turns out to be 'flatter', less complex and more commonplace than other characters might assume. Her account only gives an incomplete and unnuanced view of how she feels towards others. She does briefly mention, for example, that she had badly wanted to return Nelson's advances and remembers her years as a student in Vienna before she met her husband simply as the 'Vor-Mor-Zeit […] grau wie das Mittelalter oder die Stummfilmepoche' (*Q*, 325). Yet she does not mention other focalisers, such as Judith, Bernays, Tschoch, Sally, or Dr. Guttmann at all, mentions her parents only fleetingly, gives no indication of the fact that she has a brother in Vienna, which will be revealed by her father in the tenth chapter, and, most strikingly, says nothing at all about her work.

The absence of references to the characters who had previously functioned as focalisers emphasises all the details that Xane does not know about them: that Tschoch spied on her sunbathing on her balcony, for example, that Sally went through her things and tried to seduce her husband, or that her doctor never told her how slim her chances of conceiving had actually been. On the other hand, Xane's preoccupation with Krystyna's affair and with her own marriage and her seeming indifference towards her job highlights the extent to which she is caught up in socially prescribed ways of thinking about herself as a woman. Lacking an original vocabulary to work through her experiences and insecurities, she reiterates stereotypes about gender, relationships, and ageing. At the same time, however, she worries about becoming a certain 'type' herself, one of these women whom she and her friends 'in bestimmte, verächtliche Schubladen stecken würden' (*Q,* 321). While this chapter can be read as simply pointing to the fact that she is as limited and caught up in her own concerns as all other focalisers in the novel, its function arguably goes beyond that. By showing Xane to be trapped in clichéd and superficial ways of perceiving herself, the novel performatively illustrates the impossibility of authenticity, of viewing oneself beyond societal roles and relations.

Hakkarainen uses the concept of 'habitus' as understood by Pierre Bourdieu, i.e. as a way of describing how individuals act according to the internalised rules of their social milieu, to describe how Xane's perception and experience are shaped by her generation and social standing:

> Habitus ist Bourdieu zufolge zwar subjektiv, aber nicht individuell, und es zeigt sich, dass Xane nicht viel anders denkt und spricht als jede junge akademisch gebildete Frau, die Patchwork-Familie und Beruf unter einen Hut zu bringen versucht. Der persönliche Lebensstil erscheint als eine Variante des gemeinsamen Stils, der in zunehmendem Maße von der Medienwelt gestaltet und dirigiert wird.[60]

By commenting on how Xane's 'lifestyle' is merely one of many manifestations of a collective 'style', 'eine Variante des gemeinsamen Stils', Hakkarainen draws attention to how Xane unquestioningly conforms to social expectations and parrots the kind of discourses which surround her at the expense of real self-knowledge. The other chapters point to how little can be known about Xane from the outside; chapter seven shows that Xane's view of herself is nonetheless almost entirely shaped by the gaze of others, who do not know her well and about whom she too knows very little. Xane's own perspective offers therefore neither a privileged position of knowledge nor a helpful link between the chapters, but is rather the biggest blind spot in the novel, in plain sight at its very centre.

The chapter's epigraph, 'Angenehm ist es, zur rechten Zeit ein Narr zu sein', a quotation from the fourth book of Horace's *Odes*,[61] hints that Xane's biased and provisional observations in this chapter are simply a means of avoidance, her way of not facing up to uncomfortable, 'unangenehm' truths. Yet as this section has shown, the novel's structure pits the different characters' accounts against each other, making them *all* appear biased and provisional, incapable of building a coherent whole. As a result, *Quasikristalle* leaves the reader with an overarching sense of the instability and uncertainty of both Xane's and the other characters' positions and viewpoints in the narrative. The next section will show that the constant relativisation of the competing perspectives in the novel affects above all the two themes which also dominate Menasse's position as a public figure: firstly, gender roles and relations, and secondly, the interplay between German, Austrian, and Jewish identities.

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[60] Hakkarainen, 'Generationendialog', 278.

[61] Specifically Book IV, 12.28. Notably this is the only one of the epigrams used for the thirteen chapters whose translation is not attributed to its source in the *Quellennachweis* following the author's acknowledgements (*Q,* 569-70). By omitting this citation, Menasse arguably draws particular attention to this epigraph over others.

Part III

Relativising Gendered, Austrian and Jewish Identities

Quasikristalle and Menasse's Politics

The discussion in this chapter so far has shown two things: firstly, that Eva Menasse firmly positions herself as a feminist and as a Jewish-Austrian author in the media, thus setting the tone for how her fiction is received. And secondly, that despite being largely conventional, her second novel *Quasikristalle* conducts an experiment with structure inspired by the quasicrystals in the title: it presents irregular and non-recurrent perspectives in a deceptively symmetrical and linear way. Making sense of the plot requires a counterintuitive, multi-directional reading which pays attention to how each character's narrative is relativised by others preceding and following it. The protagonist's own narrative in chapter seven is relativised most starkly of all. It is by thus playing the individual characters' positions off against each other that the novel generates a strong sense of uncertainty about the characters' identities and relations. This final part of the chapter will argue that this uncertainty relates specifically to female identities and to Austrian-Jewish identities.

These identities are problematised in the novel mainly because of the ways in which Xane embodies them, especially when compared with how others (choose to) assume them. The representation of a range of conflicted attitudes and ways of inhabiting identity positions in *Quasikristalle* nuances and complicates the rather clear-cut and politicised identities which Menasse herself explicitly endorses. In what follows I will explore in more detail firstly, how the juxtaposition of female perspectives in the novel draws attention to and undermines Xane's own, stereotypically gendered point of view. I will show that *Quasikristalle* is ultimately a feminist novel in that it evokes clichés about gender and gender relations only to destabilise and question them. Secondly, the focus will be on how the juxtaposition of different perspectives problematises Austrian and Jewish identities in the novel. Though the narrative does, to some extent, pit against each other the reductive stereotypes about German and Austrian 'national character' to which

Menasse resorts in her essays,[62] it engages most substantially with questions about Austrian and Jewish identities by showing that they are inhabited differently and given different meaning by successive generations. By doing so, *Quasikristalle* shows on the one hand that Austrianness and Jewishness are, as Anita Bunyan argues in relation to Menasse's most recent short stories, merely situational, contingent on context and point of view.[63] On the other hand, it extends and nuances Menasse's critique of both the Austrian and the German *Erinnerungskulturen*, showing them to be problematic, inadequate ways of understanding and relating to the past.

A Feminist Novel?

Part I showed that Menasse's feminist credentials are jeopardised in equal measure by reviewers who see her work as commercial 'women's' literature and by the limitations of her essays and speeches about motherhood. I would argue, however, that *Quasikristalle* is a genuinely feminist text. Not only does it nuance the views Menasse has expressed in her essays on reproductive medicine, it also embraces the deprecating label of *Frauenliteratur* and forces it free of its association with 'Brigitte Kolumne[n]'.[64] Ironically, it does so precisely by engaging with, rather than dismissing out of hand, the kind of sexist discourses associated with women's magazines. Her (unfounded) suspicion that her husband was having an affair with a student, for example, leads Xane to conclude in chapter seven that

> wer ein respektables Ehemann-Exemplar gefunden, sich mit diesem zusammengerauft und sich an sein Schnarchen oder an seine herumliegenden Mokkalöffel gewöhnt hat, [fürchtet] nichts so sehr wie die *junge Frau*. Sobald wir über vierzig sind, hegen wir jungen Frauen gegenüber Mordgedanken. [...] [Wir] beobachten argwöhnisch, wie lange unser eigener Mann das Frischfleisch bei der allgemeinen Begrüßung küsst und an sich drückt. [...] Und da fragen sie in den Magazinen, warum Frauen stutenbissig sind? Warum sie nicht, wie die Männer, diese unsichtbaren Netzwerke bilden und sich gegenseitig zum Aufstieg verhelfen? (*Q*, 360)

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[62] Xane's employee Martin Kummer, for example, who is jealous of Xane's Austrian protegé Oskar Topic, thinks the Austrians are 'allesamt Alkoholiker' (*Q*, 404) and feels threatened by the cliquey 'Wiener Humormafia' surrounding Xane (*Q*, 418). Conversely, however, Austrian characters, including Xane herself, often churn out stereotypes about the Germans. See e.g. *Q*, 303, 451, and 480.

[63] Anita Bunyan, 'Minor, Mainstream or Situational? Eva Menasse's *Tiere für Fortgeschrittene*', in *Rethinking 'Minor Literature': Contemporary Jewish Women's Writing in Germany and Austria*, ed. by Godela Weiss-Sussex and Maria Roca-Lizarazu, Special Issue of *Modern Languages Open*, (forthcoming, 2019). The author kindly shared the manuscript with me in May 2019.

[64] Käppeler, 'Das Reden der Anderen'.

Rather than challenging the sexist stereotypes not only about relationships between men and women, but also about female relationships, Xane echoes and reinforces them, blaming men for sowing jealousy and suspicion amongst women. Yet the way female relationships are represented in other chapters, from other characters' perspectives, complicates Xane's cynical view. Some chapters foreground female relationships which are fraught with jealousy and disloyalty despite the complete absence of men. In the first chapter, for example, Judith, Xane and Claudia vie for each other's favour in constantly shifting alliances, while in the eleventh chapter Sally and Krystyna seem to resent Xane, whom they see as a 'freundlicher Tyrann' (*Q*, 493), despite both profiting from her friendship either personally or professionally.[65] Elsewhere, however, these friendships are represented more affirmatively as a confessional narrative space in which women can exchange confidences and 'try on' different positions. In chapter four, for instance, Sally and Xane spend much time together in Berlin discussing 'Männer, Bücher, Träume' (*Q*, 195) and exchanging life stories. Finally, in other chapters there are also unequivocal instances of female solidarity and kindness between older and younger women, instances which notably also involve Xane. In chapter two, for example, Ludwig Tschoch's wife Hannelore and her friend Irene put in a good word for Xane and negotiate a rent reduction for her, while in chapter twelve Shanti recognises Xane as the polite old lady at the supermarket till who offered to have Shanti's shoes dry-cleaned after accidentally dropping some eggs on the floor next to them.

Ambivalent Mothers

Like her skewed views on female relationships, Xane's attitude towards pregnancy and motherhood is also challenged through the juxtaposition of her point of view with other perspectives. In this way, the novel as a whole paints an equivocal portrait of contemporary motherhood. Xane is desperate to become a mother, and understandably frustrated at her initial inability to conceive. She eventually succeeds and becomes a devoted, conscientious, but also anxious mother. She occasionally entertains guilty fantasies of fleeing 'als Rabenmutter bei Nacht

[65] Xane introduced Krystyna to Richard, Krystyna's husband and kickstarted Sally's musical career by secretly arranging her first big audition for her.

und Nebel nach Australien' (*Q*, 316) and bemoans the passing of her best years while she was rearing her small children. With her concerns about ageing, Xane increasingly resembles her own mother, Helga, whose obsession with looking 'appetitlich' (*Q,* 437), Kurt remembers, Xane had resented as a young girl. Yet in her devotion to her son and step-daughters Xane differs from her mother, who 'befand sich immer irgendwo zwischen Friseur, Freundinnen, Kaffeehaus und Tennisclub' (*Q*, 40) when Xane was a child. Though there are several other stereotypically 'bad' mothers in the novel apart from Xane's own, the narrative represents them more sympathetically than Xane, who strives to do everything right.

Judith and Sally's mother Zsusa, for instance, is an enigmatic figure, gentle but mentally unstable, and incapable of protecting her children from her abusive husband. Lisa, Xane's stepdaughters' absent biological mother, whom Xane refers to as a 'hochneurotische Wesen' and a 'bulimische Zimperliese' (*Q*, 326), returns in chapter eight when she contacts Viola, the eldest. Unlike Viola, however, who at this time resents her stepmother and looks to Lisa for a substitute, Lisa is grateful to Xane for raising her children, rather than jealous of her or appropriative of her daughters. Yet it is Sally rather than Lisa who is posited as Xane's counterpart as a mother. In chapter four, Sally is shown to be an indifferent, struggling single mother to the four-year-old Baby, though she prides herself on rejecting 'die klassische Mutterrolle' (*Q*, 229). Sally works in nightclubs and parties late with her friends, spending her small wages on a minder for the little girl, who desperately tries to hold her mother back. By juxtaposing these 'flawed' but utterly human mothers with the ambitious Xane, *Quasikristalle* complicates the clichéd and idealising assumptions about motherhood which as we saw underpin Menasse's journalistic publications on women's reproductive rights.

The most nuanced depiction of contemporary motherhood in *Quasikristalle*, however, can be found in chapter five, narrated from the perspective of Xane's gynaecologist Heike Guttmann. A passage in this chapter summarises almost verbatim Menasse's argument in her essay defending preimplantation genetic diagnosis, while also explicitly denouncing the use of references to the Holocaust to restrict public debate:

> Die deutschen Gesetze! Rigide bis dort hinaus, das Embryonenschutzgesetz, man darf fast gar nichts, im internationalen Vergleich, sogar die Österreicher sind liberaler. Von Tschechen und Niederländern nicht zu reden. In Deutschland aber wirkt der Holocaust fort und fort, ethisch jedenfalls, jede Entscheidung wird darauf bezogen, alles Tun muss sich vom Tun der Nazis maximal unterscheiden. Deshalb dürfen die Gynäkologen zwar künstlich befruchten, aber gewissermaßen blindlings, mit einer Augenbinde, damit auf keinen Fall ein Eindruck von Selektion entsteht. Weshalb sie, *um halbwegs vergleichbare Erfolgsquoten zu haben*, mehr befruchtete Eizellen zurücksetzen als in anderen Ländern. So zwingt man die Frauen zu unnötig vielen Mehrlingsschwangerschaften. […] Aber um das Politische kümmern sich die Männer, zum Beispiel der Chef. Lässt kaum eine Fernsehdiskussion zum Thema aus und ist ein gefragter Gastkommentator. *Was tolle Werbung für die Klinik ist*. (*Q*, 254; my emphasis)

As the italicised parts show, the chapter is as much about showing reproductive medicine to be a profitable business as it is a means of commenting on Federal German family politics. Only those who can afford it can access medical assistance. This is a reality that Guttmann, presumably like other professionals in her field, cynically accepts: '[s]eit die Patienten die Hälfte der Behandlungskosten übernehmen müssen, erleichtet die soziale Auslese Heike durchaus die Arbeit. Darf man ja nicht laut sagen, und natürlich ist es schreiend ungerecht' (*Q*, 256). Such an acknowledgement of the inequality of access to reproductive medicine is absent from Menasse's essay. In addition, the chapter also nuances the arguments presented in the essay by showing Guttmann, the reproductive medicine professional, to be struggling with motherhood herself. After a secret early abortion 'in den Niederlanden, mit ihrer Mutter im Zug' (*Q*, 268), Guttmann has two children of her own, whom she hardly sees: 'sie ist seit sieben in der Klinik, Laura und Lennart schlafen noch, wenn sie das Haus verlässt' (*Q*, 265). Instead she outsources their care to Frau Jänicke, 'denn dafür, unter anderem, arbeitet sie sich ja in der Klink den schmalen Arsch ab' (*Q*, 243). Yet as she examines patients her mind wanders, 'hat sie Frau Jänicke gesagt, dass sie den Fisch rausnehmen muss? Ja, sie hat, sie hat, meine Güte' (*Q*, 265). Her neurotic concern with trivial details compensates for her lack of involvement with her children, the cost of a career helping other women have their own children. In this chapter, Menasse extends her reflections on motherhood, addressing not only the social and legal barriers women face in trying to access reproductive help, but also the difficulties of combining motherhood with one's professional ambitions, a difficulty which Xane conspicuously fails to mention in her own chapter.

Gendered Ageing

As previously mentioned, Xane's grievances about motherhood relate to her impression that it consumes her youth and energy. Her main concern, in chapter seven, concerns the widening disparity between how ageing women and ageing men are seen by society. In Xane's eyes, ageing puts women at a sexual and social disadvantage, while men remain respectable and desirable. Unlike her thoughts on female relationships and motherhood, however, her fears about ageing are not contradicted by other chapters, but are rather only relativised and nuanced. Admittedly, three different chapters narrated by men contain comments on Xane's (advanced) age which would confirm her fears: in chapter six, Nelson remarks that 'sie war nicht so jung, wie sie auf den ersten Blick wirkte' (*Q*, 280), in chapter nine Martin Kummer points out, 'früher war sie eine schöne Frau gewesen, doch war sie längst viel älter als auf den Fotos, die die Agentur bei Bedarf herausgab' (*Q,* 417), while in the following chapter Kurt remembers being surprised, each time he saw his daughter, by 'wie alt Xane aussah [o]der geworden war' (*Q*, 436). Men do remark on her age, then, just as she worries they do.

What she does not know, however, is that men also worry about ageing themselves. Both Nelson and Kurt, for example, struggle with their own anxieties about growing older, losing loved ones, and finding meaning in life as death approaches. Neither, however, worries about becoming less attractive or undesirable, and Xane herself, as other chapters show, is arguably unjustified in doing so. In chapter twelve, we find out that Xane and Mor never divorced, and that he spends the rest of his life devoted to her, while in the thirteenth chapter her son congratulates her on starting afresh with a new partner in her old age, after Mor's death. As a whole, therefore, *Quasikristalle* juxtaposes Xane's ideas, assumptions, and experiences as a woman and mother with the views of others that question, nuance, or contradict them. By doing so, the novel goes beyond limited and stereotypical representations of women and reflects (on) the diversity of gendered perspectives and experiences in a way in which Menasse's journalism arguably fails to do.

Perspectives on Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

The juxtaposition of contrasting perspectives and experiences in the novel also casts the different characters' Austrian and Austrian-Jewish identities in an ambivalent light in much the same way that it challenges representations of gender and motherhood. As mentioned in Part I, both Xane and Menasse with *Quasikristalle* as a whole self-consciously go through the motions of 'Österreich-Beschimpfung' or *Nestbeschmutzung*, especially by emphasising the characters' failures to confront or work through their past in adequate ways. The novel's own critique of Austria is most evident in the negative representation of Xane's typically Viennese landlord Ludwig Tschoch, who is the focaliser in chapter three. Tschoch is not only xenophobic, homophobic, and a covert antisemite, who looks with suspicion at 'die Nase des Mädchens [Xanes]' and then comforts himself that it 'konnte slawisch sein, oder besser: mediterran!' (*Q*, 147). He is also shown to be a 'Mitläufer' who, as a child or a young man during the war, had witnessed his neighbour's violent deportation (which is only fleetingly alluded to in the the narrative)[66] without ever acknowledging its criminal nature. In a gesture of *Nestbeschmutzung* within the chapter itself which duplicates the chapter's own negative representation of Tschoch, Xane makes a provocative film which she calls 'Film ohne Worte' (*Q*, 178) in order to expose Tschoch's hypocritical respectability. She uses footage of one of Tschoch's most prized possessions, a statuette of Jesus, as well as of his pet ferrets, one of which he secretly calls Adolf. Broadcast on television a few months later, the film predictably shocks and angers Tschoch and his family, though the chapter does not continue long enough to reveal whether it moved them to reconsider their conservative views.

Arguably, however, the fact that Xane is herself depicted as a *Nestbeschmutzerin* in the novel ultimately undermines the novel's own critical representation of the Viennese (and by extension, of Austria more generally), making it seem all too deliberate. And vice versa: the novel's criticism of Austria's reluctance to face its past makes Xane's own activism seem unoriginal and formulaic. As Xane's political commitments are gradually fleshed out through the accounts of others in subsequent chapters, however, her activism in chapter three – which points to the conflicted way in

[66] See *Q*, 179.

which she inhabits her Austrian identity— is given some depth. Crucially, it is shown to relate primarily to her attempts to understand her Jewish family history and meaningfully inhabit her own half-Jewish identity. In chapter nine, for example, Martin Kummer refers to one of Xane's early films, 'ein Doku über diesen Wiederstandskämpfer Eli Rozmburk' (*Q*, 407), her father's friend and fellow survivor and her own mentor, whose absence paradoxically plays an important role in the novel's second chapter. In this second chapter, which is implicitly set at around the same time as Xane kickstarted her career as a political filmmaker (and therefore shortly before she became Tschoch's tenant), Xane is part of a group visit to the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau. From the context we gather that she undertakes the trip in the hope that it will help her understand and articulate her own Jewish identity. However, the chapter is narrated from the point of view of Bernays, a young half-Jewish British historian who is invited to replace Rozmburk. Unlike Rozmburk and like Xane herself, Bernays belongs to the generation of survivors' children and has no first-hand experience of the camps. Because of this, however, he is all the more committed to recounting the gruesome factual details relating to the camps, while cynically enjoying their effect on first-time visitors and Xane in particular:

> [J]emand wie Bernays bedankte sich für den Zufall der späten Geburt mit der Akribie des Wissenschaftlers. Die Verschonten haben kein Recht auf das Ungefähre. Dass Xane das verstand, ja, dass sie es selbst schon wusste, machte ihn einerseits glücklich, andererseits war das ja die Voraussetzung für alles. (*Q*, 124)

Menasse's choice of Bernays as a focaliser for this chapter is strategic: even though Bernays is not German ('Geboren in Polen, britischer Pass' [*Q*, 88]), he embodies the official German *Erinnerungskultur*, in which the Holocaust is, according to Menasse, discussed with a mixture of moralistic indignation and offhandedness.[67] As Hakkarainen rightly suggests, however, with this chapter the novel '[bekämpft] nicht die Erinnerungskultur an sich, sondern [enthüllt] ihre

[67] 'Es gibt in der deutschen Politik eine Tendenz, die ich übrigens sehr gut verstehen kann, jede große ethische und moralische Entscheidung auf Auschwitz zurückzuführen. […] Man kann Auschwitz für fast alles vereinnahmen. Es gibt die Friedensmarschierer und die Ostermärsche, die sich auf Auschwitz beziehen. Aber auch Außenminister Joschka Fischer berief sich auf Auschwitz, als es darum ging, die Serben im Kosovo zu bombardieren. So sollte man grundsätzlich nicht denken. Das ist zu einfach und banalisiert die Zusammenhänge'. Menasse, '"Auschwitz ist zu oft Bezugspunkt"'.

Nebenwirkungen wie Geschäftsmacherei und Sensationstourismus'.[68] An affair develops between Xane and (the much older) Bernays against the unlikely backdrop of the concentration camps which, told from Bernays' perspective, distracts from and glosses over the storyline of Xane's effort to better understand the meaning of her own Jewish identity by learning about the Holocaust in detail. As a whole, the chapter implies that the existing culture (and industry) of rememberance offers later generations inadequate opportunities to meaningfully grapple with the history of the Holocaust. By extension, it questions the extent to which a mediated and institutionalised experience of the concentration camps such as Xane's can function as a sufficient point of reference for the definition of contemporary Jewish identities.

These doubts are reproduced, in even more cynical terms, within the narrative itself. In chapter eleven, Krystyna comments sarcastically on Xane's skewed self-perception as a Jewish intellectual and *Nestbeschmutzerin* on the basis of her family history: 'Gerade war sie noch ein normales Wiener Mädchen aus einem konservativ-katholischen Gymnasium gewesen', she sneers, 'da stürzte sie sich plötzlich auf die Verfolgungsgeschichte ihres Vaters, fand im Archiv zwei ermordete Großtanten und galt vortan als "jüdische Intellektuelle"' (*Q*, 478). Yet the tone of this passage not only accentuates Krystyna's own hypocrisy as Xane's ostensibly supportive friend. It also renders more explicit what was only hinted at in the second chapter: namely, that there is no 'authentic' Austrian-Jewish identity for Xane to inhabit, no clear sense of community to belong to. Her identification as an Austrian 'jüdische Intellektuelle' is only situational, coincidental even, and relative.

Yet by thus casting Xane's (half-)Jewishness, through Krystyna's (non-Jewish Austrian) perspective, as above all a performative political identity, the narrative also foregrounds the generational differences in how Austrian and Austrian-Jewish identities are assumed. Xane belongs to the generation of the Austrian survivors' (and perpetrators') children who, in the 1980s, called for the kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which had begun in Germany two decades earlier. The parents' generation is represented in the novel by Xane's father Kurt, who has first-

[68] Hakkarainen, 'Generationendialog', 276.

hand memories of being persecuted.[69] Paradoxically, Kurt is less political and distances himself from his children's militancy: 'Jüdischer Selbsthass, österreichischer Selbsthass, er hatte das nie genau verstanden, aber seine Kinder, beide, immer taten sie, als ob man ihnen dauernd, auf Schritt und Tritt... Woher sie diese Wut hatten. Er verstand es einfach nicht' (*Q*, 452). The fact that, despite his experiences, Kurt regards his daughter's activism with incomprehension underlines the generational divide at the heart of Austrian society between parents with direct experience of the Second World War and Holocaust but no desire to discuss it, and children with limited knowledge of their parents' experiences but a willingness to force public discussions of it.

Yet the novel ultimately also points to the limits of Xane's generation's efforts to spur an Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* by juxtaposing Kurt's sceptical view of Xane's activism with those of Xane's peers who do not share her political concerns and are unconvinced by her fervour. Like Krystyna, who views Xane's political stance as inauthentic, Sally, who is half-Jewish herself, comments, for example, that Xane's sustained left-wing politics are incompatible with her underlying, strong attachment to the very 'bürgerliche Gewissheiten' (*Q*, 202) which she targets with her activism. Ultimately, then, Xane's already shaky identity as an Austrian-Jewish intellectual is constantly relativised, questioned, and challenged through the perspectives of other characters. By problematising Xane's own attempts to understand the history of the Holocaust and to address the survival of the mentalities which led to it in chapters two and three respectively, the novel as a whole obliquely reflects on Austria's (troubled) relationship to its past, a relationship which continues to make contemporary Austrian and Jewish-Austrian identities and positions ambivalent and conflicted.

Conclusion

Ultimately, *Quasikristalle* is committed only to the idea that identities and positions are relative and relational. The perspectives of its numerous, more or less loosely related characters are held

[69] For the passage where this is evoked, see *Q*, 466.

together by the novel's most ambivalent and elusive character, the protagonist Xane, and yet each perspective on Xane is overturned, contradicted, or nuanced by the accounts of others. In the end, no single perspective prevails as the objective 'truth'; they are all shown to be equally tied to subjective positions. This effect is, paradoxically, the result of the novel's orderly structure. As the second part of this chapter has shown, the chronological sequence of chapters narrated through a different focaliser and symmetrically centred on the middle chapter seven reveals tensions between the different characters' perspectives, giving the impression that each perspective is biased, incomplete and limited, that 'jedes einzelne Bild nur ein Mosaikstück ist' (*Q*, 483).

The novel's structure thus self-consciously (and arguably imperfectly) illustrates the metaphor of the titular quasicrystals, which are both symmetrical and irregular. Despite its flaws, its use of banal plotlines, and its at times unsubtle ironisation of clichés, the novel's formal experiment ultimately has interesting political dimensions. By refracting any clear-cut models of gender, Austrian, and Jewish identity in its multiperspectival narrative, *Quasikristalle* engages with and yet complicates the identity political discourses to which Eva Menasse has contributed as a public figure, and which have in turn defined the reception of her work. With her second novel, then, Menasse provides a nuanced response to the ways in which she is pigeonholed (and has pigeonholed herself) as a female and Austrian-Jewish author, proposing that identities can only ever be relative and unstable.

Chapter Two

Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand* (2011):

Identity at the Limits of Control

Introduction

The reception of Wolfgang Herrndorf's fiction is less obviously focussed on the author's identity than Eva Menasse's. Unlike most other authors in this thesis, Herrndorf (1965-2013) was never openly concerned with the political implications of his own gender or cultural identity. However, as this chapter will argue through the example of his 2011 novel *Sand*,[1] the reception of his later work was shaped by his increasing disability, caused by his terminal brain tumour, whose course he publicly recorded for three years (2010-2013) in his blog 'Arbeit und Struktur'.[2] Even though it had been accessible to online readers since September 2010, the blog was only published in book form after Herrndorf's suicide in 2013.[3] With the exception of his young adult novel *Tschick* (2010),[4] *Arbeit und Struktur* has so far received more critical attention than any other of his works. This is partly because of a growing interest in autobiographical and fictional narratives of illness and dying in recent years,[5] and partly because of the popularity of theories of authorial *(Selbst-*

[1] Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Sand* [2011], (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2013).
[2] Wolfgang Herrndorf, 'Arbeit und Struktur', https://www.wolfgang-herrndorf.de [Accessed 10 June 2019].
[3] Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Arbeit und Struktur* [2013] (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2015). Hereafter *AS*.
[4] Wolfgang Herrndorf, *Tschick* [2010] (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2012).
[5] For helpful introductions to this topic see: Thomas Macho and Kristin Marek, eds, *Die neue Sichtbarkeit des Todes* (Munich: Fink, 2007) and Anna Katharina Neufeld and Ulrike Vedder, 'An der Grenze. Sterben und Tod in der Gegenwartsliteratur', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik,* 25.3 (2015), 495-8. For studies of *Arbeit und Struktur* as an illness narrative see Lilla Balint, 'Sickness unto Death in the Age of 24/7: Wolfgang Herrndorf 's *Arbeit und Struktur'*, *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature*, 20.2 (2016), 1-19; Elke Siegel, '"Die mühsame Verschriftlichung meiner peinlichen Existenz": Wolfgang Herrndorfs *Arbeit und Struktur* zwischen Tagebuch, Blog und Buch', *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, 2 (2016), 348-72 and Nina Schmidt, 'Confronting Cancer Publicly: Diary Writing in Extremis by Christoph Schlingensief and Wolfgang Herrndorf', in *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First Century German Literature* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018), pp. 144-58. For works in other disciplines which refer to *Arbeit und*

)Inszenierungen discussed in the introduction of this thesis. Herrndorf's account of his life as a cancer patient in *Arbeit und Struktur* is certainly to some extent performative, a way of inhabiting his public image as a literary author. As the blog made public details of his illness, as well as his thoughts on his writings during this illness, it inevitably influenced the reception of work he published during this time, and of *Sand* in particular.

Just as critics of *Quasikristalle* look to Menasse's own (political) concerns with aspects of her identity to make sense of the protagonist's own, reviewers and critics of *Sand* use Herrndorf's persona as a compass to orient themselves within the narrative precisely because it is radically uncertain and elusive. Reviews of the more conventional, accessible *Tschick*, meanwhile, usually only contain cursory references to the author's illness, even though there was already much information about it available at the point of its publication.[6] *Sand* makes for confusing and often unsettling reading. Like *Quasikristalle*, its plot is full of gaps, gaps in the information available to both the characters and readers, as well as temporal gaps, leaps, and flashbacks. Like in *Quasikristalle*, moreover, these gaps are often caused by shifts in focalisation. Unlike Xane, however, who has a limited, blinkered view of herself and others, the protagonist of *Sand* quite literally does not know who he is. After a blow to the head, he loses his memory and sense of self; his loss of identity exposes him to further violence, which escalates in the course of the narrative. The novel's unstable, cynical narrator, numerous literary and non-literary intertexts, and frequent red herrings cause the reader to repeatedly lose her bearings in *Sand*. It is not unreasonable, therefore, that even professional readers look to the figure of the author, via his blog, for help with the puzzling elements of the novel.

As I will show in this chapter, however, the overarching sense of nihilism evoked by *Sand* exceeds what Herrndorf claimed he intended with the novel on his blog. Questions of authorial

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Struktur in the context of debates on medical ethics and assisted dying, see Matthias N. Lorenz, 'Wolfgang Herrndorf. Ein Forschungs- als Problemaufriss', in *"Germanistenscheiß"*: *Beiträge zur Werkpolitik Wolfgang Herrndorfs*, ed. by Matthias N. Lorenz (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2019), pp. 9-29, here p. 12 (footnote 17).

[6] *Tschick* was published in the same month as the blog was released to the public. For more information on why and when the blog went public, see Marcus Gärtner and Kathrin Passig, 'Nachwort', in *AS*, 443-5.

control over fiction and of the agency of fictional texts thus forcefully come to the fore and question the author's self-representation as being 'in control' in *Arbeit und Struktur*. Indeed, the self-image Herrndorf projected on his blog was not just that of a master of his own (increasingly constrained) situation, but also as a self-disciplined, resilient author in control of his own work. After a short summary of the novel's extremely convoluted plot, which will make the analysis in this chapter easier to follow, Part I will explore the perceived and actual correspondences between *Sand* and Herrndorf's performative account of his illness in *Arbeit und Struktur*. This will lead to a more detailed discussion, in Part II, of the three main experimental elements in *Sand* which most contribute to the reader's sense of incomprehension: the relation between the narrator and focalisers, the function of intertextual references, and the progression of the plot through red herrings and diversions. Part III will then examine how these experimental elements make the description of torture towards the end of the novel simultaneously engaging and alienating. I will show that through this detailed yet detached torture scene the novel reflects on the kinds of extreme, lawless violence which become possible when constructs of identity and selfhood are stripped away. Finally, I will argue that the novel's nihilistic ending challenges Herrndorf's own controlled and meticulous identity construction in *Arbeit und Struktur*.

Summary

At the core of *Sand* is an imaginary conspiracy between 'Europeans' and 'Arabs' to build a nuclear bomb against Israel. The blueprints for the bomb are hidden in the ink cartridges of a pen which changes hands many times in the course of the novel before being lost for good. All action takes place in 1972, the year that members of the Palestinian terrorist group Black September kidnapped and killed eleven members of the Israeli team at the Munich Olympics.[7] The settings of the action – the sprawling North African city of Targat, the oasis settlement of Tindirma, and the desert – are

[7] There are regular subtle references to the terror attack throughout the novel, though as shall be discussed in Part III these references have an ambivalent function in the novel. See *S*, 82, 130, and 262.

all imaginary. Two subplots, each of which is centred around a pursuit, overlap throughout the five Books which constitute the novel. First, the low-ranking Francophone policemen Canisades and Polidorio are after Amadou Amadou, a local man who went on a killing spree in a commune at Tindirma founded by Western hippies. In the second and more important subplot, a nameless, amnesiac man is simultaneously persecuted by Targat mobsters and the CIA. Only at the very end of the novel is there a hint that the amnesiac is really Polidorio.

His persecution begins when a Swedish agent named Lundgren mistakes him for his contact man and (unbeknownst to him) slips him the pen containing the bomb blueprints. Polidorio takes refuge in a distillery in the desert, where he is attacked by the owner's son, causing him to lose his memory and all sense of self. While on the run, an American woman called Helen Gliese takes him in and calls him Carl Gross, after the manufacturer of his jacket.[8] Helen, who is secretly a CIA agent, uses Carl to retrieve the coveted bomb blueprints. In his effort to help Helen, whom he falls in love with, Carl falls in the hands first of his Arab pursuers and then of Helen's associates from the CIA. The latter torture the protagonist to obtain a confession he cannot make and abandon him, chained, in the depths of a mine. Carl manages to escape, only to be killed by Hakim, a miner who wants revenge on Helen for an unrelated incident. The last chapter returns to the slums of Targat. There the pen makes a final appearance in the hands of a little girl who is buried alive under a mountain of rubbish during one of the authorities' 'purges' of the neighbourhood.

Part I

Reconciling the Author of *Arbeit und Struktur* with the Author of *Sand*

The Figure of the Author in the Reception of *Sand*

The dense plot summary above admittedly conveys only a fraction of the complexity of the novel itself. It is enough to show, however, that the novel's subject matter bears no obvious relation to Wolfgang Herrndorf's illness. Still, the vast majority of reviews of *Sand* in major *Feuilletons*

[8] Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the protagonist as either 'Polidorio' or 'Carl', depending on what he is called at the specific point in the narrative discussed in each instance.

either refer directly to Herrndorf's illness or mention Herrndorf's blog.[9] It is admittedly hard to completely exclude from the process of reading what we know about the circumstances in which a piece of fiction was written, especially a piece of fiction as indeterminate and complex as *Sand*. However, it is worth looking at and questioning *how* this knowledge predisposes (professional) readers and guides their interpretations.

Reviewer Friedmar Apel mentions Herrndorf's illness in the first paragraph, before even introducing *Sand* itself. Toying with the implications of the novel's title, which for him evokes among other things the sand in an hourglass, Apel interprets *Sand* as a metaphor for the author's sense of running out of time, as well as an apocalyptic vision of humanity as a whole relentlessly heading towards a bleak future.[10] Elke Schmitter goes in a different direction, linking Herrndorf's experience of living with a fatal brain tumour not, as Apel does, to the novel's plot, but to its genre, which she identifies as a 'perfekter Thriller': 'Vielleicht ist es gerade das Andere', she writes, 'das der existentiellen Not Ferne, das Herrndorf zu dieser Art Literatur führt (die ja die Frage von Leben und Tod in programmatischer Kühle verwaltet)'.[11] Gerrit Bartels, meanwhile, explicitly compares Herrndorf, whose brain tumour caused him gradual cognitive impairment, to the amnesiac protagonist. Still, he clarifies, so as not to make his interpretation seem like a biographical one, 'bei *Sand* [entsteht] nie der Eindruck, dass es sich hierbei auch um eine Art von

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[9] See for example (in alphabetical order): Iris Alanyali, 'Wo, bitte, geht's denn hier zur Autobahn?', *Die Welt*, 13 November 2011, https://www.welt.de/print/wams/kultur/article13714325/Wo-bitte-geht-s-denn-hier-zur-Autobahn.html; Friedmar Apel, 'Wo Schmuggler, Hippies, Künstler und Agenten auftanken', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 November 2011, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/buecher-der-woche/die-f-a-z-romane-der-woche-wo-schmuggler-hippies-kuenstler-und-agenten-auftanken-11525406.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2; Gerrit Bartels, 'Wums der Wüste', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 16 November 2011, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/herrndorf-roman-sand-wums-der-wueste/5855116.html; Peter Kock, 'Tod in der Wüste. Zu Wolfgang Herrndorfs Roman *Sand*', *literaturkritik.de*, 18 June 2012, https://literaturkritik.de/id/16691; Peter Michalzik, 'Das Lächeln des Nihilismus', *Berliner Zeitung*, 21 January 2012, https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/herrndorf-roman--sand--das-laecheln-des-nihilismus-10699474 and Elke Schmitter, 'Agentenoperette', *Der Spiegel*, 7 November 2011, https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-81562377.html [All accessed 19 September 2019].

[10] Apel, 'Wo Schmuggler […]'.

[11] Schmitter, 'Agentenoperette'.

Krankheits- und Schicksalsbewältigung handeln könnte', despite the constant evocation of bodily suffering in the novel.[12]

Reading *Arbeit und Struktur* to Understand *Sand*?

Like newspaper critics, scholars often refer to *Arbeit und Struktur* when writing on *Sand*, though they refrain from speculating on the novel's relation to Herrndorf's illness. Instead, they use *Arbeit und Struktur*, a highly performative autobiographical work, as a source of information about Herrndorf's poetics, that is, his meta-reflections on his writing, and about his circumstances at the time of writing *Sand*. *Sand*, which Herrndorf refers to as his 'Wüstenroman', was together with the 'Jugendroman' *Tschick* a large part of the 'Arbeit' discussed on the blog.[13] As he publicly documented in minute detail the process of writing, editing, and publishing the two books, openly criticised certain habits of literary reception,[14] and discussed his influences and literary preferences on the blog,[15] Herrndorf clearly had some idea of how he meant his fiction to be read. That scholars take the author's comments on writing and editing *Sand* in the blog into account in their analyses is therefore not in itself inappropriate.[16]

Yet *Arbeit und Struktur* is still primarily a self-portrait of the author as a *patient*, a body of life writing, and only to a lesser extent a companion to the rest of his work, which in turn justifies

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[12] Bartels, 'Wums der Wüste'.
[13] For his references to *Sand*, see *AS,* 27 ,70 (where he simply refers to it as a 'Krimi'), 72, 87, and *passim*.
[14] For example, he complains that the questions asked in interviews invariably relate to his person, rather than being exclusively about his work (see e.g. *AS*, 276-7) and that reviews always contain plot summaries and conjectures about authorial intentions (e.g. *AS*, 279-80).
[15] There are almost as many literary references in *Arbeit und Struktur* as descriptions of the author's illness. Herrndorf gives regular updates on what he has been reading on the blog and comments at length on books that have left a mark on him (e.g. *AS*, 44-5 and 77-8). He also comments at length on his competition with some of his contemporaries, most frequently Uwe Tellkamp (e.g. *AS*, 23, 25-7).
[16] For examples of references to *Arbeit und Struktur* in scholarly articles on *Sand* see: Olivia Albiero, 'Knotty Plot and Dense Text: Crime, Detection, and Epigraphs in Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand*', *Colloquia Germanica*, 46.2 (2013), 187-202, here 194; Sonja Arnold, 'Der "Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen"—Fehler und Zufälle in Wolfgang Herrndorfs Roman *Sand* am Beispiel des Homonyms Mine', *Pandaemonium*, 16.21 (2013), 25-47, here 27; Marie Gunreben, 'Literatur als Theodizee? Providenz und Kontingenz erzählter Welten am Beispiel von Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand*', *Religion und Literatur im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert*, 1 (2015), 447-68, here 463 and Stephan Mühr, '*Tschick* und *Sand*. Zwei komplementäre Geschichten über Identität', *Acta Germanica*, 43 (2015), 198-213, here 208-9.

reviewers' references to *Arbeit und Struktur* as a source of information on the author's illness, rather than as a companion to his fiction. In fact, it is impossible to disentangle Herrndorf's portrayal of his illness on the blog from his reflections on his literary work. Most of his references to the process of writing *Sand* in *Arbeit und Struktur* have to do with the difficulties his illness imposed on him during this process. It is therefore worth looking more closely at the echoes of Herrndorf's performative account of his own deteriorating cognitive functions in the novel.

From the blog we know that Herrndorf's brain tumour caused him epileptic fits, a severe loss of orientation, and eventually, though after he had written *Sand*, affected his ability to type. However, apart from the restrictions his condition imposed on his writing, it also gave him access to experiences he would not have otherwise understood: 'beim Schreiben der Finsternisszenen in *Sand* […]', he writes, 'war der Orientierungsverlust sehr hilfreich. Vor zwei Jahren noch hätte ich mir nicht vorstellen können, wie blöd ein Mensch sich im Dunkeln anstellen kann'.[17] The similarity of certain episodes in the novel to some of the author's blog entries suggest that Bartels might be justified in comparing Herrndorf's situation to the protagonist's. For example, after struggling to understand what the Targat mobster Abdil Bassir, his kidnapper, wants from him, the protagonist feels dispirited: 'Einfältige Gedanken von Ewigkeit und erhabener Größe, die er mit der eigenen Unwichtigkeit kontrastierte, spülten durch sein nächtlich müdes Hirn' (*S*, 165). Herrndorf records almost identical thoughts in his blog when he writes, 'meine derzeitige Ansicht ist [...], dass der winzige Bruchteil der Sekunde, in dem ich zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft zu Bewusstsein komme, im Vergleich zur Unendlichkeit dieses Universums auf ein Nichts zusammenschrumpft, auf mathematisch null'.[18]

Similarly, the amnesiac in *Sand* echoes Herrndorf's growing despair and suicidal thoughts on the blog.[19] One such moment is when schoolchildren in a slum of Targat steal the precious pen which Carl ignorantly hopes to hand over to Helen. Carl collapses helplessly next to the piles of rubbish and inspects a couple of morphine capsules he carries around in his pocket to see 'ob die

[17] *AS*, 329.
[18] Ibid., 84.
[19] E.g. 'Der Wille zu leben längst nicht mehr so stark wie der Wunsch, sich zu verabschieden' (*AS*, 158), or, 'Ich kann nicht mehr. Ich will nicht mehr. Ich will das Handtuch werfen…' (*AS*, 259).

Dosis genügte, um sich umzubringen' (*S*, 316). He experiences a similar depletion shortly afterwards, when Helen abandons him in their shared bungalow at the Sheraton; 'sein Blick wanderte zu den schwankenden Baumkronen, zwischen denen der Abendhimmel stand wie violettes Glas, und er wüschte sich, er wäre tot' (*S*, 343). Finally, after he is repeatedly electrocuted and chained to a metal rod in a muddy underground lake, he tries, unsuccessfully, to commit suicide: 'Als er merkte, woraus es hinauslief, versuchte er, sich zu ertränken. […] In einem seiner klareren Momente fand Carl sich ab mit seinem Tod' (*S*, 432-3).

The two texts also feature similarly graphic descriptions of nightmares. While some of the many dreams Herrndorf records in *Arbeit und Struktur* are brief and prosaic,[20] others are detailed and gruesome: 'Traum: In einem nordkoreanischen Lager wird ein Mann, der nur noch aus Haut und Knochen besteht, von Kim Jong-un persönlich hingerichtet. Eine Maschine schreddert den Verurteilten'.[21] Descriptions of the protagonist's nightmares also play a significant role in *Sand*. Without knowing that the 'Mine' that Carl's persecutors are looking for refers to an ink cartridge, Helen and Carl visit an old goldmine in chapter thirteen. The owner, Hakim, keeps a starved goat captive in the depths of the mine, tied to the same rod that Carl will later be tied to by his torturers. 'In der folgenden Nacht', we read shortly after this episide, 'hatte Carl erneut Albträume. Er lag am Strand unweit des Hotels, und neben ihm auf einem Badetuch räkelte sich eine riesige, fette Ziege mit weiß-blinden Augen' (*S*, 184). In a more gruesome version of this nightmare, Carl dreams of 'endlose Herden ungelenker, hölzerner Ziegen, in deren Innerem als Priester verkleidete Holzwürmer arbeiteten' (*S*, 344).

Of course, such parallels between the two texts do not imply that the author is identical with the protagonist, especially since, as shall be discussed later, the author is twice implicitly aligned with the narrator of *Sand*. However, these parallels do suggest that the relationship between the two texts is not merely one of contemporaneity. Herrndorf's experience of suffering and the constraints imposed on him by his growing disability have left a mark on the novel's tone and structure. A comment on the choice of an amnesiac protagonist for the novel in *Arbeit und*

[20] E.g. *AS*, 61 and 158.
[21] Ibid., 358.

Struktur confirms this: 'Gibt wahrscheinlich nichts, was billiger wäre zur Spannungserzeugung in der Fiktion als Totalamnesie. Aber ich dachte, man muss mit einfachen Mitteln arbeiten, wenn man schwierige nicht beherrscht'.[22] In other words: while the protagonist's amnesia is certainly not a fictionalised account of Herrndorf's waning ability to orientate himself in his work and surroundings, it is a useful, if conventional, plot device, which, by allowing for mistakes, misunderstandings, and disorientation produces narrative complexity and suspense.[23]

Responses to Herrndorf's *Selbstinszenierung*

The link established above between the way cognitive failures are thematised in *Sand* and Herrndorf's concern with the disintegration of his own cognitive faculties, however, is only part of the picture. In order to understand how Herrndorf's *Selbstinszenierung* as a cancer (and psychiatric) patient in *Arbeit und Struktur* relates to and is nuanced by the novel, we first need to briefly discuss a controversy in the media surrounding this *Selbstinszenierung* on the blog. *Arbeit und Struktur* is a tightly controlled and deliberate text. Even though many entries refer to the author's weakness, to his epileptic fits, manic episodes, and moments of all-consuming fear, they are notably all written in retrospect, after these states have passed. Indeed, the order in which Herrndorf describes the onset of his illness, his diagnosis, and his multiple hospitalisations is self-consciously constructed.

The blog begins with Herrndorf being admitted into the psychiatric ward of the Charité. He writes of his 'Jack-Nicholson-Momente', the only thing missing from his experience being 'Mildred Ratched'.[24] Only later on, at the end of the ten-part 'Rückblende' between chapters eight and nine, does he provide any background to the events described at the opening of the blog. He writes that he deliberately wore the penguin costume he is seen wearing in the first photo on the blog, for 'wenn man sich einmal im Leben schon selbst dort [in die Psychiatrie] einliefert, dann

[22] Ibid., 187.
[23] For a discussion of how mistakes figure in the novel see Arnold, 'Der "Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen"'.
[24] *AS*, 17.

richtig'.[25] With the reference to the film adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in the first entries, one of the best-known representations of psychiatry in popular culture, and with his flippant decision to dress the part of the madman, Herrndorf mobilises established cultural imagery in order to make his experience intelligible to himself and to others. While his doing so does not prove that he is in control of his condition,[26] it testifies to his desire and need for such control, which, according to his own account, he managed to channel into his writing.

This desire for control is also manifest in Herrndorf's approach to death. As previously mentioned, in *Arbeit und Struktur* the author occasionally wishes for a way out of his exhaustion and despair. Yet for every such moment, there is another of resolve to stay in control of his own death rather than be defeated by his illness. In April 2010 he writes, for example: 'Ich wollte ja nicht sterben, zu keinem Zeitpunkt, und ich will es auch jetzt nicht. Aber die Gewissheit, es selbst in der Hand zu haben, war von Anfang an notwendiger Bestandteil meiner Psychohygiene [...]. Ich muss wissen, dass ich Herr im eigenen Haus bin. Weiter nichts'.[27] Discussions of suicide and assisted death recur throughout the blog.[28] On the basis of his own experience of being terminally ill, Herrndorf positions himself firmly in support of assisted suicide in much the same way that Menasse positions herself on debates about assisted reproduction. Though Herrndorf does not mention on the blog at which point his reflections on suicide became a concrete plan, his death on the 26 August 2013 made *Feuilleton* headlines the following day. In the 'Nachwort' to *Arbeit und Struktur*, his editors give a detailed account of the act itself and of his state in the days leading up to it.[29] How does his suicide fit in with Herrndorf's desire for control, as an author, over his situation and (public) image? Could it be simultaneously an ultimate expression of his (disintegrating) agency and the act which erases it and exceeds his control?

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[25] Ibid., 146.
[26] At one point on the blog, he comments, 'Die letzten Tage kramphaft versucht, die Lücke in meinem Blog zu schließen. Die Beschreibung des Irrseins macht mich wieder irre' (*AS*, 154).
[27] *AS*, 50.
[28] E.g. Ibid., 63, and 334-5.
[29] Gärtner and Passig, 'Nachwort', 445.

In an essay called 'Spekulativer Realismus'[30] author Rainald Goetz problematically argues that Herrndorf's suicide was an unnecessary and pretentious gesture with which Herrndorf tried to comply with the misguided ideal of integrity that he shared with his friends in the Berlin intelligentsia. He believes Herrndorf aestheticised his suicide as a triumph of the spirit over the body in order to project an ideal of self-controlled masculinity. Above all, as Elke Siegel comments, Goetz argues that '[Herrndorfs] Glaube daran, "Herr im eigenen Haus" sein zu können, mache das Ich, das sich in der Entscheidung zum Suizid seiner Freiheit gewiss sein will, zum Gefangenen der Tat'.[31] In my reading, Herrndorf's suicide does not cancel out his efforts to remain in control of himself through and in his writing, even if it does suspend his agency. Already in the year of his diagnosis, about two and a half years before his suicide, Herrndorf reflects on 'die Unmöglichkeit, sich ein nicht selbst erlebtes Vergangenes vorzustellen, die Unmöglichkeit, sich in ein anderes Lebewesen hineinzudenken, die Unmöglichkeit, sich das Nichtsein vorzustellen'.[32] Though he is referring to the limits of his own imagination here, this comment also implicitly casts doubt on *others*' ability to understand and judge his own experience of suffering – including the attendant need for control. I would argue that this thought pre-empts Goetz's argument: Herrndorf's suicide is his own. It defies identification, understanding, and by extension also the kind of judgment Goetz passes on it.

However, it is worth pointing out that Goetz's (unwarranted) criticism did not come out of nowhere. The autobiographical narratives of terminal illness which proliferated at the end of the 2000s, such as Christoph Schlingensief's 2009 memoir *So schön wie hier kanns im Himmel gar nicht sein!* or Georg Diez's *Der Tod meiner Mutter* from the same year, were being heavily debated in *Feuilletons* at the time.[33] At one end of the debate, Richard Kämmerlings and Michael Angele argued that such narratives are unnecessarily explicit and often banal in how they expose

[30] Rainald Goetz, 'Spekulativer Realismus', in *Texte zur Kunst*, 93 (2014), 134-43.
[31] Siegel, '"Die mühsame Verschriftlichung"', 366.
[32] *AS*, 160.
[33] Herrndorf himself seems to have been ambivalent about such texts. For example, he mentions the title by Schlingensief first in a list of distinctly non-literary cancer narratives (*AS*, 199), at the bottom of which he ironically adds *Arbeit und Struktur*.

the minutiae of private suffering.[34] Iris Radisch and Thomas Macho convincingly argued against this position.[35] They pointed out that, since illness narratives are still widely read by a public who, in Macho's words, 'auch durch jahrzehntelange Konfrontation mit Kriegs- und Folterbildern, Hinrichtungsvideos oder detaillierten Lebensgeschichten aus Konzentrationslagern nicht erschütterungsresistent geworden ist',[36] they must appeal to a universal sensibility to the suffering of others.

Macho's remark is crucial for my reading of *Sand* in this chapter. He rightly suggests that both narratives of illness and other narratives of suffering rely on the reader's empathy and involvement. An awareness of Herrndorf's illness narrative, therefore, can and indeed should be included in readings of *Sand*, a narrative of extreme and gratuitous suffering, and vice versa. The rest of this chapter will look more closely at how the experimental narrative of *Sand* foregrounds the protagonist's suffering (Part II) and discuss how the narration of senseless violence and its culmination in the novel's nihilistic ending first engages and then alienates the reader (Part III).

Part II

Elements of Uncertainty in *Sand*

Unstable Narrator, Limited Focalisers

One of the many reasons why *Sand* is so confusing to read is that it features firstly, an elusive third-person narrator and secondly, much more (but less obviously) so than *Quasikristalle*, a constantly changing perspective of narration. Many parts of the novel feature an omniscient, extradiegetic narrator, one who is not involved as a character in the action and is therefore

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[34] Michael Angele, 'Wer hat geil Krebs?', *Der Freitag*, 3 September 2009, https://www.freitag.de/autoren/michael-angele/wer-hat-geil-krebs [Accessed 19 September 2019] and Richard Kämmerlings, 'Krebsliteratur: Der Schleier über den letzten Dingen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* 14 August 2009, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/krebsliteratur-der-schleier-ueber-den-letzten-dingen-1841182.html [Accessed 19 September 2019].
[35] Thomas Macho, 'Wer redet, ist nicht tot', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19 November 2009, https://www.nzz.ch/wer_redet_ist_nicht_tot-1.4036808 and Iris Radisch, 'Metaphysik des Tumors', *Die Zeit*, 17 September 2009, https://www.zeit.de/2009/39/Krebsbuecher [Accessed 19 September 2019].
[36]Thomas Macho, 'Wer redet'.

ostensibly impartial and authoritative. Early on, for example, the narrator gives a pseudo-encyclopaedic introduction to the oasis town of Tindirma: 'Um den Tathergang und alles Weitere verständlich zu machen, muss an dieser Stelle eine kurze Erläuterung gegeben werden, wovon wir sprechen, wenn wir von der *Oase* sprechen' (*S*, 23; emphasis in the original). Later, the narrative voice intervenes in the action to specify details or make corrections to the characters' versions of events.[37] In the sixty-fifth chapter, entitled 'Das weitere Geschehen' (S, 449), the omniscient narrator styles himself (as we shall shortly discuss, it is an explicitly gendered narrator) as a 'Kulissenschieber und Regisseur'.[38] He uses filmmaking terms to announce a change in focalisation, while also, paradoxically, remaining self-conscious of his role as a literary author and addressing his narratees in the first-person plural:

> Mit einigen harmonischen Akkorden könnte man das Buch also ausklingen lassen […]. Man könnte allerdings auch, wenn man ganz furchtlos ist und sich in der richtigen Stimmung befindet, noch einen Blick zurück auf eine nicht ganz unwesentliche Figur dieser Geschichte werfen […]. Wollen wir das? Ein kurzer Blick zum Kamerassistenten, flüchtiges Schulterzucken beiderseits, und schon zoomt die Kamera die Öffnung eines Bergwerkstollens heran […]. Dann ein rascher Schnitt auf das von aller Hoffnung verlassene Gesicht […], wir [müssen] den Leser bitten, sich das Folgende allein in seiner Phantasie vorzustellen. (*S*, 451-3)

This chapter is indeed particularly confusing, not least because it is one of two points in the text when the narrator switches to the first person. The first of these instances is a longer passage in chapter eight, when the narrator remembers (over several pages) staying at the Targat Sheraton with his parents as a boy in the early 1970s: 'Meine Eltern hatten ein Zwei-Zimmer-Apartment im neunten Stock gemietet' (*S*, 47). By unexpectedly inserting himself into the narrative, the narrator casts doubt on his assumed omniscience: 'Die Frage, ob ich am letzten Augusttag des Jahres 1972 auch dort oben gestanden und die amerikanische Touristin [Helen] und den einarmigen Taxifahrer bemerkt habe oder ob hier eine Fotografie meine Erinnerung überlagert, kann ich heute nicht mehr mit Bestimmtheit beantworten' (*S*, 49).

His second appearance in chapter sixty-five, from which the longer quotation above is taken, is subtler and briefer, but all the more confusing. Though in chapter eight he gave no

[37] E.g. 'Die Wahrheit war […]' (*S*, 43).
[38] Bartels, 'Wums der Wüste'.

indication of knowing the 'amerikanische Touristin', he now suggests that he is in touch with Helen's daughter: 'In einem Brief schrieb Heather Gliese *mir*, ihre Mutter habe ein glückliches und erfülltes Leben geführt […]' (*S*, 451; my emphasis). As Michael Maar points out, Heather Gliese, though certainly a fictional character, is also mentioned in Herrndorf's acknowledgements at the end of the novel.[39] With a first-person narrator whose gender, age, and implied background correspond to the author's own, but who claims to be personally acquainted with fictional characters, *Sand* challenges the clear-cut separation between narrator and author, fiction and reality.[40]

The instability of the narrator's position is compounded by the instability of focalisation. The way individual characters' ignorance, confusion, and prejudices are seamlessly absorbed into the third-person narration suggests that these characters take turns functioning as (limited) focalisers. For example, the point in chapter ten when Lundgren, the arrogant Swedish secret agent, suffers a sun stroke, is unmistakeably limited and subjective. The narrative trails off, simulating his confusion, which ultimately leads him to mistake Polidorio for his contact man:

> Aber warum war er jetzt eigentlich hier? Wegen der … Extremzentrifuge? Der extrem schnellen Schnellzentrifuge? Nach ausgiebigem Schläfenmassieren kam Lundgren noch auf Quasi. Die Quasizentrifuge. Das war nicht das richtige Wort. Oder? War das das richtige Wort? Und wenn das nicht das richtige Wort war, wie sollte das noch enden? […] Es war die Sonne, die Scheißsonne. (*S*, 66)

In fact, all focalisers in the novel are shown to be cognitively limited, whether by nature or through impairment. The numerous grotesque and often racist accounts of how Western characters perceive the locals foreground the former's limited intelligence. Lundgren is arguably the most extreme character in this respect: he is unsurprised by the presence of cockroaches in his rented room, since, he reasons, 'wo es Araber gab, gab es auch Ungeziefer' (*S*, 44). He mentally refers to all Arabs as 'Kameltreiber' (*S*, 62), pseudo-philosophically reflects on the 'Teufelskreis des

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[39] Michael Maar, '"Er hat's mir gestanden": Überlegungen zu Wolfgang Herrndorfs *Sand*', *Merkur*, 755, (2012), 333-40, here 337.

[40] The narrator's implicit alignment with the real author has been frequently pointed out. See for example: Arnold, 'Der "Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen"', 36-7; Gunreben, 'Literatur als Theodizee?', 465, and Maximilian Burk and Christof Hamann, '"There is no conflict?" Zur Konstruktion und Irritation binärer Strukturen in Wolfgang Herrndorfs *Sand*', in *Postkoloniale Germanistik: Bestandsaufnahme, theoretische Perspektiven, Lektüren*, ed. by Gabriele Dürbeck and Axel Dunker, (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2014), pp. 329-54, here p. 354.

arabischen Nationalcharakters' (*S*, 66), and lusts after an underage 'Negerprinzessin' (*S*, 69). His sadistic enjoyment of torturing a camel at the market (*S*, 77-8) and of shouting abuse at the locals ('Heute schon dein Schaf gefickt?' [*S*, 68]) further confirm his racism.

Polidorio is also portrayed as an 'idiot', a limited and prejudiced character: he is obsessed with his own, low-to-average intelligence,[41] uninterested in politics, emotionally detached from his family, and homesick for his native France while in accidental self-exile in North Africa.[42] His regular migraines only increase his brusque treatment of the locals. Partly out of indifference and partly through his complete lack of ability as a criminal investigator, he believes in Amadou's thoroughly implausible professions of innocence. As Maar points out, it is this uncharacteristic sympathy on Polidorio's part ('der Glaube an die Unschuld eines Schuldigen' [*S*, 452]) which ultimately destroys him.[43] Yet even peripheral characters such as Canisades, the naïve fortune-teller Michelle, or Carls' sadistic torturers, who made a mistake while setting up an electrocution device to torture the wrong man, are shown to be of limited intelligence and understanding.

The way the focalisers' mental limitations are constantly foregrounded suggests that the narrative adopts their perspective with considerable irony. This in turn reinforces the impression that there is an overarching perspective, an overarching agency behind the focalisers, one which is not only omniscient, but also detached and cynical. This is evident not only in the torture scenes at the end but in many of the violent episodes throughout the novel, where the narrative shifts between a limited focaliser and zero focalisation, i.e. an omniscient perspective. For instance, when, in chapter twenty-six, the protagonist is kidnapped by Abdil Bassir's men, the narrative at first takes on his perspective ('Undeutlich erkannte er zwei Männer […]' [*S*, 148]), but soon switches to a neutral, impersonal one. This is signalled firstly, through the description of visual detail which the protagonist, whose head is covered in a linen sack, cannot see, and secondly, through the reference to film, which creates distance from the protagonists' perspective:

> Ein Anblick wie aus amerikanischen Filmen, große breite Treppe mit steinernem Gelände, Stuck und Gold, märchenhaft überladen. Ein riesiger Kristallspiegel zeigte: zwei stämmige

[41] See *S*, 9, 11, and 76.
[42] 'Wie so vieles in seinem Leben war es Zufall. […] Er hatte keine Ahnung von Afrika' (*S*, 16-17).
[43] Maar, '"Er hat's mir gestanden"', 337.

> Männer in schwarzen Anzügen. Die in einer offenen Tür standen. Zwischen ihnen eine schmächtige Figur […] der eine weiße Kapuze wie eine riesige Kochmütze bis auf die Augen gezogen war. (*S*, 149)

There are many other instances like this one, in which the presence of an omniscient narrator is ironically accentuated through the characters' *lack* of agency. For example, when, towards the end, Carl sees his persecutor Adil Bassir and his aides waiting in a car, the narrator comments, from Carl's point of view: 'Schwer zu sagen, warum sie dort parkten, worauf sie warteten und was sie überhaupt wollten. Vielleicht war es nur einer jener Zufälle, die man in Romanen nicht überstrapazieren sollte und die im richtigen Leben zur Erfindung des Begriffs Schicksal beigetragen haben' (*S,* 361-2). Elsewhere the narrator makes his presence felt by pre-empting insights which the characters are yet to have. The narrator's parenthetic comment in chapter thirty-eight, for example, when Carl tries to pinpoint what makes him uneasy about Helen, lays bare the limits of the protagonist's knowledge: 'Er dachte lange darüber nach, was es war, aber er kam nicht drauf. (Und als er drei Tage später draufkam, war es bereits zu spät)' (*S*, 259). Like the chapter 'Das weitere Geschehen' mentioned above, the thirty-eighth chapter, 'Kampf der Häuptlinge', contains a number of elements which point to a strong narrative agent in the novel, and which again suggest a slippery relationship between its narrator and author, fiction and reality.

In this chapter, whose title is the German translation of *Asterix and the Big Fight* (1964), Carl finds the titular comic book, which revolves around an amnesiac druid, amongst Michelle's books. The comic book as an intertext here has a triple function: firstly, it points to a reality beyond the fictional world of *Sand*, a world inhabited by Herrndorf and accessed by the narrator in which the *Asterix* books are well-known. Secondly, because its plot is summarised within the narrative of *Sand* as Carl reads on, it renders transparent the ways in which, as the next section will show, *Sand* itself resembles a comic book. And finally, as the comic book alerts Carl to the similarities between Helen and the suspicious druid's assistant, 'sehr schlank, sehr schön und sehr blond' (*S*, 261), Carl (rightly) begins to suspect that there is a connection between Helen and Cockroft.

In other chapters, too, paratexts such as epigraphs and chapter headings disrupt the coherence of the fictional world and form a bridge to the author's (and reader's) own reality.[44] They thus reinforce the effects created by the instability of the narrative voice and perspective, by the occasional alignment between narrator and author or the casual slips between limited and omniscient, bleak and flippant perspectives of narration. In narratological terms, then, the narrator of *Sand* is more than simply unreliable. He is 'disframed', a narrative voice which repeatedly escapes the narrative frame which is supposed to contain it.[45]

Genre Confusion: Visual Intertexts

As the previous section suggests, part of what makes the narrative of *Sand* deliberately elusive and confusing are the narrator's repeated references to the fictionality of the story he is telling. He likens the action to things that happen 'in Romanen', occasionally uses film language to denote changes of perspective, and introduces numerous disparate intertexts into the narrative. This section will look more closely at how these intertexts, which, unusually, are more often drawn from the visual arts than from literature, contribute to the generation of uncertainty in *Sand*. On the one hand, the recurring references to genre cinema, especially thrillers, adventure films, and film noir, as well as to comic books, theatre, and photography further destabilise the relationship between fiction (the narrator) and reality (the author). On the other, they create confusion surrounding the novel's genre, which in turn affects, among other things, how we read the graphic depictions of violence and suffering in it.

The fact that many reviewers not only try to categorise *Sand* in terms of genre but also compare it more often to films than to other literary texts testifies to the strong effect of such intertexts. Both Bartels and Iris Alanyali, for example, point out that reading *Sand*, with its mix of adventure, gore, and 'überscharfe Künstlichkeit'[46] feels like watching a Tarantino film.[47] It is

[44] For a detailed discussion of how epigraphs function in *Sand*, see Albiero, 'Knotty Plot', 191-200.
[45] For more on 'disframed' narrators see Richardson in Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, 53-4.
[46] Bartels, 'Wums der Wüste'.
[47] Alanyali, 'Wo, bitte […]'.

worth noting that visual intertexts feature in two distinct ways in the novel: on the level of the novel's overall structure and on the level of the plot. On the level of structure, we notice that, despite the brevity of the chapters and their episodic nature,[48] *Sand* does not make for particularly fragmentary or syncopated reading, but rather seems to consist of fast-paced sequences smoothly sutured together. Filmic techniques also structure the narration of events within individual chapters: Amadou Amadou's crime, for instance, is narrated in the fifth chapter as though in an accelerated flashback.[49] This flashback, which includes tropes from thrillers, adventure films, and slapstick comedy, also exemplifies how visual intertexts operate on the level of plot: Amadou indiscriminately shoots the witnesses of his robbery, steals a suitcase brimming with money, loses a sandal while making a run for it, jumps into his Toyota and drives away while shooting in the air only to soon run out of petrol and be arrested by the local sheriff.

Even though Stephan Speicher argues that the novel never crosses over 'aus dem Genre des Thrillers in den des Horrors',[50] I would argue that from early on, there are passages which are actually more reminiscent of splatter than of adventure thrillers. While the protagonist is trapped in the distillery, for example, he accidentally sets a pulley into motion in his effort to escape. The pulley crashes against the body of a man whom his pursuers had mistakenly killed instead of him. The man's corpse is described in gory detail: 'Ein Mann in einer weißen Dschellabah, die Gliedermaßen eigenartig verrenkt. Auf seinem zerschmetterten Kopf lag der Block des Flaschenzugs mit dem gewichtigen Metallhaken. Die ölige Kette ringelte sich durch Blut und Gehirn' (*S*, 103). Gratuitous acts of violence, whether directed against the protagonist or against others, amongst them innocent children,[51] aestheticise pain and suffering in much the same way that splatter does. The use of a quotation from the 1965 exploitation film *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!,* which ends with four characters brutally killing each other, as the epigraph of chapter

[48] The novel consists of sixty-eight chapters, divided in five Books. The first and fourth chapters are the shortest, at two pages each, whereas chapters thirty-one and forty-six are the longest ones, at sixteen pages each.
[49] 'Am Mittwoch, dem 23. August 1972 […]' (*S*, 26-7).
[50] Stephan Speicher, 'Mord und Schuld und CIA', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 December 2012, available at https://www.buecher.de/shop/leipzig/sand/herrndorf-wolfgang/products_products/detail/prod_id/36791045/ [Accessed 19 September 2019].
[51] E.g. *S*, 364.

twenty-two, underlines the novel's affinity with 'trashy' B-movies, even though, as shall be discussed later on, its depictions of cruelty and suffering are ultimately much more profound and nuanced than in such movies.

Similar to film intertexts, comic book references feature both on the level of structure and on the level of the plot itself. An example of the influence of comic books on the level of structure is the use of a quotation by Scrooge McDuck ('Dagobert Duck' in German) on the possibility of apparently implausible things as the epigraph of chapter thirty. The quotation, 'Warum soll es nicht möglich sein, Gold zu machen?' (*S*, 173), is only tangentially related to the content of the chapter, in which Helen and Carl discover the mine in which Carl will later be tortured. As the mine's only inhabitant (and Carl's later murderer) Hakim III. informs them, however, the mine had not yielded 'ein Stäubchen Gold in vierzig Jahren!' (*S*, 181). In the light of this, Scrooge McDuck's ambition to *make* gold seems more attainable than Hakim's endless search for non-existent gold. Indeed, the comic book intertexts in *Sand* are often there simply to satirise the characters and their weaknesses, once again pointing to the higher narrative authority which installed them. For example, the sun-struck Lundgren's discomfort when he is forced to compose himself for his supposed contact man is signalled in the text with the onomatopoeic exclamation 'Kawock!'. The word has no defined meaning, but echoes common comic-book exclamations and action words.

Moreover, oblique references to comic book tropes remind the reader of the cartoonish nature of the characters. The protagonist's pursuers in the desert, for example, 'ein Kleiner, ein Dicker und ein Unscheinbarer' (*S*, 87), distinctly resemble the constellation of types in a comic book or joke, as well as echoing the Spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). The visual intertexts in this scene are indeed particularly convoluted, evoking theatre, film, and graphic novels all at once: characters appear on the scene 'wie auf eine Theaterbühne' (ibid.), but make their exit 'aus dem Bild' (*S*, 90), like in a comic-book strip. A car door is slammed shut 'im Off' (*S*, 88), the sun rises '[links] wie ein Schauspieler auf dem Boulevardtheater hinter dem Holzbrett' (*S*, 91), while the protagonist tries in vain 'das Memorykärtchen mit der eigenen Identität umzudrehen' (*S*, 93).

However, the eventual (partial) return of his memory is rendered not as though in a comic-book panel, but rather as a photograph: 'Carl sah im Geiste die grüne Getränkedose unter dem Hinterrad des Autos […] in der Art einer Fotografie: viereckig, verkleinert und mit leuchtenden Farben eingeklebt in das Fotoalbum seines Gedächtnisses' (*S*, 282). Later on, when he is abducted anew by his persecutors, Carl's perception is limited to a sequence of 'Momentaufnahmen' (*S*, 365). The interlacing of intermedial references thickens as the plot progresses, emphasising the inhuman(e) extremity of the main character's experience: abandoned, chained, in an underground lake, Carl 'sah sich selbst wie eine Comicfigur am Hals mit einem riesigen Gewicht verbunden' (*S*, 440). The memory of his encounter with Lundgren, finally, which also reveals Carl's real identity as Polidorio, is played out as a kind of hallucinatory flashback of disembodied dialogue.[52]

Inconsistencies, Digressions, and Gaps

If the many (non-literary) intertexts in *Sand* disorientate the reader, the sheer complexity of the plot, with its constant digressions and red herrings, at times makes it almost impossible to follow. Without these features, *Sand* would arguably be a largely realist narrative, despite its frame-breaking narrator and abundance of intertextual references. This section will explore these complexity-producing plot devices and draw attention specifically to the way they obscure the protagonist's identity and the reason behind his suffering. As mentioned in Part I above, the narrative constantly thematises the character's (and focalisers') cognitive limitations, their mistakes, failures, and prejudices, or their extreme pain. It is indeed because of the characters' limitations that the narrative constantly digresses. Following their erroneous assumptions and conjectures, it leads either into dead ends or into mistaken courses of action.

This is most obvious in the protagonist's case, who repeatedly tries to piece his identity and past back together. From the moment he wakes up after his injury, he tries in vain to reconstruct his attackers' conversation: 'Er erinnerte sich an die grelle Sonne und den Satz: wenn er die Schiene funkenstört. Von Motorenlärm überlagerte Worte. Wenn er die Schiene... die

[52] See *S*, 454-5.

Maschine... Christine. Wenn die Maschine funktioniert. Wenn er Christina jetzt verhört' (*S*, 93). As the protagonist is for the most part the narrative's focaliser, his guesswork is also the reader's: 'Es gab eigentlich nur eine Erklärung: Er war offenbar in schwerste Verbrechen verwickelt [...]. Erst als er schon fast bei den Bungalows angekommen war, fiel ihm noch eine zweite Möglichkeit ein. Was, wenn der Weißhaarige [his pursuer Adil Bassir] selbst die Polizei war?' (*S*, 158). It is only revealed much later that both of these assumptions are wrong, but when they first appear in text, they open up parallel, competing possibilities within the plot. As we shall see in Chapter Four of this thesis, mutually exclusive versions of the same story are also allowed to coexist in Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend*. While in Erpenbeck's novel multiple alternative realities coexist, however, *Sand* subverts each of the protagonist's mistaken assumptions by showing reality to be even *worse* than he feared: he is not a criminal wanted by the police, but an innocent man wanted by the CIA.

Elsewhere it is unlikely coincidence, together with the characters' carelessness or ignorance, which thwarts the resolution of the mystery that is the protagonist's identity.[53] At one point, for example, Carl loses in the desert sand the ink cartridges that, he hopes, will answer all his questions. After retrieving them with great effort, the protagonist arrives in one of the Targat slums and mistakenly asks Helen to meet him at the wrong end of the city. In a moment of inattention, schoolchildren steal his blazer with the cartridges, which he will thereafter never recover. The first loss of the cartridges, then, was just a diversion, a false alarm, and a means of generating suspense.

The numerous red herrings in the plot have a similar function. These are, for example, the rattan suitcase full of East German money, which Amadou steals from the commune and which reappears in the hands of the protagonist's pursuers, the assumed identities of Bedeux and Cetrois under which the policemen Canisades and Polidorio were known in the brothels of Targat, or the woman with the 'kräuselige Dauerwelle' (*S*, 290), whom Carl sleeps with in Tindirma, and later

[53] Stefan Mühr and Marie Gunreben refer to these 'unlikely coincidences' as experiences of 'contingency'. See Mühr, '*Tschick* und *Sand*', 205-9 and Gunreben, 'Literatur als Theodizee?', 454-66.

sees by chance through his kindappers' car window. Such details lead both the characters and the reader of *Sand* to false conclusions. Like the woman with the perm, recurrent figures, objects, and actions usually mean nothing at all. This is also true of the fantastical, surreal or symbolic elements in the plot. The 'ouz', the enigmatic, seemingly omnipresent sand-coloured animal, and the emaciated goat chained up in the underground pool where Carl will later be tortured, are at best ambivalent symbols of the protagonist's fate. Mostly, however, they are uncannily opaque. Similarly, the polysemy of the 'Mine' which holds the key to Carl's identity invites both the characters and the novel's reader to constantly speculate about its meaning.[54]

Whether or not Herrndorf intended the plot of *Sand* to be so convoluted is a matter of contention. Especially considering that, as shall be discussed in more detail below, the moment the mystery of Carl's identity is resolved is so subtle as to almost go unnoticed, the useless clues, aborted plotlines, and mystifying symbols discussed above seem to have no other function than to confuse the novel's reader. Herrndorf himself was ambivalent about the function of such elements. In *Arbeit und Struktur* he defines the novel genre as an 'Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen',[55] a space were 'Fehler gemacht [werden], und die Fehler zu allem [führen]'.[56] In the same text he describes his proofreaders' response to *Sand*:

> keiner kapiert [die Handlung]. Drei von fünf Lesern konnten den Amnestiker bisher nicht identifizieren, was etwa so ist, als verriete ein Krimi den Mörder nicht. Das ist keine Absicht. Riesige Verschwörungstheorien auffahren, Fäden ins Leere laufen lassen und am Ende keine Lösung haben, ist nicht originell, nicht postmodern, sondern einzig und allein ein mächtiger Schmerz im Arsch.[57]

Despite this remark, critics disagree about whether the plot is deliberately incomplete. Sonja Arnold and Olivia Albiero, for example, agree with Maar that the plot is in fact conclusive.[58] Stephan Mühr, however, objects to Maar's attempt to explain away the gaps in the plot and argues

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[54] *Mine* in German does not only refer to a mine and landmine, as in English, but also to a pencil lead or ink cartridge for a fountain pen. The word *Mine* and *Miene* for mien or expression are also homophones. For critical discussions of how the novel plays with the many meanings of *Mine*, see Arnold, 'Der "Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen"', 28 and 41 and Mühr, '*Tschick* und *Sand*', 206-7.
[55] *AS*, 254.
[56] Ibid. 254.
[57] Ibid., 257.
[58] See Arnold, 'Der "Aufbewahrungsort des Falschen"', 33; Albiero, 'Knotty Plot', 190 and Maar, '"Er hat's mir gestanden"', 336.

that the novel challenges the reader to tolerate the uncertainty surrounding the protagonist's identity.[59] Marie Gunreben, in turn, claims that whether the novel is read as open-ended or closed has to do with the temporality of reading, that is, the reader's ability to remember information.[60]

This argument seems to be the most consistent with that of both Herrndorf's proofreaders and his subsequent (professional) readers, many of whom found the novel almost alienatingly complex.[61] In fact, the different strands of the plot *are* ultimately brought together. But whether we understand *how* they are brought together depends on our memory and comprehension of the messy, overcrowded first Book, which introduces not only the Pieds-noirs Polidorio and Canisades, but also Helen and Michelle, Lundgren and Amadou Amadou. Maximilian Burk and Christof Hamann advise the readers of *Sand* to read the novel twice to understand it.[62] Indeed, a second reading makes it easier to retain the subtle details which make the plot watertight, such as the repeated reminders that, like Polidorio, the amnesiac looks faintly Arab,[63] or that he is wearing a chequered suit,[64] which Lundgren's mistaken contact man was also wearing.[65]

While there are no gaps in the sequence of events described, therefore, the sheer denseness of the plot, coupled with ambiguous (or outright useless) clues as to the protagonist's identity, does produce gaps in the (first-time) reader's understanding. Crucially, these gaps initially lead the perplexed reader to identify with a protagonist who is himself bewildered by his surroundings and persecuted for reasons he does not understand.[66] The final part of this chapter will analyse how the novel manipulates (and exhausts) the reader's empathy by using the narrative techniques discussed above to explore extreme forms of (post-) colonial violence. My aim is to ultimately draw

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[59] Mühr, '*Tschick* und *Sand*', 208.
[60] Gunreben, 'Literatur als Theodizee?', 456.
[61] See for example Alanyali, 'Wo, bitte […]'; Kock, 'Tod in der Wüste' and Michalzik, 'Das Lächeln des Nihilismus'.
[62] Burk and Hamann, '"There is no conflict?", 330.
[63] See *S*, 17, 123, 278, and 335.
[64] See Ibid., 101 and 335.
[65] See Ibid., 79.
[66] See Andrea Hanna Hünninger, 'Die Wüste ist ein sinnloser Ort', *Die Zeit*, 17 November 2011, https://www.zeit.de/2011/47/L-B-Herrndorf. Both Hünninger and Speicher ('Mord und Schuld'), comment on the alignment of the protagonist and reader in their shared incomprehension.

attention to how the novel's cold, cynical ending reflects on and nuances Herrndorf's controlled *Selbstinszenierung* discussed in Part I.

Part III

Uncertainty Breeding Violence: From Cultural Pessimism to Nihilism

Kulturpessimismus: Postcolonial Order and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

In an interview with his friend (and later editor of *Arbeit und Struktur*) Kathrin Passig, Wolfgang Herrndorf describes *Sand* as a cynical twist on the picaresque novel, which traditionally centres on the adventures of a hapless, roguish, but likeable hero:

> Man kann das Ganze […] dem Genre des Trottelromans zuschlagen. Alle handelnden Personen sind Trottel. Die Araber sind dumm, faul und stinken, die Europäer sind ausnahmslos arrogante Rassisten und Päderasten, die Amerikaner foltern alles, was ihnen in den Weg kommt, und hinter allem stecken – selbstverständlich – die Juden.[67]

With the narrative elements discussed above – a complex plot, heterogeneous intertexts, shifting focalisers, and an unstable narrator – Herrndorf pits multiple worldviews and ideologies against each other in *Sand*, only to satirise them all. All cultures – Western and Oriental, Jewish and Arab, European and American – are shown to breed stupidity and cruelty, but so do countercultures, revolutions, and cults which reject established civilisation. Yet the most obvious sign of the author's cultural pessimism is, as Maar points out, a complete disregard for political correctness in the staging of the culture clashes that are so central to *Sand*.[68] While the novel's *Kulturkritik* should not be understood as reflecting the author's personal views, its pessimism echoes Herrndorf's often cynical outlook and emphatic rejection of political correctness in *Arbeit und Struktur*. It is worth exploring more closely the cynical or pessimistic narrative elements in *Sand*, as, in my reading, these elements precipitate the violent and ultimately nihilistic ending.

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[67] Wolfgang Herrndorf, 'Im Gespräch: Wolfgang Herrndorf. Wann hat es *Tschick* gemacht, Herr Herrndorf?', Interview by Kathrin Passig, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 31 January 2011, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/autoren/im-gespraech-wolfgang-herrndorf-wann-hat-es-tschick-gemacht-herr-herrndorf-1576165.html [Accessed 19 September 2019].
[68] Maar, '"Er hat's mir gestanden"', 335.

The novel's setting in a fictionalised version of the then-recently decolonised Maghreb in 1972, the year of the Munich Massacre and the Watergate Scandal, which eventually led to Richard Nixon's resignation, connotes political violence in and of itself. The French police officers stationed in Targat and the American and European outcasts who see themselves as Africa's civilisers serve as reminders of the tenacity of colonialist attitudes even after official decolonisation.[69] Lundgren's lusting after the exotic 'zwölfjährige Schönheitskönigin' (*S*, 68), meanwhile, reveals, apart from his paedophilic tendencies, his racist delusions of entitlement and power. However, in the omniscient narrator's brief history of the Tindirma commune there are also references to a kind of reverse exoticism, to the locals' fascination with, and profit from, the Western settlers:

> Den zunächst misstrauisch beäugten, langhaarigen, redseligen und orientierungslos herumtappenden Kommunarden gelang es […] relativ rasch, das Wohlwollen ihrer neuen Nachbarn zu gewinnen. Freundlich und großzügig streckten sie die Hände zur Gegenseite hin aus, und die Gegenseite griff zunächst zögerlich und dann überraschend fest und herzlich zu. Fremder Schmuck wurde bestaunt, Haare wurden betastet, Lebensmittel getauscht. [...] Im Laufe des Sommers wurde die Zahl der ungebetenen Gäste, die versuchten, finanziell Vorteil aus der Kommune zu ziehen, unüberschaubar. Auch medizinische, handwerkliche und sexuelle Dienstleistungen wurden verlangt und teilweise gewährt. (*S*, 22)

Elsewhere the characters' racist prejudices are more explicit. In chapter thirty-nine, for example, Canisades drives out to the distillery in the desert, from which the amnesiac protagonist had escaped in the beginning of the second Book, to investigate the disappearance of the distiller's two sons. The man, an 'alter Fellache', repeatedly collapses at the policeman's feet while wailing a repetitive lament for his sons. The chapter is narrated from Canisades' perspective, who is unmoved by what he perceives to be the fellah's stereotypically Arab sentimentality.[70] The narrative's implicit sympathy for the fellah, evident in the unfavourable portrayal of Canisades' unfeeling treatment of him, however, is soon counteracted through a negative representation of another Arab character. Amadou Amadou, the only local to act as a focaliser,[71] is a ruthless, cold-

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[69] 'Wohin man auch blicke, nur gesellschaftliche Formlosigkeit, schlechtverstandene Strukturen und schlappes Gemetzel' (*S*, 59).
[70] See *S*, 269.
[71] The fact that Amadou is the only Arab focaliser, and that he only speaks twice (*S*, 19 and 27-8), the second time only formulaically repeating his false testimony, suggests that Burk and Hamann are right in viewing the locals in the novel as being relegated to subaltern positions, whose 'Nicht-

blooded killer. Similarly devoid of conscience is the Syrian amongst Carl's kidnappers; though he conscientiously observes his religious duties, he has no qualms about torturing a man for the CIA.

The ambivalent evocation of contradictory prejudices about different ethnic and cultural groups is most salient in the references to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the novel. The negative depictions of Arabs are matched by an equally problematic portrayal of Israel and of Jewish characters. Indeed, all of the references to the Munich Massacre have an antisemitic slant to them. The events are first alluded to in a few elliptical sentences Canisades catches while absentmindedly listening to the news on the local, – Arab – Francophone radio: 'Der Freiheitskampf des palästinensischen Volkes würde. Der Münchner Polizeipräsident habe. Alle Geiseln seien' (*S*, 82). Canisades' attention quickly shifts onto Amadou's escape, and the conflict is only mentioned again when Michelle, provoking the allegedly Jewish Helen, compares the Israelis' treatment of Palestinians to the Holocaust. It is Jutta, a German tourist that Michelle, Helen, and Carl meet at the Sheraton beach in a later chapter, who comments more directly on the Munich events, taking care sure she is not misunderstood as expressing sympathy for the Jewish victims.[72]

While Kock argues that the representation of such positions in the novel satirises 'de[n] Anspruch gerade linker Deutscher, das Israel/Palästina-Problem mal eben so vom Schreibtisch aus zu lösen',[73] I would argue that the underlying purpose of the comparison of Israeli government policy with the Holocaust on the one hand, and the choice of a *German* character as a spokesperson for anti-Israel sentiment on the other, draw attention to the persistence of Western antisemitism to this day. Unlike Menasse, who argues that the references to the Holocaust in contemporary German politics thwart a rational discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Herrndorf comments on the way the Holocaust is paradoxically instrumentalised to legitimise antisemitic sentiment. Like Menasse, however, he at no point endorses either side of the conflict. In *Sand*, the conflict figures only as a driver of bilateral prejudice and harbinger of a violence

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Sprechen-Können oder nur Falsch-Sprechen-Können […] literarisch inszeniert w[ird]'. Burk and Hamann, '"There is no conflict?", 351.

[72] See S, 262.

[73] Kock, 'Tod in der Wüste'.

which threatens to become global if the handover of the European nuclear bomb plans to the Arabs succeeds. It is the protagonist's accidental involvement in the US attempt to intercept the handover, intended to ensure 'das Fortbestehen des Staates Israel' (*S*, 428), that gives rise to the narrative in the first place.[74]

Reading Extreme Suffering

In spite of these allusions, there is no actual violence between Palestinians and Israelis in *Sand*. Neither are there are any significant instances of colonial violence (except for Amadou's rough treatment by the French authorities) or of racist hate crimes. The violence described so graphically throughout the novel seems random and gratuitous, more like the violence in the movies and comic books it references than like real, politically grounded acts of violence. Though the frequency of violent episodes prior to the final torture scene ultimately renders violence banal and predictable, the detailed descriptions of painful experiences do, at least initially, tease out the reader's sympathy for the protagonist, who is the principal victim of this violence. This section will look more closely at how the narrative manipulates the reader into identifying with the protagonist. Doing so will help me show in the next (and final) section that the narrative excessively stretches the reader's capacity for empathy with the protagonist, only to ultimately frustrate it. By thwarting the reader's identification with the pointlessly tortured protagonist, the narrative creates a sense of helplessness and hopelessness which also characterises the author's self-portrait in *Arbeit und Struktur*.

As mentioned in Part II, confronted with the winding plot of the novel the reader sympathises with the figure of the protagonist, who is himself disorientated and at a loss. His namelessness and lack of a past make him an Everyman, and by extension a screen for both other characters' and the reader's projections. Strategically, too, Polidorio is cast as an Everyman; he is of average intelligence, neither particularly honest (he hides his 'spätnächtlichen Bordellbesuche' [*S*, 50] from his wife), nor particularly cruel. At the American authors' party he attends with

[74]See Burk and Hamann, '"There is no conflict?", 330.

Canisades, he struggles to understand and participate in others' conversations, much like he will after his memory loss. Both as Polidorio and as an amnesiac, the protagonist is almost always in pain. Polidorio suffers from incapacitating daily migraines; the amnesiac wakes up at the beginning of the second Book with a mangled head. His large wound does not heal, but is rather a constant, ever-renewed source of suffering.

In all these instances, the protagonist's pain is rendered through a problematic, seamless juxtaposition of passages clearly adopting his, the victim's, perspective, with passages taking a distanced, bird's-eye view on him. This subtle alternation of perspectives is evident, for example, when Abdil Bassir, frustrated when his threats to kill a family the protagonist has no memory of fail, rams a letter opener through his victim's hand. Rather than directly evoking the protagonist's sensations and thoughts at that moment, which were narrated until shortly before this point,[75] the narrative at first remains focused on the external scene: 'Dann ließ er [Bassir] sich auf den Stuhl zurücksinken und machte mit einer wedelnden Geste klar, dass er auf keinen Fall versuchen solle, sich den Brieföffner selbst aus dem Fleisch zu ziehen. Julius hielt die Waffe auf ihn gerichtet' (*S*, 155).

The description of the protagonist's posture which follows, however suggests a shift of perspective, powerfully conveying the extremity of his pain: 'Die Hand war so weit auf der anderen Seite des Schreibtisches festgenagelt, dass er weder sitzen noch stehen konnte. In einer merkwürdigen Hockstellung, die ihn aussehen ließ wie jemanden, der versucht, im Freien seine Notdurft zu verrichten, lag er halb über dem Schreibtisch' (ibid). His extreme pain is also evoked through his inability to speak. His reponses to questions are mere animal sounds: 'Er japste. […] Er winselte. […] Er stöhnte. […] Er wimmerte' (*S*, 155-6). By being repeatedly reduced to an inarticulate body, the protagonist takes on an animal-like quality, a defencelessness coupled with a blind instinct for self-preservation.[76] In the same chapter, he leaves Bassir's villa like a wounded

[75] '[Die Kapuze] drückte auf die Augäpfel [...], Blut tropfte von seiner Nase [...]. Die Wunde pochte' (*S*, 148-9).

[76] Indeed, the protagonist is twice implicitly compared to vulnerable animals, namely to the goat held captive in the mine and to Michelle's childhood pet, a canary which Helen brutally kills under the pretext of putting it down after an injury (see *S*, 38). When Helen lends Carl a yellow blazer, he ironically comments, 'Ich seh aus wie ein Kanarienvogel' (*S*, 167).

animal, with 'die schmerzende Hand an die Brust gepresst' (*S*, 157), a gesture of retreat and self-protection.

One particularity of the passages describing some of the protagonist's most painful moments is that they contain impersonal or impersonal-sounding constructions, even though the perspective is still clearly the protagonist's. By further divesting the (unidentified) protagonist of his individuality, this feature of the narrative accentuates his gradual regression to an animal-like state and his alienation from his own bodily experiences. Such constructions are in fact present from the very beginning of his adventure. As he regains consciousness in the distillery, he becomes aware of the pain in individual body parts: 'sein rechter Arm und ein bedenklicher Teil des Oberkörpers hingen über dem Abgrund. Die rechte Hand: ein einziger Schmerz. Das Schultergelenk: ein noch größerer Schmerz' (*S*, 99). Instead of 'sein Oberkörper', 'seine Hand', 'sein Schultergelenk', the articles used here are *der*, *die*, *das*. Even though the possessive use of the definite articles to refer to one's own body parts is neither unusual nor less idiomatic in German that the use of possessive pronouns, the formation of the possessive used here arguably conveys the protagonist's inchoate sense of self more powerfully.

In a later scene, Helen and the Syrian torturer force the protagonist to ingest a laxative so that they can examine his stool for the ink cartridges they are after; in this moment, the protagonist unwittingly finds himself mourning his dispossessed body:

> Dass sie sich über etwas hermachten, was eben warm und stinkend seinen Körper verlassen hatte, erfüllte ihn mit einer sonderbaren Wehmut. Es lag etwas Symbolisches in diesem Vorgang, etwas Grauenvolles, die dunkle Ahnung, dass sie auch andere Teile und Güter seines Körpers von ihm trennen und in Besitz nehmen könnten. (*S*, 418)

Yet in an earlier passage, it is precisely his inability to separate himself from his body which is unbearable:

> Die Sekunde vor der Ohnmacht war das Angenehmste, was er seit langem erlebt hatte, die Minuten danach ein morgendliches Zimmer im Halbdunkel, in dem Reste eines Albtraums hingen. […] Er versuchte, sich seiner physiologischen Reaktionen vor dem Ohnmachtsanfall zu erinnern, um dorthin zurückzukehren, und beobachtete sich wie ein von sich Getrenntes. Aber Cockroft und der Syrer beobachteten ihn auf die gleiche Weise, um genau das zu verhindern. Sie reduzierten die Stromstärke und ließen nicht zu, dass er ein zweites Mal entkam. […] Cockroft redete. Carl versuchte, von Körper auf Geist umzuschalten. (*S*, 397)

The description of the torturers' motivation here ('um genau das zu verhindern') in parallel with its effect on their victim betrays the continued presence of an omniscient and ambivalent narrator. This not only accentuates the victim's helplessness, but also exacerbates the reader's consternation at the implied narrative agency behind such graphic violence.

As the above examples show, the protagonist's suffering makes for particularly affecting reading because of the combination of external/omniscient and internal/limited perspectives in its description, which alternatingly pushes the reader back from the narrative and draws her back in. The evocation of the protagonist's pain as being both impersonal or animal-like *and* extremely specific and detailed paradoxically renders it both universally intelligible and impossible to fully understand. On the one hand, the protagonist's extreme vulnerability is the basis of our empathy with him. In the essay 'Violence, Mourning, Politics' Judith Butler suggests that the recognition of the humanity of others is contingent on the recognition of our shared vulnerability. Failure to recognise another's vulnerability dehumanises them, and such dehumanisation serves to legitimise physical violence.[77] Those who are excluded from normative Western conceptions of who counts as human, who are 'Othered', are victimised not *because* they are vulnerable, but precisely because their vulnerability is not acknowledged.[78] Butler stresses that it is the body which is 'the site of a common human vulnerability',[79] and therefore also the site of our mutual recognition of each other as human. In the light of this, the visceral detail in the descriptions of Carl's suffering awakens us to the reality of the pain of a body that is 'outside' both of normative Western conceptions of identity (he is of Arab descent) and indeed of conventional understandings of selfhood (he has no name, memories or kin). This level of detail allows us to empathise with him as 'just' a human being in pain.

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[77] Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics', in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), pp. 19-50, here p. 34.
[78] Ibid. 32-3. Butler mentions in this context 'the thousands of Palestinians who have died by the Israeli military with United States support, or any number of Afghan people, children and adults. […] To what extent have Arab peoples, predominantly practitioners of Islam, fallen outside the "human" as it has been naturalised in its "Western" mould by the contemporary workings of humanism?'
[79] Ibid., 44.

On the other hand, however, the indeterminacy of the protagonist's identity, his status as perennial victim, and his extreme defencelessness place him so completely beyond the realm of the reader's experience that identifying with him becomes difficult. Divested of all agency, he is pushed to the margins of ordinary human experience, becoming a form of 'bare life'. Giorgio Agamben defines 'bare life' as the 'life of the *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*',[80] a man who, in archaic Roman law, was 'set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law'.[81] Excluded from both human and divine law, the *homo sacer* exists in a 'state of exception',[82] a state whose contours depend on the limits of the law as defined by sovereign power.[83] Without the obligations and protections that come with being part of a political collective, the *homo sacer* is exposed to extreme violence and death. Agamben's theorisation of the state of exception, the state of the *homo sacer*, has gained traction in the context of human rights violations against persons (mostly of Arab descent) detained without trial in off-shore detainment centres run by the US during the ongoing Western 'war on terror' after 9/11.[84] *Sand* is set three decades before 9/11. Yet as the protagonist's torturers not only belong to the CIA but are also aware of acting outside the US jurisdiction – Cockroft admits to Carl that 'das, was wir hier tun, ist mit den Gesetzen dieses Landes nicht vereinbar. Mit unseren übrigens auch nicht' (*S*, 396) – it is possible to read the torture scenes as covert references to the abuses of Guantánamo and Carl as a *homo sacer*, a figure so radically excluded from legal protection and exposed to violence that he is dehumanised.[85] The reader's empathy with the protagonist on the basis of his

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[80] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 12; emphasis in the original.
[81] Ibid., 48.
[82] Ibid., 13-4.
[83] Agamben views the Nazi concentration camps, which rendered visible the exclusion of individuals whose lives were ejected from the protection of the law, as the paradigmatic form of the state of exception in modernity. In his view, they exemplify what Michel Foucault termed 'biopolitics', i.e. the ways in which 'bare life' is appropriated by 'the mechanisms and calculations of power'. See 'The Camp as Biopolitical Paradigm of the Modern', in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 69-105, here 72. This view is controversial, not least because how it uses Foucault's notion of biopolitics, but it has led to productive further discussions on contemporary forms of biopolitics. For more details, see Leland De La Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), pp. 219-20.
[84] See for example Judith Butler, 'Infinite Detention', in *Precarious Life*, pp. 50-100.
[85] See Kock, 'Tod in der Wüste'.

physical pain is therefore radically problematised through her confrontation with violence and suffering which exceed all law and reason.

Nihilism as the Limit of Authorial Control

As discussed above, the combination of omniscient and limited perspectives in the graphic descriptions of violence manipulates (and ultimately frustrates) the reader's capacity for empathy. These elements alone, however, are not what makes *Sand* the nihilistic novel that it is. Rather, it is the hasty, abrupt termination of its digressive plot, which accentuates the complete pointlessness of the violence against the protagonist.[86] That Carl, Helen's victim, is eventually shot dead by Hakim, his keenly anticipated saviour, in retaliation not for his own but for Helen's misdeeds, is a thoroughly nihilistic plot twist, imbued with a sense of exhaustion and desperation. After fanning the reader's hopes for the protagonist's salvation for chapters on end, the narrative kills off the long-suffering protagonist within the space of a sentence, and indifferently picks up another strand of the story.

Even more than the protagonist's anticlimactic death after his long and excruciatingly detailed suffering, it is the last chapter, 'Die Madrasa des Salzviertels', which follows the ink cartridges containing the nuclear plans, which makes the novel nihilistic. To the reader, who is more invested in the now-dead protagonist's quest for his identity than in the conclusion of the adventure plot, the chapter seems not only distracting and unnecessary, but coldly indifferent to the rest of the narrative, as though carrying on and on of its own accord. This impression is only confirmed when the chapter (and novel) ends with the brutal death of the pen's last owner, an innocent girl in one of Targat slums named Samaya. Rushing to save the doll she had made by

[86] Several reviewers and scholars have commented on the novel's nihilism, though they locate it in different elements of the plot or narration. Like Mühr, who writes of the 'nihilistische Verrirungen' in the novel ('*Tschick* und *Sand*', 210), Bartels views the often deliberately deceptive plot elements as giving the narrative as a whole a nihilistic quality ('Nihilismus ist Trumpf', in 'Wums der Wüste'), while for Michalzik the novel's nihilism is in the tone of the narration: 'Es ist ein lächelnder, freundlicher, sehr sympathischer Nihilismus, der aus seinen Sätzen spricht' ('Das Lächeln des Nihilismus').

using the pen as a spine during a 'purge' of the slum, she gets crushed by a collapsing wall and then run over by a bulldozer.

Yet Samaya is not the only secondary character to be killed at the end: in fact, *every* innocent character in the novel is killed, as are many less innocent figures. In chapter sixty-five, 'Das weitere Geschehen', the amnesiac's wife and child are found with their throats slit, the old fellah who lost his sons is unjustly hanged for Canisade's murder, which was actually committed by Amadou, while the police officer Karimi, implicitly the one responsible for Samaya's death, resigns from his post and dies years later, as a minor painter, of pneumonia. Together with the protagonist's, himself a fundamentally innocent, if limited, character, these deaths testify to the sweep of nihilism that drives the plot to its end.

In *Arbeit und Struktur*, Herrndorf comments twice on the novel's nihilism, both times with noticeable ambivalence. In one instance, he reflects that the worldviews underlying *Sand* and *Tschick* are complementary. *Sand*, he writes, with its 'Kapitel für Kapitel wiederholte[n] und gegen Ende völlig aus dem Ruder laufende[n] deprimierende[n] Nihilismus', is 'eine direkte Reaktion auf die Freundlichkeit der Welt in *Tschick*. bzw. umgekehrt. Denn eigentlich war *Sand* zuerst'.[87] His choice of words here ('völlig aus dem Ruder laufende[n] [...] Nihilismus') betrays the author's sense that the novel moved in directions he did not entirely intend or control, and which he sought to correct with *Tschick*. Elsewhere on the blog he insists that he conceived of *Tschick* first, and that *Sand* was its corrective, but even there he expresses a sense of disappointment, depletion, and regret about the way the plot of *Sand* turned out. Significantly, in this second instance it is not just the ending but the pervasive violence throughout the novel which causes him concern:

> Zweihundert Seiten, auf denen sie den Helden zu Tode foltern. Vor knapp fünf Jahren angefangen, als ich gerade in der Fahnenkorrektur zum *Van-Allen-Gürtel* war und im Fernsehen dieser Film mit Ray Liotta lief. Und schon damals als bewusster Gegenpol zu *Tschick* und seiner Freundlichkeit konzipiert, die nihilistische Wüste. Fand ich ja früher lustig, Gewalt. Aber jetzt zieht es mich runter. Lieber würde ich was anderes schreiben.[88]

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[87] *AS*, 237-8. Many reviewers also cite this comment from *Arbeit und Struktur*. See e.g. Alyanali, 'Wo, bitte […]'; Kock, 'Tod in der Wüste' and Speicher, 'Mord und Schuld'.
[88] *AS*, 206.

Here Herrndorf comes closest to admitting the limits of his control over what is in the text. From the moment he starts writing it, he implies, it takes on a life of its own and develops according to its own (self-defeating) logic. The extreme violence in it affects even him as his own reader, indeed affects him *first*. His claim to have previously found violence funny is telling: Cockroft's use of humour as an instrument of psychological torture is one of the novel's most sinister, indeed most nihilistic moments. After giving the protagonist repeated electric shocks during his pointless interrogation, Cockroft tells him a tasteless joke about Stasi torturers who won a competition against the CIA and KGB by extracting information from a millennia-old skeleton. After the punchline, he maliciously turns to his victim, who, unable to block his ears, closes his eyes: 'Finden Sie nicht lustig? Ich find's lustig. Oder ein anderer Witz, der gefällt Ihnen bestimmt' (*S*, 400-1). In light of Herrndorf's comment about no longer finding violence 'lustig', Cockroft's teasing question seems addressed as much to the author himself as to the novel's protagonist and reader. Herrndorf's professed reluctance to follow through with the violent end of the novel and the fact that he ultimately does so anyway are almost akin to admitting 'defeat' by his own work.

Conclusion

As Part I of this chapter showed, Wolfgang Herrndorf carefully steered his public representation as a terminally ill author through his blog. It is for this reason that his suicide was linked (as I argued, unfairly) to a desire to exert control over his life and authorial persona. His comments on the alienating nihilism of *Sand* are revealing against this backdrop. They suggest that, though an author can control how he lives, works, and dies, and to a lesser extent how he is received and remembered, his authority over his own work has limits. With its nihilistic momentum *Sand* not only exceeds Herrndorf's control, but challenges the identity he constructed in *Arbeit und Struktur*, his public image as a disciplined, structured, 'sovereign' author. In this sense, *Sand* subtly but forcefully subverts the politics, that is, the strategy, of the author's (self-)representation. With the realistic anchoring of its plot, Menasse's *Quasikristalle* engages directly and strategically with contemporary discourses about gender and feminism, religion, and nationality, discourses in which

the author also partakes herself. *Sand*, by contrast, does not explicitly intervene in contemporary political (and identity political) conversations, but it does bring a valuable new perspective to the conversation about its author's identity and the politics of his (self-) representation.

As we saw in Part I of this chapter, *Arbeit und Struktur* is frequently read as a companion text to *Sand* (more so than to *Tschick*, which was completed in Herrndorf's early blogging days). Yet it is also possible to read them the other way around: to read *Sand* in order to better understand the author's project of *Selbstinszenierung* in *Arbeit und Struktur*, as well as its limits. Both texts centre around the disintegration of identity in the face of extreme circumstances; in *Arbeit und Struktur*, however, the author presents his own physical and cognitive deterioration as drivers of his self-mastery and prolificacy. Paradoxically, his disintegration is the very material with which he consolidates his public persona in the blog. By contrast, the protagonist's suffering in *Sand* has no creative or generative element. It is gratuitous, excessive, and engages the reader's capacity for empathy, which Herrndorf does not allow himself to appeal to in *Arbeit und Struktur*. By stretching the reader's empathy with the protagonist to its limits, however, the nihilism of *Sand* brings the reader in alignment with Herrndorf, the author who repudiates the worldview of his own work: at the very limits of his control and his identity as an author.

Chapter Three

Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* (2014):

Collective Identity and its Discontents

Introduction

Like the novels by Eva Menasse and Wolfgang Herrndorf discussed in the previous chapters, Saša Stanišić's second novel *Vor dem Fest* (2014)[1] nuances and complicates the terms by which its author is publicly received primarily because of how it uses narrative voice and perspective. With a first-person plural narrator and multiple focalisers, *Vor dem Fest* problematises the notions of community and belonging which underlie contemporary identities, whether 'local' or 'transnational'.[2] This chapter will argue that by doing so, the novel also questions the category of *Migrationsliteratur*, or literature by authors with a background of migration, which is frequently used in reviews, interviews, and other public discussions of Stanišić's work. *Vor dem Fest*, which, like *Sand* in 2011, was awarded the *Preis der Leipziger Buchmesse* in 2014, can be fruitfully read in conjunction with the novels discussed in the two previous chapters, though it is arguably an (aesthetically) more daring text than either of them, though perhaps not quite as experimental as Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012) discussed in Chapter Four. *Vor dem Fest* is neither chronologically ordered, like *Quasikristalle*, nor plot-driven, like *Sand*. It contains even fewer

[1] Saša Stanišić, *Vor dem Fest* [2014] (Munich: btb, 2015).

[2] In a forthcoming article which she kindly shared with me on the 9 May 2019, while it was still a work in progress, Frauke Matthes explores the elements of 'transnationalism' in *Vor dem Fest*. In her understanding the term refers to '[the] interdependence, the reciprocity between, as well as among, nations and, on a smaller scale, regions, based on the movements of people and goods, but also of ideas and cultures' (p. 1 of the manuscript). Matthes looks at the ways in which *Vor dem Fest* renegotiates 'the supposedly narrow-minded regional as a concept which does not stand in opposition to the "cosmopolitan" transnational, but is a lived experience shaped by turbulent histories and migratory movements' (p. 5). See Frauke Matthes, '"Weltliteratur aus der Uckermark": Regionalism and Transnationalism in Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*', in *German in the World: A Culture in National, Transnational and Global Contexts*, ed. by James Hodkinson and Benedict Schofield (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming 2019).

realist elements than these two novels and is therefore more confusing, in terms of its form, structure, genre, and subject matter, than either of them.

Moreover, it constantly foregrounds the uncertainty surrounding the collective and individual identities at its centre, those subsumed by the narrative 'wir'. In this respect, *Vor dem Fest* also differs significantly from Stanišić's first novel, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* (2006),[3] an account of a young Serbobosnian boy's life in his hometown Višegrad before the Yugoslav wars, his flight to Germany, and subsequent visit to Višegrad as an adult. The debut novel is more conventionally structured, has a first-person singular narrator, and makes no secret of its autobiographical inspiration. References to the author's background in discussions of the first novel are therefore not only to be expected, but also helpful, to some extent, in addressing how and to what effect history, memory, and trauma are fictionalised in the novel.[4] References to the author's background in the marketing and public discussion of the second novel, however, are more puzzling. This chapter will argue that, with its enigmatic collective narrative voice, *Vor dem Fest* both pre-empts and undermines, in complex and subtle ways, its own reception as the work of an author 'mit Migrationshintergrund'.

The novel relates the goings-on in the fictional village of Fürstenfelde in the Uckermark, a region between Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in former East Germany, the night

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[3] Saša Stanišić, *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* [2006] (Munich: btb, 2010).

[4] For useful scholarly articles on how these themes feature in *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert* see, e.g. Annette Bühler-Dietrich, 'Verlusterfahrungen in den Romanen von Melinda Nadj Abonji und Saša Stanišić', *Germanica*, 51 (2012), 1-10; Brigid Haines, 'Saša Stanišić, *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert*: Reinscribing Bosnia, or: Sad Things, Positively', in *Emerging German-language Novelists of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Lyn Marven and Stuart Taberner (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013), pp. 105-18; Diana Hitzke and Chartlon Payne, 'Verbalising Silence and Sorting Garbage: Archiving Experiences of Displacement in Recent Post-Yugoslav Fictions of Migration by Saša Stanišić and Adriana Altaras', in *Archive and Memory in German Literature and Visual Culture*, ed. by Dora Osborne, *Edinburgh German Yearbook*, 9 (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), pp. 195-212; Frauke Matthes and David Williams, 'Displacement, Self-Reconstruction and Writing the Bosnian War: Aleksandar Hemon and Saša Stanišić', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10.1 (2013), 27-45; Charlton Payne, 'How the Exiled Writer Makes Refugee Stories Legible: Saša Stanišić's *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*', *Gegenwartsliteratur,* 13 (2014), 321-39 and Norbert Wichard, 'Mitteleuropäische Blickrichtungen: Geschichtsdarstellung bei Jan Faktor und Saša Stanišić', in *National, post-national-transnational? Neuere Perspektiven auf die deutschsprachige Gegenwartsliteratur aus Mittel- und Osteuropa,* ed. by Renata Cornejo, Sławomir Piontek and Sandra Vlasta, Series: Aussiger Beiträge, 6 (Ústí nad Labem: Univerzita J. E. Purkyně v Ústí nad Labem, 2012), pp. 159-76.

before the annual 'Annenfest'. The villagers' collective and personal histories unravel as they prepare for the celebrations and are mostly narrated in the first-person plural, by an indeterminate 'wir'. The chapters narrating the villagers' habits, roles, and preparations for the feast alternate with excerpts from the village's secret archive, which is administered by the obese and depressive Frau Schwermuth. Other chapters describe a vixen's expeditions into the village's hen coops from the neighbouring forest in order to find food for her cubs. The novel ends with the celebration of the anticipated 'Annenfest', which brings together, or rather brings to a halt (most of) the novel's numerous subplots. Through these subplots, the reader becomes well acquainted with the traditions, legends, and opinions of Fürstenfelde, but is no more capable of differentiating between truth and fiction, history and myth, than the Fürstenfelders themselves.

This chapter will show that the collective identity of Fürstenfelde's inhabitants is ultimately shown to be shaky precisely because it it based on the shared contingencies of birth, geography, and history. As Part I will explain, a similarly problematic understanding of collective identities underlies the category of *Migrationsliteratur,* in which Stanišić's writings (including *Vor dem Fest*) are frequently placed. Part II will explore the unstable relationship between the 'wir' narrator and the individual characters in the novel, which will then lead to a discussion in Part III of how the references to the village's present, as well as its real and imagined histories, force an impossible homogeneity on the village community. Ultimately, I will show, the diversity of the village cannot be subsumed under the collective 'wir', just as the author's identity as a non-native German speaker cannot be understood with reference to arbitrary and unnuanced categories such as *Migrationsliteratur*.

Part I

Vor dem Fest as the Work of a 'Migrant Author'?

Saša Stanišić as an Author 'mit Migrationshintergrund'

Despite only being a debut novelist at the time, Saša Stanišić (1978-) was awarded the Adalbert-von-Chamisso Prize in 2008. Funded by the Robert Bosch Foundation, the prize offered support

and recognition for 'herausragende auf Deutsch schreibende Autoren, deren Werk von einem Kulturwechsel geprägt ist'.[5] When the prize was first awarded in 1985, it was meant to recognise outstanding work in what was then called *Gastarbeiterliteratur*; after the *Wende*, its addressees were seen more broadly as writing *Migrationsliteratur*. Despite its popularity, the award was discontinued after 2017 on the grounds that *Migrationsliteratur* had become fully established as a legitimate part of contemporary German literature. Unlike *Gastarbeiter* authors in the 1980s, the sponsors claim, authors 'mit Migrationsgeschichte' today are now free to enter the same competitions as German-born German native speakers.[6] Whether this is true or not is a moot point;[7] even if literature by authors with a transcultural and/or multilingual background has become mainstream, the authors' personal histories of migration often remain a focal point of their reception and of their public persona in a way that frequently overshadows their work itself. This is very much true in Saša Stanišić's case. In both his fiction and his public statements, interviews, and autobiographical writings, Stanišić is indeed concerned among other things with the themes of migration, belonging, multilingualism, and mobility. In other words, Stanišić actively assumes his public persona as an author 'mit Migrationshintergrund' and thus participates, to some extent, in the reception of his work as *Migrationsliteratur*.

As his latest book *Herkunft* (2019) suggests,[8] Stanišić has become both bolder and more nuanced over time in publicly discussing his origins, experiences, and understanding of home. *Herkunft* challenges readers' expectations of genres such as autobiography and family narrative and addresses the experience of migration in formally original ways. However, a survey of the responses to *Vor dem Fest* casts Stanišić's return to autobiographical themes in *Herkunft* in an ambiguous light. These responses centre around a text published by Maxim Biller in *Die Zeit* in

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[5] 'Über das Projekt', Adalbert-von-Chamisso-Preis der Robert Bosch Stiftung, Bosch Stiftung Homepage, https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/de/projekt/adelbert-von-chamisso-preis-der-robert-bosch-stiftung [Accessed 11 July 2019].
[6] Ibid.
[7] See e.g. Ilja Trojanow and José F.A. Oliver, 'Kritik an Bosch-Stiftung: Ade, Chamisso-Preis?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 September 2016, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/kritik-an-bosch-stiftung-ade-chamisso-preis-14443175.html [Accessed 11 July 2019].
[8] Saša Stanišić, *Herkunft* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2019). Hereafter *H*.

2014, which triggered a debate about Stanišić's interest in a geographical region that is purportedly profoundly (in the sense of: monoculturally) German. While the debate was short-lived, it exposed the double bind in which *Migrationsliteratur* has found itself in recent years and is therefore worth outlining here.

Maxim Biller's Argument

In his article 'Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermark' Biller agues that contemporary German literature is too homogeneous and comformist. Since the death of canonical German-Jewish authors like Peter Weiss and Elias Canetti and literary critics like Marcel Reich-Ranicki, he claims, the tone has been set by 'autochthonous' Germans and is followed by a compliant, well-adapted 'migrant' literature that seeks to minimise its own cultural difference by turning it into 'immer nur Folklore oder szenische Beilage'.[9] In Biller's view, *Vor dem Fest*, with its focus on a quintessentially German village, is Stanišić's response to the criticism which he, in Biller's opinion unfairly, received for the 'folklore' tone of his first, autobiographically inspired novel:

> Als Saša Stanišić' erster, grandioser, weil universell verständlicher Roman über das Lieben, Leben und Töten im Bosnien der neunziger Jahre erschien, musste sich Stanišić von vielen unserer Kritiker anhören, das alles sei zu verspielt, zu kitschig, na ja, eben irgendwie zu orientalisch. [...]. Inzwischen wurde *Wie der Soldat das Grammofon repariert* aus dem Deutschen in 27 Sprachen übersetzt, Stanišić ist in den USA und England einer der Stars der neuen Weltliteratur wie Junot Díaz oder Jhumpa Lahiri – doch sein neuer Roman spielt in einem Dorf in der Uckermark, unter ehemaligen Ossis, von denen Stanišić so viel versteht wie seine Kritiker vom jugoslawischen Bürgerkrieg, vor dem er mit 14 Jahren nach Deutschland fliehen musste. Ist dieser radikale, antibiografische Themenwechsel nur Zufall? Hat den ehemaligen Leipziger Literaturstudenten Saša Stanišić der Mut verlassen? Ist es ihm wichtiger, als Neudeutscher über Urdeutsche zu schreiben als über Leute wie sich selbst?[10]

[9] Maxim Biller, 'Letzte Ausfahrt Uckermark', *Die Zeit*, 20 February 2014, https://www.zeit.de/2014/09/deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur-maxim-biller [Accessed 11 July 2019].
[10] Ibid.

In reality, only a few critics accused Stanišić of succumbing to *Heimatkitsch* in his first novel.[11] But Biller's inaccurate literature review is the least of his argument's many faults.[12] Much more problematically, he relies on an artificial opposition between 'Weltliteratur' and a literature 'of the local' or the 'provinces'. By reading *Vor dem Fest* as the latter, he ignores not only the ways in which the village in *Vor dem Fest* is inevitably permeated by elements of contemporary global culture,[13] but also the long (and transcultural) history of village narratives or *Dorfgeschichten* with which, as I shall show below, Stanišić's novel is in conversation.

If we give Biller the benefit of the doubt, his article arguably voices a reasonable concern about the ways communities work, and more specifically about how literary communities work. As I will argue in Part III of this chapter, such a concern is also at the heart of *Vor dem Fest*. In other words, Biller is right to challenge the idea of a compliant literary community which excludes or exoticises difference. However, the alternative he suggests to such a community of sameness is equally prescriptive. The only thing that would shake up contemporary German literature, he argues, as it does US American literature, is an 'ethnische Dickköpfigkeit' on the part of immigrant writers.[14] In his view, authors with a background of migration should foreground, rather than suppress, their cultural difference from the mainstream. Roman Bucheli rightly suggests that

> [Biller] befördet mit seinem Ruf nach 'bis ins Mark ethnischen' Texten eine Folklorisierung der Literatur, die gerade das Gegenteil bedeutet der von ihm treuherzig beschwörenen

[11] See Haines, 'Sad Things, Positively', 117 (endnote 12). Biller's comment here is specifically aimed at Iris Radisch, who in her review likened the child narrator of Stanišić's debut to Oskar Matzerath, the narrator of Günter Grass' *Die Blechtrommel*. See Iris Radisch, 'Der Krieg trägt Kittelschürze', *Die Zeit*, 5 October 2006, https://www.zeit.de/2006/41/L-Stanisic [Accessed 11 July 2019].

[12] As other reviewers also point out. See e.g. Jörg Magenau, 'Saša Stanišić: Ein Vertreter der Migrationskultur erfindet sich neu', *Cicero*, 13 March 2014, https://www.cicero.de/kultur/heimatroman-vertreter-der-migrationskultur-erfindet-sich-neu/57201; Lothar Müller, '*Vor dem Fest* von Saša Stanišić: Wir fahren übern See, übern See', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 March 2014, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/vor-dem-fest-von-sasa-stanisic-wir-fahren-uebern-see-uebern-see-1.1911969; Thomas Pletzinger, 'Jetzt kommt der Sturm', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 March 2014, available at https://www.buecher.de/shop/doeblin-alfred/vor-dem-fest/stanisic-sasa/products_products/detail/prod_id/42686151/; Christopher Schmidt, 'Leipziger Buchpreis 2014 für Saša Stanišić: Probebohrung in der deutschen Geschichte', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 March 2014, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/leipziger-buchpreis-2014-fuer-sasa-stanisic-probebohrung-in-der-deutschen-geschichte-1.1912068 and Christoph Schröder, 'Die Füchsin von Fürstenfelde', *Die Tageszeitung*, 10 March 2014, https://taz.de/!381383/ [All accessed 11 July 2019]). .

[13] As Matthes argues convincingly and in detail ('"Weltliteratur"').

[14] Ibid.

> Authentizität. Vor allem aber reinstalliert und konstruiert er Polaritäten, wo längst alle Schranken niedergerissen sind, wo die schönste unübersichtliche Pluralität herrscht.[15]

Likewise, Ijoma Mangold objects most strongly not to Biller's pessimistic view of the German literary landscape, but to the artificial opposition Biller sets up between an idealised figure of the author 'mit Migrationshintergrund' with his or her 'ethnic' experiences on the one hand, and a blurry notion of what Mangold sarcastically refers to as 'der deutsche Normalo-Autor' on the other.[16] These constructed categories are, in Mangold's view, reductive and prescriptive. 'In Billers Argument', he writes, 'steckt auch eine verteufelte positive Diskriminierung: Der Autor mit Migrationshintergrund ist nämlich nicht mehr frei, den Stoff aufzugreifen, der seinen Formvorstellungen den größten Spielraum eröffnet, statt dessen ist seine Herkunft sein literarisches Schicksal!'[17]

The Problem(s) with *Migrationsliteratur*

Mangold correctly identifies the main problem here. Even though, for instance, the sponsors of the Chamisso Prize are confident that German contemporary literature has attained the desirable levels of diversity, authors 'mit Migrationshintergrund' are still not free to be, and write about, whatever they want. Biller's response to *Vor dem Fest*, and other reviewers' reiteration of his argument (even if only to dismiss it), suggest that, though authors with a transcultural background are often key players in the contemporary German *Literaturbetrieb*, readers are constantly reminded, by publishers, *Feuilleton* critics, and often by other authors themselves, of how they are different from the monocultural or 'native' German author—a label which, as Chapter Five of this thesis shows with reference to Felicitas Hoppe, comes with its own set of problems.[18]

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[15] Roman Bucheli, 'Mit der Nazi-Keule', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 February 2014, https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/mit-der-nazi-keule-1.18253430. [Accessed 11 July 2019].
[16] Ijoma Mangold, 'Literaturdebatte: Fremdling, erlöse uns!', Die Zeit, 17 Februar 2014, https://www.zeit.de/2014/10/erwiderung-maxim-biller-deutsche-gegenwartsliteratur/komplettansicht [Accessed 11 July 2019]
[17] Mangold, 'Fremdling'.
[18] See Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 1-2.

By identifying some authors as 'migrant' authors, I would argue, we not only unduly foreground their biographies at the expense of their work but also burden them with the contradictory expectations and prescriptions attached to that label. Over half a decade before *Vor dem Fest* was published, Feridun Zaimoglu made an argument about *Migrationsliteratur* which, though diametrically opposed to Biller's, is equally prescriptive. In a 2006 interview, Zaimoglu claimed that migrant literature is dead, i.e. unoriginal and uninteresting, precisely because it is *too* focused on the author's experience of migration.[19] Admittedly, Biller also begins his article by lamenting the well-worn tropes of migrant narratives. Unlike Zaimoglu, however, he does not see them as lacking originality, but as lacking authenticity. While Zaimoglu calls for German authors with a migrant background to also write on non-autobiographical topics, Biller calls for them to write *more* autobiographically in order to achieve greater authenticity, to better convey lived experience. The two authors' opposing views suggests that, whichever way they choose to go, German authors with a 'migrant' background will always do wrong by one or the other side of the argument. Because of their background (or at least the way they publicly assume their background), they are inevitably constrained by prescriptive ideas about how they should work and position themselves as public figures.

Scholarship admittedly uses the category of *Migrationsliteratur* more heuristically than prescriptively. Critics often distinguish amongst authors with a 'migrant' background, placing them in the context of their *specific* experience, their geographical origins, and generation. Since the early 2000s, for instance, there has been much interest in a subgroup of German-language authors who were born in Eastern Europe. Having spent his childhood in former Yugoslavia, Stanišić is placed within this subgroup, which is often associated with a 'Balkan Turn'[20] or more

[19] Feridun Zaimoglu, '"Migrationsliteratur ist ein toter Kadaver": Ein Gespräch', Interview by Julia Abel, in *Literatur und Migration*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (Munich: text + kritik, 2006), 159–66.
[20] Boris Previsic, 'Poetik der Marginalität: *Balkan Turn* gefällig?', in *Von der nationalen zur internationalen Literatur,* ed. by Helmut Schmitz, Series: Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik, 69 (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 189-203.

broadly an 'Eastern Turn'[21] in post-1989 German literature.[22] According to Birgid Haines, the works of Eastern European German-language authors whom critics associate with the 'Eastern Turn' do present some similarities. For example, many of them deal with the Communist past and its aftermath, aiming to correct and complete Western perceptions of life under Communism.[23] However, as Haines is careful to note, they ultimately resist 'containment and collective treatment'.[24] She also points out that these authors are not isolated or insular, but are increasingly 'intervening in or broadening out the memory debates of their countries of settlement'.[25]

Readability as 'Un-German'?

Haines' remark that the authors mentioned as part of this 'Eastern Turn' tend to write 'in accessible prose with a strong element of storytelling' and that 'in this, they fit in with the return to a more realistic mode of narration, the so-called "new readability"'[26] further problematises Biller's claim that Stanišić opportunistically conforms to a 'German' style of writing. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis,[27] the push for more 'readability' in German-language literature in the late 1990s was inspired by the proliferation of engaging, plot-driven Anglo-American novels at this time. 'Readable' texts in German therefore tend to be compared to English-language novels rather than to German classics, which are often deemed to be inaccessible, demanding, or esoteric.[28] Richard Kämmerlings, for example, writes that *Vor dem Fest* is 'nicht deutsch, auch nicht migrantisch-deutsch, sondern eher angloamerikanisch: klug, sehr unterhaltsam und mit viel Chuzpe, die auch vor Pathos nicht zurückschreckt'.[29] Though Kämmerlings means well, by

[21] Brigid Haines, 'The Eastern Turn in Contemporary German, Swiss and Austrian Literature', *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, 16.2, (2008), 135-49.
[22] See Matthes and Williams, 'Displacement', 27.
[23] Haines, 'The Eastern Turn', 139.
[24] Ibid., 138.
[25] Ibid., 143.
[26] Ibid., 139.
[27] See Introduction, p. 6.
[28] See Mangold ('Fremdling') for a good summary of Biller's argument on why contemporary German literature is 'boring'.
[29] Richard Kämmerlings, 'Saša Stanišićs Schauerroman *Vor dem Fest* mit einem Happy End', *Die Welt*, 12 March 2014, https://www.welt.de/print/welt_kompakt/print_literatur/article125588072/Nominiert-III-Sasa-Stanisics-Schauerroman-Vor-dem-Fest-mit-einem-Happy-End.html [Accessed 12 July 2019].

describing the novel's distinctive lightness as neither 'deutsch' nor 'migrantisch-deutsch' he inadvertently aligns himself with Biller's thesis that German contemporary literature is stagnant, austere, and elitist and that most migrant literature gladly follows suit. The fact that 'readability' is still associated with 'national' literary styles is hugely problematic. Not only does it isolate German literature behind the unfair label of gravity and difficulty, but it also has implications for how literature written by authors with transcultural backgrounds relates to 'national' literature, literature by German-born native speakers.

By associating Stanišić's style with an Anglo-American and a German tradition respectively, Kämmerlings and Biller are both clearly eager to 'fix' Stanišić more firmly within the contemporary literary landscape. Haines inadvertently does so too. In an article on *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, she writes on the one hand that Stanišić, a former child refugee, is no longer in the position of the 'other' that the author with migrant background is assumed to occupy, but a 'global bestselling author and multilingual citizen of the world'.[30] On the other hand, in an argument which arguably overcompensates for Stanišić's general reception as a 'migrant' author, she continues by pointing out that he is of 'distinctly German pedigree',[31] because he attended the *Deutsches Literaturinstitut* in Leipzig alongside many of the most successful contemporary German authors.

Stanišić is, by virtue of his education and career development (e.g. through the support of literary prizes such as the Chamisso Prize and the Prize of the Leipziger Buchmesse), indeed a child of the twenty-first century German *Literaturbetrieb*. But saying that he is of German 'pedigree' as an author, however, is no more helpful in understanding his writing than viewing it within the context of 'new readability' or even, as Biller does, within the context of a conformist, Germanified *Migrationsliteratur*. This is because all of these attempts to categorise his work rely on ideas about 'migrant' and 'national' (German) literature which are still implicitly laden with connotations of authenticity and relevance.

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[30] Haines, 'Sad Things, Positively', 105.
[31] Ibid., 106.

Stanišić on Authenticity

When we look at Stanišić's work as a whole, however, we find that it subtly but consistently debunks notions of cultural or national authenticity. *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon repariert*, for example, does not claim to be an 'authentic' narrative about the war and genocide in Bosnia or about the experience of migration. Rather, it is in some ways a novel about inauthenticity, about not having shared the collective experience of one's own community. The fact that the novel is written in German rather than Serbocroatian or Bosnian adds to its self-conscious 'inauthenticity'.[32] Stanišić clearly sees his multilingualism (and his sense of lacking any particular ethnic perspective) as an opportunity to be orginal (rather than authentic): 'Die Sprache ist das einzige Land ohne Grenzen', he states in a 2008 essay on the question of migrant literature. 'Jeder kann (und sollte) von dem Privileg Gebrauch machen, eine Sprache größer, besser und schöner zu machen, indem er dort einen Wortbaum pflanzt, einen noch nie zuvor gezüchteten'.[33]

Most recently, in *Herkunft,* Stanišić positions himself even more directly on questions of cultural authenticity, addressing the arbitrariness of notions of 'origins' and 'home'. His starting point in this book, which can best be described as a collection of semi-autobiographical essays, is an idea whose seeds are already present in *Vor dem Fest*. The village painter in the novel, Frau Kranz, who, as shall be discussed in Part II, is a perpetual outsider in Fürstenfelde because of her identity as a 'Donauschwäbin' or 'Jugoslawiendeutsche' (*VdF*, 55), twice speaks of the 'Zufall' or 'Glückslos' that is one's birth (*VdF*, 55 and 92). This is one of the central leitmotivs in *Herkunft*. Stanišić narrates fragmentary stories from his past and present centred around two visits to his paternal grandmother Kristina, in 2009 and then again 2018, as she sinks further into dementia.

Together, grandmother and grandson visit the village of Oskoruša in the Serbian mountains, his great-grandparents' place of birth. The villagers, some of whom share his surname, ask him where he is from. These encounters prompt a reflection on the inadequacy of our origins

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[32] Wichard, 'Mitteleuropäische Blickrichtungen', 163.
[33] Stanišić Saša: 'Wie ihr uns seht. Über drei Mythen vom Schreiben der Migranten', in *Eingezogen in die Sprache, angekommen in der Literatur. Positionen des Schreibens in unserem Einwanderungsland*, ed. by Uwe Pörksen and Bernd Busch (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008), pp. 104-9, here p. 109.

to authentically describe our experience: 'Wie man es dreht', he concludes, 'Herkunft bleibt doch ein Konstrukt! Eine Art Kostüm, das man ewig tragen soll, nachdem es einem übergestülpt worden ist. Als solches ein Fluch! Oder, mit etwas Glück, ein Vermögen, das keinem Talent sich verdankt, aber Vorteile und Privilegien schafft'.[34] Yet throughout *Herkunft* Stanišić also reflects at length on his own origins. By writing his family history, he appropriates his own *Migrationshintergrund*, while at the same time showing what a hollow generalisation this term is. Personal and family histories are always specific and individual, whether or not they cross national borders, or indeed are themselves traversed and divided by cultural and religious borders. At one point in *Herkunft*, Stanišić reflects on his family's mixed ethnic origins and secular background. With the collapse of Yugoslavia's supra-national identity after Tito's death, these hybrid identities were replaced by clear-cut, divisive, and ultimately arbitrary labels of identity.

Curiously, however, both Stanišić's description of the old, 'multiperspektivische Erzählung Jugoslawiens' and of the new narratives of the post-Tito era, are uncannily reminiscent of the narrative of *Vor dem Fest*:

> Die neuen Erzähler hießen Milosevic, Izetbegovic, Tudman. [...] Sujet: Das eigene Volk als Opfer. [...] Perspektive: Allwissend. Erste Person plural ist das Erzählpronomen der Wahl. Das *Wir* wird so genutzt, dass es *Die* ausschließt, die nicht dazugehören: 'Wir lassen uns von denen nicht mehr—undsoweiter'.[35]

This passage does not suggest a direct equivalence between the narratives of Yugoslavia's 'neu[e] Erzähler' and the first-person plural narrative voice of Fürstenfelde. But it does suggest that Stanišić is more broadly concerned with constructions of 'us' and 'them', i.e. with inclusive and exclusive understandings of community and the identities arising from them. This concern runs through *Vor dem Fest*, in which the 'wir' is alternatingly inclusive and judgmental, reassuring and intolerant.

Vor dem Fest **as a contemporary** ***Dorfgeschichte***

[34] *H*, 32.
[35] Ibid., 95-6.

Like the two texts discussed above, *Vor dem Fest* questions notions of 'authenticity', especially if it is measured with reference to origins or specific ethnic perspectives. Biller's view of Fürstenfelde as being 'urdeutsch', as 'inherently German and thus provincial',[36] is as nonsensical, in a contemporary context, as seeing Stanišić as a 'Neudeutscher'. It is true that the novel's setting is given a degree of geographical, historical, and cultural specificity: Fürstenfelde is a former East German village post-reunification. Stanišić makes no secret of the real-life inspiration behind his fictional village and thanks the inhabitants of several villages with names starting in *Fürsten-* in his acknowledgements.[37] Yet Thomas Pletzinger, a friend of Stanišić from his time at the *Leipziger Literaturinstitut*, makes it clear that Stanišić's conceived of the idea of Fürstenfelde as a landscape and a community long before visiting any real-life villages in the Uckermark.[38]

In other words, despite the specificity of its setting, *Vor dem Fest* is a work of fantasy, a universal village tale. Stanišić himself explains his choice of the Uckermark as a setting for his novel in terms that suggest he did not have a specific, 'quintessentially German' village in mind, but rather a type of place that can be found both in Germany and elsewhere:

> Ich mag Verfall und Verschwinden. Das klingt vielleicht komisch. Mich faszinieren aber eben Orte, die es nicht leicht haben. Orte, denen Menschen abhandenkommen, Orte, die einmal 'was waren', es aber – warum auch immer – nicht mehr sind. Und darin interessieren mich aber nicht die Spuren des Verfalls und des Verschwindens, sondern die Menschen, die bleiben. Die trotz der widrigen Umstände etwas zu schaffen und zu erschaffen versuchen, die noch 'was vor haben'. In Deutschland gibt es viele solche Orte, an denen die Arbeitslosigkeit, die Landflucht und die Verwahrlosung neue Bewohner geworden sind. So einen Ort wollte ich also erschaffen, um das zu erzählen, was den Menschen übrig bleibt: Erinnerungen, alte Geschichten und neue Hoffnungen.[39]

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[36] Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 6.

[37] Like Herrndorf, who sneaks in the name of a fictional character, Heather Gliese, amongst his real-life acknowledgements for *Sand*, Stanišić also mixes the real and fictional in his acknowledgements for *Vor dem Fest*: 'Dank an die Bewohner von Fürstenberg, *Fürstenfelde*, Fürstenwalte, Fürstenwerder und Prenzlau für den Austausch und die Gastfreundschaft sowie an die jeweiligen Heimatmuseen, Heimatstuben und Heimatvereine für die historischen Einblicke' (*VdF*, 316; my emphasis). While there is no village by the name of Fürstenfelde in Germany, all other villages or towns mentioned in this acknowledgement indeed exist in the Uckermark.

[38] Pletzinger, 'Jetzt kommt der Sturm'.

[39] Saša Stanišić, '"Blockaden kenne ich nicht, nur langes Nachdenken"', Interview via e-mail by Mirjam Mohr, Universität Heidelberg Homepage, July 2015, https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/universitaet/heidelberger_profile/interview/stanisic.html [Accessed 10 July 2019].

This statement suggests that, despite the specificity of its history, which will be discussed in some detail in Part III below, Fürstenfelde is not archetypical (as the term 'urdeutsch' implies), but typical, both in the sense that it is typical of the area it is supposedly in, an 'Idealtypus des wendeversehrten Ost-Gemeinwesens',[40] and in the sense that it is a 'type', a literary topos of a village. With only few adjustments, the plot could have been set in a number of other regions both in the former Eastern Bloc and beyond and invested with the specific flavour of a different culture. Werner Nell and Marc Weiland confirm that the village in contemporary culture is commonly an ambivalent space, one that is universal in its many specific manifestations.[41] *Vor dem Fest* indeed foregrounds some of the universal features of the twenty-first-century village experience and can therefore fruitfully be read as a modern *Dorfgeschichte*.[42]

Though historically considered a conservative (if not reactionary) genre, new approaches to *Dorfgeschichten* view them as rich sources of sociological and ethnological information. Michael Neumann and Marcus Twellmann, for example, argue that *Dorfgeschichten* present the village and its community not as 'abgeschlossene Totalität'[43] but in a process of contact and exchange with society at large, especially through 'outsider' figures who enter the space of the village.[44] Their overarching argument that *Dorfgeschichten* are a prime locus of 'Transformationserfahrungen',[45] transformations in how the village community is understood and understands itself over time, is particularly relevant to *Vor dem Fest*. The novel indeed captures the life of a village community at a (historical) moment of transformation. Fürstenfelde is a

[40] Thomas Andre, 'Ostdeutsche Provinz: Null Kneipen, aber Sterni mit Schnittchen', *Der Spiegel*, 6 March 2014, https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/sasa-stanisic-vor-dem-fest-a-955575.html [Accessed 11 July 2019].
[41] Werner Nell and Marc Weiland, 'Imaginationsraum Dorf', in *Imaginäre Dörfer: Zur Wiederkehr des Dörflichen in Literatur, Film und Lebenswelt*, ed. by Werner Nell, Marc Weiland (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), pp. 13-50, here p. 19.
[42] Josephine Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature: National Tales, Dorfgeschichten, Romans Champêtres*, (New York: Continuum, 2010), here p. 7.
[43] Michael Neumann and Marcus Twellmann, 'Dorfgeschichten: Anthropologie und Weltliteratur', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 88. 1 (2014), 22-45, here 4.
[44] Ibid, 42.
[45] Ibid., 45.

community coming to terms with its own inherent diversity, a diversity which challenges its self-understanding as historically homogeneous.

Part II

The Uncertainty of the 'Wir' in *Vor dem Fest*

An Experimental Narrative Voice

The narrating 'wir' in *Vor dem Fest* seeks to control these processes of transformation and remain in charge of the village's historical and mythical narratives. The more it asserts its power over the discourses by which Fürstenfelde understands itself, however, the more it becomes clear that the village community cannot be contained or subsumed by this collective voice. This section will explore the self-contradictory, unstable function of the novel's first-person plural narrative voice in detail. On the one hand, this 'wir' claims to be omniscient and inclusive and to stand above and beyond the various subgroups in the village. On the other, it admits its own ignorance and expresses its suspicion against those villagers who cannot or will not blend in with the group. The inconsistent claims of this collective narrative voice and the frequent changes in focalisation ultimately create confusion and uncertainty about the nature of Fürstenfelde's community even amongst the villagers themselves. As Part III will discuss, this uncertainty makes the villagers hold on ever more tightly to their problematic history.

Unlike the competing focalisers of Menasse's novel, and the slippery focalisation and cynical narrator of Herrndorf's, the contradictory first-person-plural narrator of *Vor dem Fest* is more obviously experimental. Indeed, the first-person plural is considered to be one of the main forms of nonrealist or 'unnatural' narrative voice,[46] as it claims to group together, impossibly, the utterances or perceptions of multiple figures. Because of this, Brian Richardson writes,

> first-person plural or 'we' narration typically comes highly charged politically, though it is used in opposed ways. It has been deployed to contest deindividualised social conformity as well as to articulate the shared social history and collective sensibility of marginalised or

[46] Richardson, *Unnatural Voices*, 2 and 14.

> oppressed groups such as peasants, women, colonial subjects, and members of the African diaspora.[47]

In *Vor dem Fest*, the 'wir' arguably does both, inadvertently exposing the contradictions inherent in collective identities by insistently re-asserting its own internal coherence. Elsewhere Richardson notes that 'in extreme examples of this kind [of narration], contradictory perceptions are set forth or shared thoughts stretching over centuries are delineated'.[48] In light of this comment, the 'wir'-narrator of *Vor dem Fest* seems to be not only a textbook case but an extreme example of nonrealist, 'unnatural' narrative voice.

While Richardson writes of 'contradictory perceptions' and 'shared thoughts', the narrating 'wir' in *Vor dem Fest* mostly sets forth its (contradictory) *opinions*, (moral) judgments, and emotional states. These statements are often placed at the beginning of chapters, in short clauses which are capitalised for emphasis: 'WIR SIND UNBESORGT' (*VdF*, 54), it states at one point, for instance, only to belie this a page later by claiming, 'Wir sind besorgt' (*VdF*, 55). On other occasions the 'wir' is suspicious: 'WIR SIND ARGWÖHNISCH. Seit etwa drei Wochen lungert ein junger Mann spät nachts bei uns herum bis zum Morgengrauen' (*VdF*, 179).[49] Elsewhere it expresses its suspicion more suggestively: 'Drei Ehemänner hat die Steiner überlebt, jeder ist nach genau neun Monaten Ehe gestorben. Schwierig, schwierig. Es könnte ja jemand nachrechnen' (*VdF*, 294). Such evasiveness is typical of a conservative narrative voice which assumes the role of the village's moral guardian, the enforcer of rules, and judge of the propriety of the villagers' behaviours.[50]

The Threat of Violence in the 'Wir'

These judgments are ultimately motivated by the 'wir'-narrator's opinions or emotions, especially its attachment to traditions, rather than by any specific laws, values or reasons. Of all the

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[47] Richardson in Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, 177.
[48] Ibid., 108.
[49] The beginning of all chapters in *Vor dem Fest* are capitalised. For the sake of consistency, the capitalisation will be preserved here in all citations which are capitalised in the original, as this often suggests that they should be stressed.
[50] E.g. 'Alles gut, sofern es darum geht, zu behalten, was uns gehört' (*VdF*, 296).

contradictory statements of collective emotion in the novel, the most puzzling is not suspicion or disapproval, but a strange kind of glee. Early on we read:

> WIR SIND FROH, Anna wird verbrannt. Morgen Abend beim Fest wird das Urteil vollstreckt. Die Kinder werden zu den Kälbern ins Heu gelegt, aber sie schlafen nicht, sie lugen zwischen den Brettern nach dem, wovor sie im Schlaf Angst haben möchten, und wenn in den Flammen nichts mehr kocht und zischt und weint, stöpselt der Bäcker die Geige an seinen mobilen Verstärker, und dann wird gegeigt, dann wird gesungen, auf dem Grill brät Raubfisch weich. (*VdF*, 28)

An allusive passage later on in the same chapter refers to a little girl and boy throwing logs into the oven where their mother dries the flax to bake bread for the feast.[51] The references to the children and the fire in this passage vaguely complement, but without explaining or removing, the alarming prospect introduced in the above quotation, of a girl or woman being burnt at the stake with the village children fearfully looking on. Taken together, these two passages suggest that the 'wir' who gleefully announces the woman's impending death may not merely be mercurial, inconsistent and conservative, but actually cruel and inhumane. Later on, one of the entries from the village archive provides the background story which explains the allusion to the young girl in the earlier chapter. The entry is about a 'schrecklicher casus tragicus' (*VdF*, 181) which occurred in 1722, involving a child named Anna. When she and her brother were forced to tend to their mother's flax oven overnight, Anna burnt to death, and her brother was severely injured.

While the mysterious claim in the long quotation above that 'Anna wird verbrannt' is not explained, we assume it refers to a ritualistic sacrifice of a woman called Anna, presumably in the memory of her young namesake who was accidentally burnt alive. This is only ever a conjecture, though. Even in the novel's last page, the 'wir' will simply claim, again contradicting its previous statement, 'Wir sind froh, Anna wird vermutlich doch nicht verbrannt. Sie steht beim Scheiterhaufen und hebt ein brennendes Scheit in die Luft' (*VdF*, 315). Despite the happy outcome, with Anna still alive and the reader spared the brutal details of her death, the prospect of her death tints the entire narrative of Fürstenfelde with the possibility of extreme violence, and the

[51] 'Drüben bei den Öfen? […] gerecht nach seinem Recht' (*VdF*, 31-2).

'wir' with a radical unreliability[52] which only intensifies the reader's desire to understand its position and function. Though Fürstenfelde's 'wir' is of mixed literary ancestry, at times sounding like a moralistic Greek chorus[53] and at others naïve and fairy-tale-like, no comparisons quite capture its simultaneously elusive and obstrusive, omniscient and ignorant quality.

Omniscience and Ignorance

Indeed, the most peculiar characteristic of the first-person plural narrative voice in *Vor dem Fest* is that it constantly shifts between different perspectives, that it alternatingly claims to know everything about the villagers and not to know, or not to be interested in, some of their stories. Some of the things the 'wir'-narrator knows are private, others are simply impossible to know; most are trivial and unnecessary. It knows, for example, that the television set in the so-called 'Haus der Heimat', which houses the village archive and historical society, is not a GDR artefact as the village's 'auswärtige Besucher' think, but merely 'ein Alltagsgegenstand aus der Tschechoslowakei (1988)' (*VdF*, 161). Yet it also knows what Frau Steiner, who 'survived' her three husbands, *really* prays for: 'Ihr Morgengebet hört niemand, außer uns. Und das ist kein Morgengebet, oder es ist eines, das man zischend aufsagen muss und bei dem man sich schütteln muss wie im Fieber' (*VdF*, 294).

Yet the 'wir'-narrator is much more than the well-informed entity it makes itself out to be: it has the worrying power to decide what is true, right, and real in Fürstenfelde, what is history and what is mere rumour.[54] In this capacity, however, it is transparently manipulative: 'Man kann nur verneinen, was existiert' (*VdF*, p. 163), it claims at one point for example, implicitly privileging the far-fetched imaginary narratives surrounding the village and its inhabitants over objective reality or the village's difficult history. Most importantly, however, the 'wir' evidently decides on

[52] See Richardson on 'antimimetic unreliability', a more extreme and self-reflexive form of unreliability than the 'typically human distortions' encountered in mimetic narratives. Richardson in Herman et al., *Narrative Theory*, 53.
[53] See 'Buchmesse Leipzig: Saša Stanišić', *Kultur*, 3sat, 15 March 2014, https://www.3sat.de/kultur/buch/buchmesse-leipzig-sasa-stanisic-100.html [Accessed 16 July 2019, available until 3 April 2024].
[54] 'Was auch immer du über uns gehört hast, das nicht von uns selbst kommt, stimmt so nicht' (*VdF*, 163).

the legitimacy of the villagers' experiences, and arbitrarily chooses who deserves to have their own separate storyline and who does not. The taciturn stranger in the track suit who has started showing up at Zieschke the baker's for breakfast, for one, does not: 'Es ist egal, was wir vom Adidas-Mann halten. […] Er braucht nicht mehr Worte, als für seine morgendliche Bestellung. Nicht jeder braucht eine Geschichte' (*VdF*, 252).

Similarly, even though the beginning of the novel's second Book reads, in capitals, 'WIR SIND VON NATUR AUS HISTORISCH INTERESSIERT' (*VdF*, 123), what follows slowly but forcefully undermines this statement:

> Lokalgeschichtliche Meilensteine interessieren uns nicht. [...] Der Schützenverein interessiert uns historisch nicht. Wissen interessiert uns historisch nicht. [...] Kacheln und DDR-Alltag interessieren uns historisch nicht. Uns interessiert die massive Holztür im Keller. So ist das mit Türen und mit Kellern. [...] Der Stadtschäfer interessiert uns ein bisschen, aber nur deswegen, weil wir das Wort 'Stadtschäfer' mögen. [...] Historische Genauigkeit interessiert uns nicht. (*VdF*, 124-5)

It would seem, then, that the 'wir'-narrator is not in fact omniscient, but merely curious and indiscrete, driven by its suspicions and a taste for gossip. This is most obvious in its comments on Frau Schwermuth, whom it suspects of falsifying or even writing the village archive herself. 'Johanna Schwermuth', it states suggestively, 'interessiert uns menschlich wie kriminalhistorisch ungemein' (*VdF*, 128).

From these contradictory examples we can conclude that the first-person-plural narrative voice in *Vor dem Fest* is above all erratic and unstable, both in its statements and in its identity. At times it seems to be aligned with the inhabitants of Fürstefelde – the 'Volk',[55] the 'Dorf',[56] or the 'Alteingesessene', whom it is so keen to distinguish not only from the 'Zugezogene',[57] but also from the 'Touris',[58] whether 'Berliner'[59] or other 'Städter', as well as from 'Auswärtige'[60] and 'Fremde'.[61] At other times, however, it seems to draw lines of division within the community

[55] *VdF*, 116, 159 and 277.
[56] Ibid., 28, 169 and *passim*.
[57] Ibid., 238.
[58] Ibid., 133.
[59] Ibid., 31.
[60] Ibid., 251.
[61] Ibid., 253 and 302.

itself. There are indeed some moments when characters such as Anna and Frau Schwermuth seem to be part of the 'wir' and indeed occasionally use the pronoun 'wir' themselves.[62] Yet their relationship to the collective is, as the next section will show, ambiguous and tense. This tension between individuals and the collective is suggested by shifts in focalisation as well as occasional changes in the narrative voice.

Individual Perspectives

Even though Part II so far has focussed exclusively on passages narrated by the 'wir', there are at least as many passages narrated in the third person singular in *Vor dem Fest*, as well as one chapter which is narrated in the first person singular by Frau Schwermuth's son, Johann. Significantly, though, not all chapters with individual focalisers are narrated in the third person, and indeed most of them feature a mix of narrative voices. How arbitrarily exclusive the 'wir' is becomes clear if we compare chapters in which the 'wir' recedes (even if only partially) behind the third person, such as the chapter which introduces the pig farmer Gölow, with chapters in which the 'wir'-narrator's presence is strong even if the perspective is clearly that of an individual, such as the chapter which introduces the ex-postman (and suspected Stasi informant) Ditzsche. In the former, the collective perspective asserted by the 'wir' at the beginning of the chapter[63] is gradually replaced by Gölow's interior monologue in the third person,[64] before the 'wir' returns again on the next page to announce it is looking forward to Gölow's contribution to the feast.[65] The chapters featuring Ditzsche, by contrast, contain no passages of interior monologue. The 'wir' holds strong in these chapters: 'Ditzsche macht uns ratlos. Was findet die Nacht interessant an ihm? Sein beständiges Einzelgängertum? Die Einsamkeit des alten Mannes? Dafür haben wir Herrn Schramm. [...]. Dietmar Dietz ist wie ein Ohrwurm von einem Lied, das du kaum kennst' (*VdF*, 233).

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[62] E.g. Frau Schwermuth (*VdF*, 218); Ulli, the garage owner (*VdF*, 67) and Herr Schramm (*VdF*, 110).
[63] 'So jemandem sehen wir gern zu' (*VdF*, 35).
[64] 'Eine Anlage in Alaska, das wäre doch was' (*VdF*, 38).
[65] 'Wir freuen uns auf Olaf Gölows Auktionsbeitrag' (*VdF*, 39).

The chapters focusing on Herr Schramm, a suicidal, retired officer whose 'Einzelgängertum' seems to be more palatable and less threatening to the community, are accordingly mostly narrated in the third person and mostly from his own perspective. Some of the chapters in which Herr Schramm features centrally contain alternating individual perspectives (as opposed to the *collective* perspective adopted elsewhere in the novel), as his perceptions alternate with those of Anna, who saves him from commiting suicide,[66] and, in one chapter, with those of both Anna and Frau Schwermuth.[67] In the latter instance, however, the overarching, suprapersonal perspective usually associated with the 'wir'-narrator also intervenes: 'Herr Schramm seufzt. Schwer zu sagen, ob resignierend oder genervt. Annas Mienenspiel ist eindeutiger. Sagen wir: entschlossen' (*VdF*, 217).

In most cases, the individual focalisers, which are marked as being simultaneously part of the 'wir' and apart from it, are women, or, more appropriately, considering they include an animal focaliser, female. Early on, it is suggested that women are excluded from the collective, as the 'wir'-narrator explicitly aligns itself with a community of men: 'wir trinken in Ullis Garage, weil nirgends sonst Sitzgelegenheiten und Lügen und ein Kühlschrank so zusammenkommen, dass es für die Männer miteinander und mit Alkohol schön und gleichzeitig nicht *zu* schön ist' (*VdF*, 20). In such instances, the 'wir' is occasionally replaced by 'die Garage' used as a collective subject.[68] Even though later on women are implicitly included in the 'wir' and women like Anna, Frau Schwermuth, and Frau Kranz play a crucial role in Fürstenfelde's everyday life, the 'wir' never appears as an exclusively female community in the same way that it appears as a male one above.

All three of these women and the fourth main female character, the vixen from the neighbouring woods, are lonely, inscrutable figures, even if they are aligned, in various constellations, with each other or with other characters. According to Josephine Donovan, in nineteenth-century *Dorfgeschichten* female characters are frequently cast ambivalently both as the guardians of the community's values and as its 'other':

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[66] *VdF*, 165, 207 and 240.
[67] Ibid., 217-18.
[68] E.g. 'Die Garage war ein wenig enttäuscht. […] Die Garage trank' (*VdF*, 60-1).

> In upholding the virtues of *Gemeinschaft* or close-knit community, which women have historically sustained, and in rejecting the evils of *Gesellschaft* —its anomie and alienation— the antimoderns worry that any change in women's status will mean a loss of the former and capitulation to the latter. […] A dominant theme in local-color literature is the exploration of this 'feminine' otherness —this different way of doing things— often affirming it in opposition to standard (masculine) ways of thinking and behaving, which under modernity meant the abstract universalizing modes of Enlightenment rationalism.[69]

Women as Familiar Outsiders

Donovan's reference to how women are both central to village narratives and 'othered' helps us understand how the three female protagonists and the vixen in *Vor dem Fest* function as familiar outsiders. Each in their own way, Frau Schwermuth and Frau Kranz engage in a practice of storytelling, the one through writing, collecting, and exhibiting the archive and the other through painting village scenes. Despite their personal eccentricities, they set the tone of the village tales, preserve memories, and evoke figures from the past. At different points, they are both explicitly described as 'chroniclers' of village life: Frau Kranz, who has painted 'ganze Generationen' of Fürstenfelders, as well as 'Auswärtige' and 'Tiere', has captured 'fast siebzig Jahre eines Dorfes, eine Chronik in Öl, Aquarell und Kohle' (*VdF*, 85), while since the *Wende*, Frau Schwermuth has taken over the village archive from her predecessor, Paul Wiese, 'unser Chronist bis in die Fünfziger' (*VdF*, 124).

In their capacity as chroniclers, then, the two women belong to a decade- or, if the dates of the archive entries are anything to go by, century-long line of archivists and storytellers who helped shape the village's collective narrative voice. At the same time, however, they seem to have their own voices amongst the conformity of the 'wir'. It is not by chance that both women are said, at one or another point, to be talking to themselves: Frau Kranz 'führt ein Selbstgespräch' (*VdF*, 93) as she gets ready for a night of outdoor painting, while Frau Schwermuth 'flüstert so für sich Sachen aus den Märchen' whenever her spirits are low, and sometimes 'klingt das, als ob ihr jemand antwortet' (*VdF*, 132). In terms of their roles in the narrative, the main difference between the two figures is that Frau Schwermuth never actually functions as a focaliser, whereas Frau

[69] Donovan, *European Local-Color Literature*, 12.

Kranz does on several occasions.[70] The fact that she does so and thereby (however briefly) displaces the collective perspective of the 'wir' accentuates her role as an outsider. Her role as outsider in fact functions on many levels: because of her identity as 'the former migrant and "stranger"', as Frauke Matthes writes, Frau Kranz 'also serves as a mediator of key questions concerning "the other", namely: who really is the stranger, the other; how do we recognize them; and how can they belong?'.[71] Arguably, however, Frau Schwermuth is also implicitly but forcefully 'othered' by being represented through her teenage son's perspective.

Though as previously mentioned, the poignantly named Frau Schwermuth is respected by the villagers for her knowledge, she is also clearly marked out as an outsider primarily by her obesity and mental illness, both of which are gently caricatured from her son's perspective.[72] Indeed, Johann is the only character who figures as a first-person narrator throughout an entire chapter. This narrative 'privilege', as it were, anticipates the key role he is going to play in the narrative: Johann is the only person apart from his mother to ever access the village archive when he accidentally gets locked in the basement of the 'Haus der Heimat'. This incident exposes how delusional his mother is: she notices the break-in, but confuses her son with a character from a fairy tale and refuses to let him out. This gives him ample time to read material from the archive. In the meantime, Frau Schwermuth threatens Anna and Herr Schramm, whom, in her delirium, she mistakes for figures from an archive story. Her inability to distinguish between reality and fiction, truth and superstition, is partly depicted as a symptom of her illness. But it also feeds into the 'wir'-narrator's suspicion, discussed in more detail in Part III below, that if Frau Schwermuth does not single-handedly invent the archive stories, then she at least heavily edits them.

Anna seems to be caught between fiction and reality, history and legend in different ways from Frau Schwermuth. Like Poppo von Blankenburg, the descendant and namesake of the local lord, who for generations has seemingly carried the same unfortunate first name, Anna at times seems to be a palimpsestic character. She is implicitly aligned with generations of 'Annas' who

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[70] *VdF*, 92, 99 and 287.
[71] Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 13.
[72] See *VdF*, 130.

played an important role in Fürstenfelde's life: its historical (or mythical) protector from invaders; the little Anna burnt by accident; the village's now-neglected patron saint; and its sacrificial offering on the day of the feast. Frau Kranz's first name is also Ana, albeit with one 'n'. And indeed, the two women are not only aligned with each other by their shared name, but also linked through their status as outsiders: Frau Kranz is from elsewhere and Anna is about to leave for elsewhere. They are both lonely, vulnerable, and melancholy figures. Like Frau Kranz, the *Heimatvetriebene*, Anna has known loss and destruction too early, and is left only with 'Erinnerungen an ein einmal volles Haus, und die Frage, was je gut war für sie in den achtzehn Jahren dort' (*VdF*, 31).

Both women also have a special affinity with the vigilant vixen, who is hunting eggs for her young in Fürstenfelde the night before the feast. The vixen has known Anna her whole life, 'seit sie ein Junges war', and trusts her; 'sie hat gelernt, das Weibchen ist keine Gefahr' (*VdF*, 63). She also knows Frau Kranz, the 'altes Menschenweibchen', whom 'sie manchmal auch im alten Wald begegnet' (*VdF*, 177). Even more so than the two women with whom she is implicitly aligned, the vixen is the paradigmatic figure of the familiar outsider in *Vor dem Fest*, an 'other' who, while never included in the 'wir', has apparently existed in parallel to the village community for centuries.

A fox or vixen indeed seems to have been present at all key moments in Fürstenfelde's history, often in conjunction with the village's two notorious thieves, Hinnerk Lievenmaul and Kunibert Schivelbein, who were executed on the field next to Anna's family property at the turn of the seventeenth century. The two reappear in the narrative present reincarnated as Henry and Q, two cheerful young men. Blasting 'eine Welle deutscher Hip-Hop' (*VdF*, 106) from their car and speaking exclusively in rhyme, they give Anna a ride home when she is seized by a bad asthma attack on her run. Later the thieves will save the vixen from the chicken farmer Ditzsche's attack. Only the vixen realises, in her own non-verbal way, that the young men are really the ghosts of the historical thieves, as they are 'ohne jedes Aroma' (*VdF*, 245). Even though she fears them, she is also one of them: 'Bravo, feine Räuberin' (*VdF*, 246), the 'zwei berüchtigte Räuber' (*VdF*, 28) silently praise her for her catch.

Indeed, the vixen's perspective introduces a completely 'other' mode of perception into the narrative. As a focaliser, she not only casts a defamiliarising gaze onto the human community of the village but also echoes in her own precarious situation the community's constant struggle for survival.[73] The vixen's world, unlike the chatty world of the 'wir', is one of taste, smell, and hearing, of intuition, small pleasures, care for her young, and hunger. Yet unlike the villagers' narrative(s), the vixen's also has a progressive logic, a legible *Spannungsbogen*: she leaves her young in the woods to venture into the village, fails to make a catch the first time, attempts the egg theft again, gets wounded. The pain she feels when she smells the death of her young is powerfully evoked through a triple reiteration of 'hier' as she frantically sniffs around for them, and the parataxis 'Sterne Nacht Zeit Tod' (*VdF*, 256). As Gerrit Bartels writes, 'die Fähe, […] [verkörpert] gewissermaßen [das] überzeitliche Prinzip, die Ewigkeit, mit all ihren Sinnen'.[74] Indeed, from the start, 'die Fähe ahnt die Zeit, da die Seen noch nicht existierten und keine Menschen hier ihr Revier hatten' (*VdF*, 22).

Part III

The Shaky Basis of Collective Identity

The outsider figures in the novel, individuals who, as the shifts in narrative perspective suggest, both stand out within the collective *and* stand apart from it, reveal dissonances within the compulsive uniformity of the 'wir'. It is above all the vixen, Fürstenfelde's familiar stranger, who, with her vague, instinctive memory of a time before the village existed, uncovers how constructed the 'wir'-narrator's rhetoric of ancestry, continuity, and tradition is. Indeed, it is the animal focaliser in *Vor dem Fest*, ahistorical and universal like nature, which also paradoxically remind us how problematic the village's specific geographical and historical anchoring is. As it gradually

[73] 'Das Dorf spricht täglich Gebete um ein Einigermaßen. Um ein Zumindest. […] Um den eigenen Fortbestand' (*VdF*, 32).
[74] Gerrit Bartels, 'Die wertvollste Gabe ist die Erfindung', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 14 March 2014, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/sasa-stanisics-roman-vor-dem-fest-die-wertvollste-gabe-ist-die-erfindung/9617570.html [Accessed 19 July 2019].

becomes clearer how ambivalent the individual villagers are towards the collective they belong to, the 'wir'-narrator's claim to be the unified and homogeneous voice of the village community flounders. The 'wir' is instead revealed to be the product of a long and troubled history, whose facts the 'wir' stubbornly ignores or suppresses.

The third and last part of this chapter looks more closely at how geographical, cultural and historical details are used in *Vor dem Fest* to suggest that historically constituted, culturally homogenous communities are intrinsically problematic. Any conception of 'national' culture, therefore, which is necessary to sustain, by opposition, categories such as *Migrationsliteratur*, is highly problematic, too. For the sake of clarity, the section will discuss the ways in which Fürstenfelde's collective voice is invested with a sense of geographical and historical specificity in two subsections. These will focus respectively on references to the contemporary culture of the village and on its (real and imagined) history. What follows will show that Fürstenfelde's collective identity is the result of the 'wir'-narrator's tight control over the dominant historical discourses in the village, rather than of history itself.

Decay, Global Politics, and Pop Culture

The setting of Fürstenfelde in Brandenburg, one of the so-called 'new' German *Bundesländer*, associates it with what Verena Auffermann describes as 'eine vernachlässigte deutsche Gegenwart, die in den Städten niemand für möglich hält'.[75] There are many subtle references in the novel to the shrinking of the local population. Before the village name is even revealed, the 'wir'-narrator states, '[e]s gehen mehr tot, als geboren werden. Wir hören die Alten vereinsamen. Sehen den Jungen beim Schmieden zu von keinem Plan. Oder vom Plan, wegzugehen' (*VdF*, 12-13). A strong sense that the village was one of the losers of the *Wende* runs throughout the novel. In lieu of flourishing 'ostdeutsche Industrie' there are now only 'brandenburgische Industrieruinen' (*VdF*, 84) while foreign investors vie for whatever profitable business is still in operation.[76]

[75] Verena Auffermann, 'Eineinhalb Neonazis', *Die Zeit*, 6 March 2014, https://www.zeit.de/2014/11/sasa-stanisic-vor-dem-fest-roman [Accessed 19 July 2019].
[76] 'Die Holländer haben Golöw eine Million geboten' (*VdF*, 38).

Economic decline, in turn, brings social precariousness: Herr Schramm cannot live off his officer's pension, the village priest, Uwe Hirtentäschel, is a reformed drug addict, whereas Meerettich-Micha, one of the village's young men, is constantly in and out of prison. The remaining village youths, Lada, Johann, and 'der stumme Suzi' (*VdF*, 15), have nowhere to go since the petrol station and its mini-market closed down. Admittedly, there are only '1 ½ Nazis' in the village (*VdF*, 85) despite the expectation, 'demographisch gesehen' as Johann puts it, that his and his friends' hobbies are 'Ego-Shooter und rechtes Gedankengut' (*VdF*, 130). However, decay is undeniably the order of the day: 'Verwahrlosung ist uns nicht fremd' (*VdF*, 265). The sense of a closed community which the 'wir' articulates is to some extent contingent upon the experience of being neglected by central authorities and excluded from the prosperity of the rest of the country.

As the village is remote and poor, it is hardly surprising that its inhabitants eye any external influence which challenges their collective identity with suspicion. Especially the older members of the community are clearly ambivalent about the influx of contemporary pop culture and global politics into their daily life. On the one hand, both German and global contemporary culture seem to be firmly embedded within the village's daily life. For example, Frau Schwermuth 'guckt […] *Buffy – The Vampire Slayer*' (*VdF*, 32), her son Johann 'liebt Internet-Foren zu abstrusen Hobbys' (*VdF*, 51) while Herr Schramm daydreams of a 'Fürstenfelder *Tatort*' (*VdF*, 137). The 'Annenfest', too, is increasingly globalised. One of the villagers offers classes in Raku ware, a type of Japanese pottery, others organise a concert with African music from Stuttgart (*VdF*, p. 29). On the other hand, however, the villagers' sceptical approach to global politics and current affairs is evident in several instances in *Vor dem Fest*. Gölow, for example, expresses a clear preference for Clinton over Obama, the 'Dampfplauderer' (*VdF*, 36). Frau Kranz, meanwhile, paints the cheap Romanian labourers working Fürstenfelde's fields, the reminders of how the eastward expansion of the EU economically impacts the area.

The novel's unofficial sequel, the short story 'Fallensteller' in the homonymous collection from 2016,[77] also reflects Fürstenfelde's ambivalence towards contemporary culture and politics.

[77] Saša Stanišić, *Fallensteller* (Munich: Luchterhand, 2016). Hereafter *F*. The titular short story in this collection is in fact the second unofficial sequel to *Vor dem Fest*. The first 'sequel' is a

The short story features the same setting, the same 'wir'-narrator and many of the same characters as *Vor dem Fest*.[78] Significantly, however, it introduces an additional level of fiction to Fürstenfelde's story which is absent from the novel. The village has supposedly become a tourist destination 'nachdem der Schriftsteller hier gewesen ist, der mit dem Buch über uns […]. Ein Jugo war das. Aber ein verweichlichter Jugo, ganz ungewöhnlich. Jugo-Schriftsteller halt. Später sind dann "Literatur-Touristen" hergeradelt "auf den Spuren des Buchs"'.[79] Because he brings a profitable influx of tourists, Stanišić, the 'Jugo-Schriftsteller', is later (favourably) compared with the Russian investors who come to exploit local property.

Since the author's first trip, we read in 'Fallensteller', there have been two significant developments in Fürstenfelde. Firstly, the village is now threatened not by a vixen, but by a pack of wolves. It is implied that these are the wolves that Lada and Suzi smuggle into the Uckermark in *Vor dem Fest*.[80] The imagined, or at least exaggerated, threat of the wolves unites the villagers, who commission a 'Fallensteller', a mystifying figure who always speaks in rhyme, like Henry and Q in *Vor dem Fest*, to deal with the problem.[81] With his eye-brow-raising methods of pest control, the 'Fallensteller' is an elusive character. At one point he briefly transforms into mere 'Flötenmusik',[82] like a modern-day Pied Piper of Hamelin. The Pied Piper is not only implicitly alluded to in *Vor dem Fest*, when the villagers are facing a 'Mäuseproblem' (*VdF*, 89), but is also, as we will see in Chapter Five, a central (and ambivalent) figure in Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012). The villagers remain suspicious of the 'Fallensteller' and implicitly see him as part of the wolf problem: 'Er roch nach Raubtier. Lada wusste gleich, nach welchem'.[83] Both the villagers'

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collection of unpublished fragments from the manuscript of *Vor dem Fest* hosted under the domain *fürstenfelde.de*. A part of this page is called 'Haus der Heimat', like the fictional village's most central institution. This part of the page, however, features both photographs of Brandenburg villages which link to the removed excerpts when one clicks on them and interviews with the author. The publication of material online not only gives *Vor dem Fest* a digital afterlife, but also testifies to the extent of Stanišić participation, as a public figure, in the marketing and reception of his own work.

[78] See also Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 16-18.

[79] *F*, 173.

[80] See *VdF*, 17.

[81] 'Ich bin Spezialist in Sachen Deportation, hier die Nummer von meinem iPhone' (*F*, 214).

[82] *F*, 247.

[83] Ibid., 189.

debate about the wolves and their distance from the 'Fallensteller' are telling of the way the community of Fürstenfelde is constituted through its attempts to marginalise and exlude difference through the creation of in- and out-groups.

The second major development in Fürstenfelde is the 2015 refugee crisis, which brings to a head the villagers' struggle to keep in sight what little unites them. The 'syrische Flüchtlinge'[84] in the short story are officially welcomed, but also strongly 'othered'. Because of this, they are simultaneously the counterparts of the feared and unwelcome wolves and to some extent akin with them.[85] 'Fallensteller' thus updates the narrative of Fürstenfelde into a much tenser social and historical context, one which poses completely new challenges for the 'neue Bundesländer' and for Germany as a whole. By doing so, it adds significant political dimensions to Fürstenfelde's portrayal as a contemporary village in *Vor dem Fest*, obliquely commenting on the real challenges facing the rural former East and on the stress which, justifiably or not, they put on communities which define themselves through their shared history.

History

The greatest challenge facing Fürstenfelde's community, however, is arguably its own history. Early on in *Vor dem Fest* the 'wir'-narrator comments that the village lives in a post-historical present marked by decay and neglect, revealing how deeply attached it is to its problematic past. This comment is embedded within the subplot surrounding the 'Gedenkfindling' (*VdF*, 65), the commemorative boulder at the centre of the village which 'gedenkt momentan niemandem' (ibid.), and which brings to the fore the village's sense of unease with its present identity. The boulder is

[84] Ibid., 175.

[85] In a seminar held at the University of Zurich on the 24 November 2017 as part of a series of events which accompanied Stanišić's *Zürcher Poetikvorlesungen* (see Sebastian Meixner, 'Zürcher Poetikvorlesungen mit Saša Stanišić', Universität Zürich Homepage, 3 May 2017, https://www.media.uzh.ch/de/medienmitteilungen/2017/Poetikvorlesung.html [Accessed 20 July]), the author suggested that the wolves in 'Fallensteller' can be read both literally (given that farmers are indeed often threatened by wild predators), and as stand-ins for migrants and how they are viewed by the locals in the German provinces. This comment, however, was notably followed by a discussion between the author and the seminar participants on the role of animals as 'slippery' textual figures in both *Vor dem Fest* and in 'Fallensteller', i.e. as figures which feature both as metaphors for the human community, and in their literal function as animals, in the latter case giving both texts a strong ecocritical edge.

known as the 'Hitler-Stein' (*VdF*, 66) because someone had drawn Hitler's characteristic moustache and hair parting on it, using the holes left by the screws of past commemorative signs as eyes. Yet as Ulli, the garage owner, tells Lada, the boulder indeed once stood as a monument to Hitler, as it did to Wilhelm II before him and to Ernst Thälmann, the Weimar-era Communist Party leader, after him, in the GDR. The 'wir'-narrator comments, pessimistically, on the boulder's fate, which encapsulates the community's own: 'Am Sportplatz zwischen Vereinshaus und Kegelbahn steht ein Stein. Wir haben Namen und Hoffnungen daran angeschlagen. Hat nichts gebracht. Der Gedenkfindling gedenkt niemandem mehr. Aber er ist immer noch da' (*VdF*, 69).

During the feast at the end of the novel Lada will attach a sign to the boulder commemorating Juan Steffen, a geographer and explorer from Fürstendfelde who had become a famous peacemaker in South America. Both the 'wir'-narrator's matter-of-fact observation that the boulder is still standing and Lada's gesture can be seen as signs of the community's survival *despite* its troubled history, and of its present desire for renewal and progress. But I would argue they also function as an unsettling reminder of its need to identify with its own past, if necessary by celebrating obscure historical figures as local heroes, as Lada does. The boulder, then, stands less for the village's recovery from historical traumas, and rather for its readiness to ignore them in defining itself as a historically continuous entity.

These historical traumas, however, are alluded to throughout *Vor dem Fest*. There are covert or explicit references to at least four different 'eras' in the village's history. The figure of Poppo von Blankenburg, for example, presently Fürstenfelde's own 'Landmaschinenmogul', who renovated his family's baroque 'Landschlösschen' (*VdF*, 89), points to the survival of the landed gentry, and through it, of feudal structures into the ostensibly post-historical present. And while there are only few references to the German Empire before the First World War or to the poverty of the Weimar era, there are numerous references to the Nazi period and the Second World War, to the GDR, and to the experience of the Wende throughout. The most evocative references of this kind are, paradoxically, the most oblique ones: the complete omission of the period between 1939 and 1945 from the 'Leitz-Ordnern' (*VdF*, 123) containing the village's historical documents, for example, or the 'wir'-narrator's wistful contemplation of old, black-and-white village photos from

the 1930s, 'ein Schwarzweiß so schwarzweiß, dass es fast *braun* aussieht' (*VdF*, 277; my emphasis). As though oblivious to its own allusion here, the 'wir' reflects fondly on this time:

> Es sind gute Jahre. Wir sind vierhundert mehr als heute. Wir fahren von zwei Bahnhöfen ab und mit fünfzehn Automobilen herum. Der Optimismus zeugt Kinder. […] Wir sind städtisch für die Umgebung. Glauben an Arbeit und ans Vaterland, haben Arbeit und Vaterland, tragen Schleifen an den Hüten. (*VdF*, 275-6)

But the 'wir' knows that its nostalgia is deeply problematic and rushes to add, 'Die wohltuende Ahnungslosigkeit. Nach dem Krieg werden wir barfuß herumlaufen' (*VdF*, 276). Yet this disclaimer is itself problematic, in that it to some extent taps into politically controversial revisionist theories of German victimhood under the Nazi rule, which became louder after the *Wende*, especially following the 1998 so-called *Walser-Bubis Debatte*.[86] The references to the violent invasion of the Red Army in 1945 similarly emphasise German victimhood.[87] References to the GDR and *Wende*, meanwhile, are more ambivalent. The village is torn. On the one hand, it continues to perceive itself as East German[88] and struggles with the feeling of having lost its place in the world. On the other, it is not immune to *Ostalgie* and romatically fetishises GDR material culture from a historical distance. A 'VoPo-Uniform' (*VdF*, 29) is auctioned off during the 'Annenfest', for example, while GRD 'antiques', 'Fön, Nähmaschine, Dosenöffner, Volkspolizist, Dose etc' (*VdF*, 125) are exhibited at the 'Haus der Heimat'.

The Archive as an Alternative History

These references suggest that the villagers feel profoundly ambivalent about their history: they identify with the previous generations who had lived in Fürstenfelde but are also keen to comply with twenty-first-century demands for political correctness and tolerance. The events planned for the 'Annenfest', for example, include among other things an 'antifaschistisches Fahrradfahren' (*VdF*, 300), which will, in the end, attract eighty participants instead of the twenty envisaged by

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[86] See Robert Weninger, *Streitbare Literaten*, 186-207.
[87] E.g. '[Anna] hat [Herrn Schramm] […] prüfend angestarrt […], als er fragte, ob sie wisse, dass die Russen auf dem Feld unter ihrem Fenster Dutzende Leute erschossen hätten' (*VdF*, 184).
[88] '[D]ie Ossis im Mittagsprogramm [sind] immer nur Asoziale und Unverbesserliche. Erst am Abend gibt es normale Ossis wie dich und uns' (*VdF,* 148).

Frau Schwermuth, as well as a sermon by the priest, Hirtentäschel, on antisemitism, 'welcher in der bürgerlichen Mitte der Gesellschaft lauere, oft in den Mantel der Israel-Kritik gehüllt' (*VdF*, 301). As discussed in both previous chapters of this thesis, any critique of Israel in Germany and Austria is indeed frequently viewed as a surrepticious vehicle for antisemitism and is thus often, to the chagrin of both Jewish and non-Jewish intellectuals such as Eva Menasse and Wolfgang Herrndorf, considered taboo. In Stanišić's novel, this taboo is satirised, as when at the end of his sermon Hirtentäschel provides 'drei Beispielsätze, wie man Israel-Kritik üben kann, *ohne* – gewollt oder ungewollt – antisemitische Äußerungen zu treffen' (ibid.).

As these examples suggest, the villagers in Stanišić's novel are keen to *look* like they are righting the wrongs of previous generations, but are largely unable or unwilling to decouple their self-understanding as a community from the homogeneous community of their ancestors. The novel's epigraph consists of lyrics from the song 'On the Edge of a Cliff' by the Birmingham alternative hip-hop band The Streets, which Johann is listening to early on in the novel. The song's chorus is about the unlikelihood of one's ancestors having survived, 'successfully looked after and passed on to you life'. Johann is mesmerised by the thought 'wie krass unwahrscheinlich das ist' (*VdF*, 48) and imagines that his ancestors will proudly hear the church bells he rings in his upcoming bell-ringer's exam. Though Johann's fantasy of his ancestors surviving 'seit Anbeginn der Menschheitsgeschichte' (ibid.) is harmless in and of itself, it is symptomatic of the villagers' broader tendency to privilege their ancestral narratives over everything else, even over historical facts. In other words, Fürstenfelde's ancestral narratives are a kind of alternative history, a history in which real events are mixed with myths of the village's origin,[89] folktales, and legends.

The primary locus of this alternative history is the village archive. As Matthes confirms, 'these "old stories," which, having crossed many borders, the village bounds included, and having been conveyed by the *Fährmann*, are flexible and adaptable, are more significant than official history'.[90] The excerpts from the archive are mostly juxtaposed with the narration of the action on

[89] 'JENE SIEDLER, DIE SICH VOR HUNDERTEN JAHREN […]' (*VdF*, 95).
[90] Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 9-10.

the night 'before the feast'.[91] The archival tales stand out because they are written following archaic German syntax and spelling. They are not chronologically ordered, but rather positioned in such as way as to reflect on the action in the chapters preceding or following them. Many of them are warning tales, tales of passions, cruelty, and gore, whose connection to the chapters surrounding them is obscure at best. In other instances, though, the relation between the archive entries and the action in the narrative present is slightly more transparent.

For example, the brief except about the execution by hanging of the murderer Drewes[92] only serves to illustrate the reference to the 'Eiche' on the field next to Geher's farm, '[an der] über die Jahrhunderte hinweg massig Leute hingerichtet wurden' (*VdF*, 163). The story of little Anna's mourning mother, who admonishes her child 'es sole [sic] heldisch sein in allem' (*VdF*, 215), sheds light on the previous chapter, which consists entirely of a list of commandments starting with 'Sei heldisch' (*VdF*, 211-12). The archival tale of the mourning mother, however, is important for another reason as well. It is one of only three instances in which the archives feature a first-person singular narrator, pointing to the narrative authority of the archivist.[93] Most other archive tales feature the 'wir'-narrator in much the same way as the village's contemporary narrative, which gives the present-day community of Fürstenfelde the kind of historical legitimacy and depth that its *real* history does not possess.

However, the occasional, subtle appearance of a first-person singular narrator suggests that there has always been an archivist in the village, an individual like Frau Schwermuth, who exerts authority over the narratives by which the village community understands itself. The archival texts which feature a first-person singular narrator exemplify most succinctly the tension between individual characters and the collective, the 'wir' at work throughout the novel. Indeed, questions of individual and collective authority and discursive power, i.e. the power to decide on the legitimacy of different narratives, inevitably bear upon archival practices. Diana Hitzke and Charlton Payne have written on the role of archival practices in *Wie der Soldat das Grammophon*

[91] Though in other instances they are embedded within chapters in the narrative present. E.g. *VdF*, 231.
[92] See *VdF*, 164.
[93] For the other two see *VdF*, 70 and 152.

repariert in a way that is perhaps even more relevant to *Vor dem Fest* than it is to the author's first novel. Their analysis draws from Michel Foucault's conception of the archive in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). In this work, Foucault posits the archive as that which allows statements to continue to exist and to transform over time, not just as a physical storage space, but, as Hitzke and Payne write, 'a less tangible yet highly effective general system governing what can be said about a given culture'.[94] Crucially, for Foucault, 'the archive is irreducible to the consciousness of individual subjects'.[95] This qualification makes Foucault's conception of the archive particularly pertinent to the archive in *Vor dem Fest*. Even though Fürstenfelde's archive is administered and perhaps in part (re)written by Frau Schwermuth, the self-appointed archive manager, it remains a trans-historical collection of the narratives produced and sanctioned by the village community, which are meant in turn to sanction this community.[96] Frau Schwermuth's position is therefore an ambivalent one in that her own desire to hold on to discursive power, to retain her influence over the community's self-understanding as a historical entity, is at odds with her role in what Ernst Langthaler calls the 'Wissensfabrikation von Dorfgeschichte und Dorfgedächtnis'.[97]

This also explains the 'wir'-narrator's ambivalence towards her, its simultaneous respect for and mistrust of her. As discussed in Part II, for all her authority, Frau Schwermuth is also an outsider, one of the eccentric women in Fürstenfelde who are at once central to and separate from the collective. The 'Archivarium', as she calls the archive, contains texts which are supposedly centuries old, but whose mint condition raises the village's suspicion: 'Wir glauben eher unserem Verstand', the 'wir'-narrator claims, 'der sagt, es handelt sich um außergewöhnlich ungeschickte Fälschungen, als Frau Schwermuth, die sagt, das Gerät zur Regulierung der Luftfeuchtigkeit sei

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[94] Hitzke and Payne, 'Verbalising Silence', 195.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Matthes reads Frau Schwermuth's role in the light of a different theory of the archive. She draws on Jacques Derrida's reflection, in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), on the origins of the archive in the ancient Greek *archeion*, which denoted the residence of the (etymologically related) *archons*, a city's rulers: 'As the "document's guardians" the *archons* "do not only ensure [their] physical security, [but also] have the power to interpret the archives"' (Matthes, '"Weltliteratur"', 11. Matthes is citing here from Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics* 25.2 (1995), 9-63, here 9-10).
[97] Ernst Langthaler, 'Das Dorf (er-)finden: Wissensfabrikation zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis', in Nell and Weiland, *Imaginäre* Dörfer, pp. 53-80, here p. 55.

prima und tipptopp' (*VdF*, 127-8). Recalling Johann's earlier comment that 'die Chronik nach 1740 hat Mu abgetippt' (*VdF*, 49), the villagers' suspicion that Frau Schwermuth is lying seems justified. One archive entry included in the narrative further undermines Frau Schwermuth's credibility. This is the fairy tale of the 'Kesselflicker', the tinker who finds a ring that makes him invisible. This entry, which is inserted in facsimile roughly in the middle of the novel, is heavily edited by hand. By actually looking different on page from all the other chapters, this story accentuates the morphological irregularities of all the archive excerpts, with their archaic syntax and spelling, interspersed throughout the novel.

Most importantly, however, this facsimile insert strongly suggests that Frau Schwermuth's intervention in the village's narratives is invasive, even violent.[98] The original, printed sentences are crossed out, but still legibile underneath the sloppily, presumably furtively, hand-written corrections. The central hand-written chapter in *Vor dem Fest* visualises how self-appointed authorities within the collective silence and overwrite certain voices and historical narratives in the process of deciding on an 'official', dominant history. By disrupting the homogeneity of the printed text, then, this facsimile excerpt visualises the complex and antagonistic relationship between individuals and the collective, between autonomy and conformity, in *Vor dem Fest*.

Conclusion

As the above discussion shows, *Vor dem Fest* traces the productive tensions which give rise to collective narrative identities – tensions between history and legend, between individuals and groups, tradition and progress. The alternation between a first-person plural narrator with a suprapersonal perspective on the one hand, and the perspectives of individuals, both human and

[98] While never clearly stating that the handwriting in this part of *Vor dem Fest* is supposed to be Frau Schwermuth's, Stanišić does mention in an interview that the tale of the 'Kesselflicker' is meant to have been edited by a woman's hand in the novel, and that because of this, the handwriting in the published version is not his own, but that of a female employee at his publisher, Luchterhand. See: Saša Stanišić, 'Vor dem Fest – Ein Interview nach dem Preis', Interview by Wolfgang Tischer, *literaturcafe.de*, 15. März 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE9Ylqwd6lo&frags=pl%2Cwn [Accessed 10 July 2019].

animal, that the 'wir' narrator claims to subsume or exclude, on the other, makes the community of Fürstenfelde seem fragmentary and conflicted. Yet Stanišić's novel is not ultimately pessimistic about the possibility of a functioning community. Rather, it reveals the community to reside not in the 'wir' but in the sum of its unruly, individual parts. By transforming the concept of community in this way, *Vor dem Fest* is not only a paradigmatic contemporary *Dorfgeschichte*, but also a powerful comment on the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb*.

It shows that any kind of 'wir' premised on notions of sameness, cultural homogeneity, and historical continuity is illusory, whether it refers to Fürstenfelde, to 'autochthonous' German authors, or to authors 'mit Migrationshintergrund'. When Maxim Biller argues that 'migrant' authors should honour their transcultural experiences, he is also referring to experiences that he himself, as a Czech-born, Jewish author writing in German, shares with others. There is an implicit 'wir' that Biller identifies in *Migrationsliteratur* and that he pits against the 'wir' of what he sees as the 'autochthonous' German literary establishment. By fashioning a 'wir'-narrator undercut by the numerous individual voices which constitute it and which it fails to subsume, Stanišić anticipates the Biller debate by implicitly privileging a model of community which is necessarily inhabited by difference, rather than constituted through its exclusion.

Chapter Four

Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012):

Identities Fractured by History

Introduction

At the heart of Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* (2012)[1] is a (half-)Jewish woman's fractured biography set against the backdrop of the most monumental and traumatic events of the twentieth century. With its focus on how difficult it is to coherently narrate an individual life story, Erpenbeck's novel is thematically akin to Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* discussed in Chapter One. Both novels feature unusual plot structures which subvert the linear temporality of their protagonists' lives and both end up giving only an impressionistic, blurry, and contradictory sense of who these protagonists are. Indeed, the two novels can fruitfully be read together (and, as I shall argue in Chapter Five, also alongside Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe*) as attempts to capture the complexity of individual (women's) lives in narrative form. However, *Aller Tage Abend* is much more experimental than *Quasikristalle*, whose complexity results from the juxtaposition of multiple limited perspectives.

The protagonist's life story in *Aller Tage Abend* is not narrated from many different perspectives but is rather fractured at the level of the narration itself. It proceeds in a stop-start way, by means of leaps and interruptions which mirror the breaks and caesuras in the protagonist's life and family history. The novel is made up of five successive narratives, five Books, each of which either begins or ends with her death. Shorter chapters called Intermezzi are inserted between any two successive Books in the novel. These Intermezzi are mostly (but, as we shall shortly see, not exclusively) narrated in the subjunctive. Each Intermezzo hypothetically tweaks minute details from the preceding chapter which could have prevented the heroine's death. These inserts

[1] Jenny Erpenbeck, *Aller Tage Abend* [2012] (Munich: Penguin, 2017).

constantly destabilise and change the 'facts' of the plot, making *Aller Tage Abend*, much like Wolfgang Herrndorf's *Sand,* feel like an endless series of twists, red herrings, and other narrative dead-ends to the reader. Unlike *Sand*, however, *Aller Tage Abend* is not a plot-driven, suspenseful thriller, but meandering and painstaking, premised on a central paradox already alluded to in its title: namely, that death is not 'aller Tage Abend', the end of the world, but rather that which generates the narrated world of the characters and which gives rise to narratives of life.

Though the two novels are seemingly very different in style and subject matter, *Aller Tage Abend* is, like Saša Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*, centrally concerned with how individual stories and identity narratives intersect with, feed into, or undercut collective histories. Both novels, moreover, are interested in 'alternative' histories, though they approach the notion in very different ways. There are no legendary or mythical variants of collective history in *Aller Tage Abend* comparable to the archival tales of Stanišić's Fürstenfelde. Erpenbeck's novel focusses rather on the unrealised possibilities which inhere in *individual* narratives. Yet Erpenbeck's novel also reflects on how these possibilities are determined, and often radically restricted, by a collective history which is itself incoherent and fractured, marked by destruction and death at every turn. By repeatedly re-writing her protagonist's life story in *Aller Tage Abend*, Erpenbeck explores the kinds of historical experience and knowledge which create, and often destroy, a sense of self and identity.

The novel's protagonist dies five times, at a different moment in each of her five lives: as an infant in a remote eastern province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century; as a lovesick teenager in post-World War I Vienna; as an emigrant in the USSR in a gulag in the Kazakh steppe; as a celebrated dramatist in the GDR; and finally, as an old woman in a care home in reunified Berlin. Ironically, it is in the last story and while Frau Hoffmann, as she is finally named, has *not* yet lost her life, that the true extent of her losses and failures is most poignantly visible. She is plagued by guilt for abandoning her mother's Jewish family, who were deported from Vienna to the concentration camps while she was in the Soviet Union, and feels estranged from a new republic in which her ideas and life's work seem to have become irrelevant.

The protagonist's disillusionment after the *Wende* is one of the themes which reviewers and scholars most frequently draw out in their discussions of the novel. However, this focus seems

to be motivated more by Erpenbeck's own identity as a former East German than by the novel's – admittedly ambivalent – thematisation of communist and East German identities. Part I of this chapter will explore the merits and shortcomings of existing historical readings of *Aller Tage Abend* which regard the novel as being about the experience of communism and its fall. Part II will then address the structural paradox at the heart of the novel, that of a life narrative which is renewed and extended by death. Finally, Part III will focus on the forms of historical knowledge which are lost as a result of these recurrent extensions of the heroine's story – on those narrative strands which are foreclosed by each new version, and on family narratives and individual traumas which ultimately remain unacknowledged and unclaimed. These latent histories of loss, I argue, increasingly diminish the protagonist's ever-prolonged life story, and thus empty it of any sense of progression or overarching purpose.

Part I

A Historical Novel by a GDR-born Author?

Biography as Bias

As mentioned above, critics and reviewers frequently discuss *Aller Tage Abend* in terms of how it depicts the experiences of a generation who lived to see its ideological commitments and efforts go to waste with the fall of communism. This way of reading the novel, however, is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it assumes that Erpenbeck's identity and interests as an author have largely been shaped by her East German origins. Secondly, it not only inadequately accounts for the complex ways in which the novel's plot is woven into the changing tableau of twentieth-century history but also misguidedly ascribes to it a historico-philosophical mission. To be sure, my primary critique here is not that interpretations which focus on the novel's ending with the fall of communism and on its parallels with the author's family history are narrowly biographical. Rather, I suggest that such interpretations steer the reader's attention towards specific themes in Erpenbeck's novel (e.g. the experiences of German-speaking communist intellectuals before,

during, and after the fall of the GDR) at the expense of the 'bigger picture' of twentieth-century history, its complex form, and wealth of detail.

Erpenbeck's (*Selbst-)Inszenierung* as an East German and a Public Intellectual

Admittedly, Jenny Erpenbeck (1967-) frequently refers to her experience of growing up not only in the GDR, but more specifically in a family of respected East German intellectuals. Many of the texts containing references to her childhood and family history are assembled in her most recent book, the collection of non-fictional writings *Kein Roman* (2018).[2] In particular the autobiographical essays 'Wo die Welt zu Ende ist' (2006) and 'Heimweh nach dem Traurigsein' (2013)[3] in this volume evoke images and landscapes which, in the collective imagination of post-reunification Germany, are stereotypically associated with the GDR: Soviet-style high-rises, nuclear bomb drills, cityscapes of ruins and rubble. Yet most compelling about these essays are Erpenbeck's memories of the *Wende* rather than of her GDR childhood itself. Inspecting the demolition of her old school years after the reunification, she is belatedly overcome by a sense of loss and grief shared by many East Berliners, as they witnessed the transformation of the world as they knew it.[4] 'Mit dem Wegwischen der Trümmer', Erpenbeck writes, 'beginnt bei mir eine grundsätzlichere Art von Trauer, die über meine eigene Biographie hinausreicht', a process of mourning for the loss of 'kranker oder gestörter Dinge und Räume'.[5]

Other essays in this volume suggest that her sense of identity is just as strongly shaped by her family history, and especially by her relation to the women in her family, as it is by childhood landscapes, the regime change, and her sense of awkwardly straddling two historical eras and geographical regions.[6] The texts 'Ich werde ich' (2014), 'Hoffnung' (2014) , 'Zeit' (2015) and

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[2] Jenny Erpenbeck, *Kein Roman: Texte und Reden 1992-2018* (Munich: Random House, 2018). Hereafter *KR*.
[3] Ibid., 17-23 and 42-60 respectively.
[4] Yet Erpenbeck has also written about her experience of disorientation and anxiety in the immediate aftermath of the Fall of the Wall. See e.g. *KR*, 42 and 386-7.
[5] Ibid., 47-8.
[6] In 'Sich ganz weit verirren', she writes of the 'sinnliche Wahrnehmung einer unüberwindlichen Parallelität', and of a visceral knowledge of 'wie es sich anfühlt, wenn zwei Welten Zeit und Ort miteinander teilen, ohne sich zu begegnen' (*KR*, 379).

'Vision eines Kreises' (2016)[7] all deal to a greater or lesser extent with Erpenbeck's family history on both sides and how it has shaped her self-understanding. In some of these texts she directly mentions her paternal grandparents, the writers Fritz Erpenbeck and Hedda Zinner, who had emigrated from Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union, as well as her father, scientist, philosopher and author John Erpenbeck.[8] Considering how frequent the references to her family are in these texts, it is unsurprising that reviewers and scholars often take into account her belonging to a prominent family of (Eastern German) intellectuals when discussing her work, with one interviewer even introducing her as 'die Nachfahrin einer ganzen Schriftstellerdynastie'.[9]

Yet the wealth of existing biographical information about the author is often counterproductive for her reception, as almost by reflex, commentators point to traces of her family history in her fiction. Several reviews of *Heimsuchung*, for example, the novel Erpenbeck published right before *Aller Tage Abend*, mention that the house featured in the novel belonged to Erpenbeck's paternal grandmother, Hedda Zinner.[10] The reception of *Aller Tage Abend* both in the *Feuilleton* and by scholarship similarly centres on the similarities between the protagonist's story and Zinner's biography.[11] Like the protagonist, Zinner was born in the Habsburg Empire at the

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[7] *KR*, 61-4; 65-8; 69-71 and 72-8 respectively.
[8] Ibid., 63 and 72.
[9] Jenny Erpenbeck, 'Warum schreiben Sie über Dinge, die Sie nicht verstehen?', Interview by Gisela Steinhauer, *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 9 January 2015, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/jenny-erpenbeck-warum-schreiben-sie-ueber-dinge-die-sie.970.de.html?dram:article_id=308165 [Accessed 9 August 2019].
[10] E.g. Alexander Cammann, 'Sommerhaus, früher', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11 March 2008, https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/sommerhaus-frueher-11561270.html; Katharina Döbler, 'Großmutters klein Häuschen', *Die Zeit*, 29 May 2008, https://www.zeit.de/2008/23/L-Erpenbeck-NL and Martin Halter, 'Das Haus am Scharmützelsee', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 Feburary 2008, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/literatur-das-haus-am-scharmuetzelsee-1515514.html [All accessed 8 August 2019].
[11] For examples from the *Feuilleton*, see: Verena Auffermann, 'Eine Frau, was aus ihr wurde und was hätte sein können', *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 2 October 2012, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/eine-frau-was-aus-ihr-wurde-und-was-haette-sein-koennen.950.de.html?dram:article_id=223043; Helmut Böttiger, 'Und immer wieder der Tod', *Die Zeit*, 25 October 2012, https://www.zeit.de/2012/44/Jenny-Erpenbeck-Aller-Tage-Abend/komplettansicht and Cornelia Geißler, 'Fünf Tode, Fünf Leben', *Berliner Zeitung*, 27 September 2012, https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/jenny-erpenbeck--fuenf-tode--fuenf-leben-3780770 [Accessed 8 August 2019].
For examples of scholarly articles which mention the novel's autobiographical inspiration see: Anke S. Biendarra, 'Jenny Erpenbecks Romane *Heimsuchung* (2008) und *Aller Tage Abend* (2012) als europäische Erinnerungsorte', in *Wahrheit und Täuschung. Beiträge zum Werk Jenny Erpenbecks*, ed. by Friedhelm Marx and Julia Schöll (Göttingen: Wallstein 2014), pp. 125-43, here

turn of the twentieth century, either in Lviv, then still called Lemberg, or in Vienna. She emigrated first to Berlin in the 1920s and then, after the Nazis' rise to power, to the Soviet Union via Vienna and Prague. She gave birth to the author's father, John Erpenbeck, in Ufa, then in the USSR, where the heroine of *Aller Tage Abend* gives birth to her own son from her affair with a Soviet poet. Finally, like Frau Hoffmann, Zinner returned to live in East Berlin, where she passed away in the early 1990s after a successful career as a dramatist.[12]

Zinner's biography and the protagonist's life narrative in *Aller Tage Abend* are indeed strikingly similar, barring their exact birthplace and other minor details.[13] The interpretative value of these similarities, however, is arguably limited, though some critics make them central to their argument. Tim Menke, for example, suggests that the parallels between the protagonist's and Erpenbeck's grandmother's life story help illuminate the 'Geschichtsbild'[14] underlying the novel. Anke Biendarra similarly claims that, because of its relation to the author's biography and family history, *Aller Tage Abend* 'steht […] an der Schnittstelle von Familienroman und historischem Roman',[15] two sub-genres of the German novel which arose in the wake of the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s and continued to grow in popularity over the course of the 1990s. By considering the parallels in the novel with the author's own family history, Biendarra aims to show that a reading of the novel through Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'postmemory',[16] that is, as the narrative of one generation which is processing the memory narratives of a previous generation, is fruitful. While

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p. 126; Anna-Katharina Gisbertz, 'Zum Identitätsverfall nach 1989 in Jenny Erpenbecks Roman *Aller Tage Abend* (2012)', in *Identitätskonstruktionen in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. by Monika Woltig (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2017), pp. 119-31, here p. 119 and Timm Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit am 20. Jahrhundert: Jenny Erpenbecks Roman *Aller Tage Abend*', *Neophilologus*, 100.3 (2016), 435-42, here 440.

[12] See Claudia Schoppmann, *Im Fluchtgepäck die Sprache: Deutschsprachige Schriftstellerinnen im Exil* (Frankfurt a.M: Fischer, 1995), pp. 203-26 and David Pike, *German Writers in Soviet Exile, 1933-1945* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982), pp. 57, 151, 253, and 248.

[13] The protagonist's birthplace is admittedly never revealed explicitly, but there are references in the text to the 'kleine galizische Stadt' (*ATA*, 17, 62) in which she was born, as well as its exact geographical co-ordinates. These allow us to trace the references to the small Ukrainian town of Brody. The setting of the novel's beginning in Brody is arguably an oblique reference to Joseph Roth, Brody's most famous inhabitant.

[14] Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit', 440.

[15] Biendarra, 'Jenny Erpenbecks Romane', 126.

[16] Biendarra, 'Jenny Erpenbecks Romane', 127. Biendarra is referring here to Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997), p. 22.

these critics make circumspect use of the available information about the author and her family history, they tend to use this information to read *Aller Tage Abend* through the limited filters of genres such as the *Familienroman* and the historical novel to which, I would argue, the novel only tangentially relates.

Aller Tage Abend as a (*Nach-*)*Wenderoman?*

Yet even if we put aside the oblique references to the author's family history in *Aller Tage Abend*, and instead draw her own experiences (especially of the GDR and its fall) into our readings of the novel, we risk misunderstanding what the novel is trying to do. Recent scholarship does read the novel, and Erpenbeck's work more broadly, with reference to her identity as a former East German, as *Wende-* or more precisely *Nachwendeliteratur*. Derek Schaefer, for example, counts Jenny Erpenbeck amongst a 'third generation' of GDR authors. These authors, he writes,

> all spent their formative years in the GDR and all of them continue to live, at least partly, either in Berlin or East Germany. They experienced the downfall and end of the GDR, the *Wende*, and the post-*Wende* era at different ages, but their writing careers all began after German unification. These authors belong to a generation that has 'made it' as authors in post-unification Germany.[17]

Their writing, Schaefer argues, differs from that of their West-German-born peers, though not because it nostalgically dwells on the past. Rather, such authors assert their work as a contemporary 'minor literature' in its own right.[18] Acknowledging the distinct perspective of East-German-born authors, as well as the perspectives of authors of other backgrounds, Schaefer suggests, would help move the discussion away from the idea of a German *national* literature and towards the discussion of *German-language* literature instead. Such considerations are essential if we are to appreciate their work 'not only as an aesthetic art form, but […] as politically, socially, and historically critical writing'.[19]

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[17] Derek Schaefer, 'East German Literature in the 21st Century: Minor Literature and Alternative Memory' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2016), available by ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (10470895), p. 16.
[18] Ibid., 3.
[19] Ibid., 4.

Admittedly, it is possible to read Erpenbeck, alongside her GDR-born peers, as a 'minor' author. As the previous section showed, she has repeatedly given expression to her own feelings of alienation following the *Wende* in both her fiction and non-fiction.[20] By extension, it is to some extent fruitful to read the literature of GDR-born authors as a 'minority' literature which opens up dissenting political perspectives in the (mostly) consensual cultural politics of the Federal Republic in the past decade. However, there are two main problems with such a view, problems which also beset the notion of *Migrationsliteratur* discussed in the previous chapter: on the one hand, it assumes that the experiences of East-German-born authors were to some extent uniform, and on the other, it makes the political relevance of literature contingent on authors' identities, rather than, as it should be, on their texts.

Ariane Hans convincingly argues against over-emphasising the political import of literary works with reference to their authors' identities. Polemically, she claims that 'Literaturkritiker, die sogenannte Nachwendeliteratur von "anderer" deutschsprachiger Literatur unterscheiden, [errichten] in der Tat eine "zweite Mauer", was zu einer neuen Form der Kategorisierung von Literatur führt'.[21] For Hans, the only way for reception to go beyond this categorisation of literature is to focus on what she calls the literary-aesthetic qualities of an author's writings, rather than on his/her identity. In an interview with Hans, however, Erpenbeck herself takes a less categorical position on the subject, suggesting that it is impossible to completely ignore considerations of the author's own experience in discussing contemporary works:

> ich bin sicher sehr geprägt von meinem Aufwachsen in dieser in jeder Hinsicht anderen Gesellschaft als der der Bundesrepublik, dennoch habe ich mein erstes Buch erst 10 Jahre nach dem Mauerfall veröffentlicht, und das ist dann nun einmal keine DDR-Literatur mehr.[22]

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[20] According to Deleuze and Guattari's definition, one of the main characteristics of a 'minor literature' is what they call its 'deterritorialised' language, i.e. a language used in such a way that it intimates its user's experience of non-belonging to a majority culture. GDR-born authors' initial experience of not belonging in the new Federal Republic could be understood as an experience of such 'deterritorialisation'. See: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'What Is a Minor Literature?', in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986), 16-27. For a more detailed discussion on how I think Deleuze and Guattari's notions of 'minority', 'minor literature', and 'deterritorialisation' translate in a contemporary context, see my article 'The Identity Politics of Uncertainty: Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* (2013)', in Weiss- Sussex and Roca-Lizarazu, *Rethinking 'Minor Literature'*.

[21] Ariane Hans, 'Monika Maron und Jenny Erpenbeck: DDR im Zeichen der Moderne' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2014), available by ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (10086976), p. 5.

[22] Ibid.

While implicitly rejecting the label of 'third-generation GDR literature' proposed by Schaeffer, Erpenbeck's comment legitimises, to some extent, readings of her work as *Nachwendeliteratur*, readings which draw on her own political experiences.

As mentioned earlier on, *Aller Tage Abend* is indeed frequently read as a *Nachwende* novel which centres on the experience of the fall of the Berlin Wall. For Anna-Katharina Gisbertz, for example, the novel dramatises the trauma of the *Wende* as a substitute for the trauma of the Holocaust, which is only obliquely thematised in the novel. In her account, the trauma of the Holocaust is transposed from the level of the plot onto the level of the narration, where it is 'von der Erzählstimme […] in einem Wiederholungszwang durchgearbeitet'.[23] According to Gisbertz, the fall of the Berlin Wall comes to occupy the space in the plot left vacant by the suppressed Holocaust narrative. It stands in for the heroine's own fall down the stairs which does not, after all, occur in her own story in its last version. While Gisbertz's close attention to narrative elements such as repetitions and patterning is valuable, by insisting that references to characters falling in the novel ultimately point to the fall of the Wall (and by extension to the Holocaust), she reduces the narrative to a single point, i.e. the heroine's fall in the fourth Book. With its fragmented, meandering structure, however, the novel tries hard to eschew being reduced to a single 'key' moment.

More broadly speaking, critics' tendency to cast the fall of the Wall as the central trauma in the novel is a questionable approach. For Menke, the fall of the regime confronts the elderly heroine with the traumatic realisation 'dass sie ihre Lebensarbeit, den Aufbau eines gerechteren, sozialistischen Staats in Deutschland als gescheitert akzeptieren muss'.[24] This claim, however, disregards how the heroine's political views change over the course of the novel. The same heroine who in her youthful enthusiasm joins the Austrian Communist Party in the second Intermezzo is shown to feel foreign and isolated in Moscow after her husband is arrested by the Soviet authorities. Even when, in the third Intermezzo, her own life is spared, she initially remains in the

[23] Gisbertz, 'Zum Identitätsverfall', 125.
[24] Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit', 438.

USSR and eventually emigrates to East Germany not to stay true to her ideological convictions, but because of practical concerns.[25] Indeed, the third Book tracks the protagonist's ideological trajectory from conviction to disillusionment, and from enthusiasm about the world order envisioned by early communist idealists to doubt and eventually dread as she witnesses the enforcement of this order. Though the heroine does eventually have a successful career in the GDR as an author loyal to the regime, there is little which could be read as a profession of her political convictions to be found in the fourth and fifth Books, and no indication of her attitude towards the fall of the Wall, though her son's feelings about it are evoked in detail.[26] In fact, the *Wende* is shown to be more traumatic for her son than it is for the protagonist. This does not make it irrelevant or secondary, but rather makes it seem only like one of the *many* caesuras in the historical period covered by the novel, which encompasses the Eastern European pogroms, two World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalin's Great Purge, and the Siberian gulags.

Against Historical Grand Narratives

As the section above argued, there are various problems with reading *Aller Tage Abend* as either 'third-generation GDR literature' or a (*Nach*-)*Wenderoman*, even if Erpenbeck herself considers her experience of the *Wende* to be central to her identity as an author. Yet there is a second category of readings which focus on the historical themes in *Aller Tage Abend* which is particularly problematic, as they ignore the implications of the novel's non-linear structure, which will be discussed in detail in Part II below. These are readings which see the novel as programmatically countering historical grand narratives, in particular the grand narrative of communism. Menke proposes such a reading of *Aller Tage Abend*. By elevating 'die Zufälligkeit des Geschehens' to its narrative principle, he argues, the novel challenges the communist understanding of history 'als einer fortschrittlichen und vernunftgeleiteten Entwicklung zu einem Ziel'.[27] Biendarra concurs that *Aller Tage Abend* challenges teleological understandings of history by evoking the Angel of History from the ninth thesis of Walter Benjamin's 'Über den Begriff der

[25] 'Auf Einladung der Genossen, von ihr aus auch nach Berlin, ja, warum nicht' (*ATA*, 206).
[26] *ATA*, 264-7.
[27] Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit', 439.

Geschichte', a figure which helplessly witnesses the piling up of the debris of historical catastrophes before its feet as it is blown away from paradise with its back turned towards the future.[28] This figure, Biendarra claims, can help us understand how Erpenbeck tries, in *Aller Tage Abend* and *Heimsuchung*, 'die katastrophische Geschichte des vergangenen Jahrhunderts als poetisches Sediment festzuhalten, nachzuvollziehen und zu verstehen'.[29] Later she comments further on the Benjaminian slant of the two novels, noting that 'in ihrer geschichtsphilosophischen Dimension teilen beide der hier besprochenen Romane Prämissen der Geschichtstheorie Benjamins'.[30] Yet elsewhere in her article Biendarra describes both novels as 'Großerzählungen der Geschichte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts'.[31]

I agree with both Menke and Biendarra that the novel is sceptical about a progressive, rationalist model of history such as that propagated by communism. However, it seems to me contradictory to suggest, as Biendarra does with her reference to Benjamin, that Erpenbeck challenges progressive historical grand narratives in her own 'Großerzählungen', i.e. by means of *other* grand narratives. Moreover, both Biendarra and Menke, who has most strongly put forth the argument that *Aller Tage Abend* reflects on the failure of progressive conceptions of history, disproportionately emphasise the collapse of communism in the novel. 'Das Fazit des Romans', Menke writes, 'ist dann die Einsicht, dass mit dem Fall der Berliner Mauer und dem Ende des europäischen Kommunismus die sozialistischen Hoffnungen auf eine neue Gesellschaft gescheitert sind'.[32] By trying to draw out the novel's historical-political 'Fazit' or 'Botschaft',[33] Menke's reading imposes upon it precisely the kind of grand narrative which he argues that the novel resists.

To conclude this section, I would argue that all readings which present the novel as being 'about' the experience of communism and the trauma of its fall, or 'against' grand teleological

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[28]See Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.2, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 691-706, here p. 697.
[29] Biendarra, 'Jenny Erpenbecks Romane', 126.
[30] Ibid., 142.
[31] Ibid., 126.
[32] Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit', 441-2.
[33] Ibid., 442.

narratives, are, paradoxically, teleological readings, readings geared towards some form of narrative progress and resolution. In doing so, they neglect large parts of the novel, focus solely on the last two Books, and assume that the heroine only *really* dies at the end, as an old woman. Such readings view her death in each of the first four Books, rather than her revival in the Intermezzi, as being merely hypothetical. While it is admittedly possible, and even tempting, to read the novel in this linear, progressive way,[34] such readings gloss over the novel's complex, paradox-ridden structure, which I will discuss in Part II below. Ultimately, as I will argue in Part III, the novel is not only or not primarily concerned with history in and of itself, but more specifically with how historical traumas and caesuras fragment individual biographies by interrupting the transmission of intergenerational narratives.

Part II

Death as Generator of (Uncertain) Narratives

Avoiding Grand Narratives: Narrative Progression without Progress

When we look more closely at the structure of *Aller Tage Abend*, we find that it is hard to distinguish 'real' from hypothetical statements. This is because two grammatical moods, the indicative and the conditional, are used interchangeably and to different effects throughout the novel. In my view, the teleological readings discussed in the previous section disregard this element. They assume, for example, that the first three Intermezzi, which are narrated entirely in the pluperfect of the *Konjunktiv II*, the unreal conditional,[35] override the events described in the Books they precede, *even though* these events are narrated in the indicative.[36] At the same time, however, these readings assume that the final Intermezzo and final Book must be the real versions of the heroine's life story *because* they are narrated in the indicative. The idea that the conditional

[34] There are indeed many storytelling elements in the novel, such as a strong omniscient narrator and numerous leitmotifs, which allow a realistic reading geared towards the heroine's 'natural' death at the end of the fifth Book.
[35] E.g. '*Hätte* aber zum Beispiel die Mutter […] das Fenster *aufgerissen* […]' (*ATA*, 71; my emphasis).
[36] E.g. 'Aber sie *hatte* nicht *gewusst*, was in solch einer Lage zu tun war' (*ATA*,12).

can undo facts described in the indicative is admittedly counterintuitive, contrary to the common usage of language. But more problematic still is the implicit claim in these readings that indicative passages function differently as the plot unfolds, describing unreal events at first (in Books one, two, three and four) but decidedly real events later on (in the last Intermezzo and in Book five). If we read more closely, however, we realise that the use of the conditional and indicative in *Aller Tage Abend* is unstable from the very beginning, rather than changing suddenly and arbitrarily in the last Intermezzo.

Throughout the novel, the indicative is not only used to describe real situations, and the conditional is not the only way in which alternative possible outcomes are introduced into the narrative. Depending on the context, both grammatical moods evoke both 'real' and hypothetical events. Despite the partial use of the indicative in the third Intermezzo and its exclusive use in the final one, for instance, the tone of both these Intermezzi remains conditional. This is because different possibilities are introduced into them by other means, such as the use of 'vielleicht', or the juxtaposition of clauses with terms such 'oder', 'statt' or 'nicht… sondern', most prominently in the opening of the last Intermezzo. At the same time, all Intermezzi are rich in specific details about, among other things, the dating of events, the characters' interior monologues or the dialogues between them, so that the conditional narrative in these passages often reads as realistically as many of the indicative parts of the novel.

Decidedly, grammatical mood does not reliably indicate whether events are 'real' or hypothetical. The reader of *Aller Tage Abend* is therefore not justified in distinguishing with any certainty between the two moods, as Biendarra and Menke implicitly do. Instead, the reader must assume that the five versions of the heroine's life story are only as hypothetical or as real as each other. There are no textual markers which suggest that her death of old age in the last Book is more 'real' than her previous deaths. It is only sometimes assumed to be so because it is not followed up by another Intermezzo, presumably so that, for practical reasons, the novel can come to an end. Yet in the second Intermezzo the narrator self-consciously states, 'eine ganze Welt aus Gründen gab es, warum ihr Leben nun an ein Ende gekommen sein könnte, wie es gleichzeitig eine ganze Welt aus Gründen gab, warum sie jetzt noch am Leben sein könnte und sollte' (*ATA*,

137). Throughout the novel, the heroine's death and survival indeed remain equally and simultaneously ('gleichzeitig') possible in the narrative present ('nun', 'jetzt noch'), and therefore also equally 'real'.

In other words, *Aller Tage Abend* presents us with a heroine caught up in a similar indeterminacy as Schrödinger's cat in the famous quantum mechanics experiment: one whose situation is always uncertain, and who is equally likely to be alive and dead, suspended between life and death. It is precisely this paradox which sustains the heroine's life narrative, a narrative which does not end in her death but is motivated and extended by it in unexpected directions. As I will argue in the sections that follow, the paradoxical way in which death causes the heroine's narrative to continue by disrupting and diverting it not only prohibits any way of reading 'straight' towards the end of the novel, but also brings to bear on the central identity narrative a distinctly non-teleological understanding of history. In other words, since the protagonist dies and is revived multiple times, her life narrative is not geared from the outset towards her death as a *telos*, just as the historical events occurring during her lifetime(s) do not culminate in or aim towards any particular 'outcome' that could be seen as their *telos*, but are rather shown to be driven by arbitrary sequences of events.

On Death and the Generation of Narrative: Walter Benjamin's *Erzähler*

Walter Benjamin's reflections on the relation between death and storytelling in his 1936/7 essay 'Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolaj Leskows'[37] provide a helpful way of understanding the paradoxical way the protagonist's life narrative is generated by death in Erpenbeck's novel. In this essay, Benjamin establishes a distinction between what he sees as two diametrically opposed types of narrative: the novel and oral storytelling. The lives of fictional characters in novels, he explains, take on meaning 'nur erst von ihrem Tode her'.[38] We read novels in search of the meaning of life, which we expect to be revealed from the perspective of the

[37] Walter Benjamin, 'Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2.2, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 438-65.
[38] Ibid., 456.

characters' death, whether 'den übertragenen: das Ende des Romans. Doch besser den eigentlichen'.[39] In this sense, reading novels is always a teleological process, driven by the prospect of a future meaning which can only be formulated at the end of a fictional life: 'Das was den Leser zum Roman zieht, ist die Hoffnung, sein fröstelndes Leben an einem Tod, von dem er liest, zu wärmen'.[40]

Death plays a different role in Benjamin's conception of oral storytelling, which he understands as the practice by which an experienced person communicates the wisdom they accumulated over a lifetime to another person. Unlike the novel, which is meant to be 'consumed' in solitude, storytelling requires a listener who participates 'in der Gesellschaft des Erzählers'.[41] Its condition is the communicability of experience, 'das Vermögen, Erfahrungen auszutauschen'.[42] In turn, the condition of the communicability of experience is the imminence of death: the storyteller's experience, 'sein gelebtes Leben', takes on 'tradierbare Form am ersten am Sterbenden',[43] on his deathbed.

By this account, therefore, death is neither the reader's redemption, as it is in the novel, nor the end of the storyteller's narrative, but rather its reference point and motivation. 'Der Tod ist die Sanktion von allem, was der Erzähler berichten kann', Benjamin continues, because 'es ist die Naturgeschichte, auf welche seine Geschichten zurückverweisen'.[44] He explains what he understands by *Naturgeschichte* in this particular context by citing the short story 'Unverhofftes Wiedersehen' by Johann Peter Hebel, in which the passing of many years is compressed into a few sentences summarising wars, plunders, and the deaths of monarchs. Benjamin comments,

> Tiefer hat nie ein Erzähler seinen Bericht in die Naturgeschichte gebettet, als Hebel es in dieser Chronologie vollzieht. Man lese sie nur genau: Der Tod tritt in ihr in so regelmäßigem Turnus auf wie der Sensenmann in den Prozessionen, die um Mittag um die Münsteruhr ihren Umzug halten.[45]

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[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 457.
[41] Ibid., 456.
[42] Ibid., 439.
[43] Ibid., 449.
[44] Ibid., 450.
[45] Ibid., 451.

In storytelling, then, death is a means of 'keeping time' and of grounding a narrative within what Benjamin elsewhere calls the 'großen unerforschlichen Weltlauf'[46] of *Naturgeschichte*, that is, within a history which is not governed by a discernible causality or intelligibly geared towards progress or a finite, definitive goal. Consequently, the process of listening to or indeed reading a story[47] does not follow the same finite trajectory as the process of reading a novel:

> In der Tat gibt es keine Erzählung, an der die Frage: Wie ging es weiter? ihr Recht verlöre. Der Roman dagegen kann nicht erhoffen, den kleinsten Schritt über jene Grenze hinaus zu tun, an der er den Leser, den Lebenssinn ahnend sich zu vergegenwärtigen, dadurch einlädt, daß er ein 'Finis' unter die Seiten schreibt.[48]

While *Aller Tage Abend* is certainly to be considered a novel and its narrator is decidedly not a storyteller in Benjamin's sense of the word, the way in which death figures in it resonates with his idea of storytelling as a narrative of which death is not the end but the source and motor – a threshold which can be transgressed. Death, in *Aller Tage Abend*, indeed occurs regularly, and embeds the narrative within a non-teleological, non-redemptive collective history akin to Benjamin's *Naturgeschichte* as this features in 'Der Erzähler'.[49]

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[46] Ibid., 452.

[47] Ibid., 456. Benjamin suggests here that it is possible to conceive of *reading* such stories. We can therefore assume that the oral quality which supposedly defines storytelling indicates more broadly a communicative quality.

[48] Ibid., 455.

[49] The term *Naturgeschichte* is central to Benjamin's thought on the philosophy of history, and appears with a slightly different inflection in texts from different periods of his career. In order to delineate the meaning of the term in 'Der Erzähler' which I find helpful in my reading of *Aller Tage Abend* from the complex figurations of the term in his earlier and later texts, I offer here a brief, and by necessity lacking, summary of how it features in his main writings on the philosophy of history. From his early writings through to his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, Benjamin's concern with history centred around a critique of nineteenth-century historicism, the historiographical tradition spawned of the Enlightenment belief that mankind is on a course of constant progress. The figure of the Angel of History from the latter text on which, as discussed in Part I of this chapter, Biendarra draws in her reading of *Heimsuchung* and *Aller Tage Abend*, captures the essence of this critique of history as a narrative of reason and progress. Yet while in his late theses on the concept of history Benjamin is mostly concerned with proposing what he calls a 'materialist historiography' as an alternative to historicism, his earlier work reflects on the waning of an older, theological model of history which long predated the emergence of historicism with its teleology of progress. In his 1928 professorial dissertation *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.1, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 203-430) Benjamin uses the term *Naturgeschichte* to describe how, in the process of secularisation during the seventeenth century, the religious, messianic understanding of history was demystified or 'naturalised' into a flat, linear chronicle. The 'fall' into this *Naturgeschichte* from the eighteenth century onwards can also be understood, Benjamin suggests, as a spatialisation of history, its merging with the setting, the

Death as Narrative Space

The non-teleological reading of *Aller Tage Abend* which I propose here sees the protagonist's life story as enmeshed in and mirroring a 'natural history' of the kind Benjamin sees in Hebel's work, a history both driven and punctuated by death. Reading the novel like this means not looking for the heroine's likeliest, most realistic death, but rather tolerating the paradox of death as the generator of a discontinuous life narrative. A compelling argument in the field of 'unnatural' narratology, which as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, studies nonrealist, experimental and non-immersive narrative forms, is that such narratives require what H. Porter Abbott terms an 'ethics of unreadability'.[50] Such texts, Abbott claims, challenge us to read them 'in a full acceptance of their insistent unreadability',[51] i.e. without 'allowing default responses to override the immediate experience of […] unreadability'.[52] This does not mean that understanding such texts is impossible, but rather that they deflect or frustrate 'default', that is, identificatory or immersive readings. Similarly to Herrndorf's *Sand*, which alienates its reader by constantly evoking the protagonist's extreme pain, *Aller Tage Abend* involves the reader in the protagonist's (movingly evoked) deaths only to repeatedly distance her from the narrative by carrying on with

'Schauplatz', of human action and political intrigue (ibid., 271). Only in the use of allegory in the mourning plays of the German baroque, Benjamin argues, is a sense of that lost messianic history salvaged. Benjamin understands allegory as the rhetorical figure in which 'die facies hippocratica der Geschichte', history's dying face, 'als erstarrte Urlandschaft dem Betrachter vor Augen [liegt]'. With 'history's dying face', he is referring to the ruins of history, the marks of destruction and suffering, 'die Geschichte in allem was sie Unzeitiges, Leidvolles, Verfehltes von Beginn an hat' (ibid., 343). Allegory, in the *Trauerspiel* book, is a redemptive figure which breaks out of the profane, continuous 'natural' history, the backdrop of the baroque mourning play. While Benjamin's conception of *Naturgeschichte* in his early work is not directly useful for the present reading of *Aller Tage Abend*, it does help us better understand some of the unspoken implications of his use of the term in 'Der Erzähler'. See: Andrew Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and History* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings and Angels* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) and Tanja van Hoorn, *Naturgeschichte in der ästhetischen Moderne: Max Ernst, Ernst Jünger, Ror Wolf, W.G. Sebald* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016).

[50] H. Porter Abbott, 'Unreadable Minds and the Captive Reader', *Style*, 2.4, Series: Minds and Literature (2008), 448-66, here 463. Abbotts argument on the 'ethics of unreadability' responds to the influential argument by Jan Alber, one of the main theorists of 'unnatural' narratology, that readers always tend to 'naturalise' recalcitrant texts, i.e. to apply onto them the same rules and measures by which they understand real human experience. See Jan Alber, 'Impossible Storyworlds and What to Do with Them' in *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 1 (2009), 79-96.

[51] Abbott, 'Unreadable Minds', 463.

[52] Ibid.

her life story *despite* her deaths. Tolerating the paradox of death being (narratively) generative means precisely taking each of the heroine's five deaths at face value for the disruption that they are, rather than, as I argue the teleological readings above do, ignoring the first four.

Even though death constantly suspends the heroine's life story, it is also what allows it to be told again and told differently. By interrupting her story, her deaths also constantly expand it, foreclosing its ending and allowing other stories, about her and about others, to be told. Conceived in this way, her narrative is much more than the story of her life. It becomes invested and expanded with the stories of others, a repository of individual and collective stories and experiences: the heroine's own, but also those of her grandparents, her parents, her sister, her husband, her friends, her son. *Aller Tage Abend* thus reverses the hierarchy between individual and collective narratives in *Vor dem Fest*, in which the narratives of individual characters are inscribed into and risk being subsumed by the dominant discourse of the collective. In *Aller Tage Abend*, the protagonist's death opens up narrative space – that is, room for new narrative development – within her own narrative and the stories of others. A closer look at the recurring imagery of death will show that death is indeed mostly conceived in spatial terms throughout the narrative.

Grenze, *Schlund,* and *Loch*

Throughout the novel, death is evoked through references to limits and borders, interiority and exteriority. With such references, the narrative self-consciously reflects on the role of death as a recurring plot divider. The most frequent figure for death, for example, that of a 'Grenze' or 'Front', a boundary or frontier, is distinctively territorial. While, in a drawn-out moment which spans the entire fourth Book, the heroine falls down the stairs to her death, she realises that death, broadly conceived as a metaphor for radical breaks and interruptions, has been a constant in her life: 'Zu vielen Zeiten ihres Lebens hat sie irgend etwas für immer zum letzten Mal gemacht, ohne zu wissen, dass es das letzte Mal sein würde. Also war der Tod kein Augenblick, sondern eine Front, lebenslang?' (*ATA*, 226). The younger version of herself in the second Book similarly wonders, 'wie viele Fronten gab es in einem Leben, die einen das Leben kosten konnten? Es war so mühsam, all die Schlachten, in denen man nicht fallen würde, zu bestehen' (*ATA*, 104).

More often than as a 'Front', death is configured as a 'Grenze'. The term 'Grenze' is ubiquitous in the novel, referring alternatingly to actual geographical borders, to social restrictions, emotional boundaries between characters, or to the perceived borders which separate the characters from the rest of the world.[53] There are, however, numerous instances in which the term specifically evokes the delineation of the living from the dead and the presence of death as a boundary *within* human life. In the first Book, for example, the protagonist's mother remembers her grandfather rejecting her, after her marriage to a 'goy', as though she had 'schon die Grenze des Lebens überschritten' (*ATA*, 17); her husband too learns, on the night of their daughter's death, 'was eine solche Grenzüberschreitung in Wahrheit bedeutet, [...] was es bedeutet, wenn die Möglichkeit, den Rückweg anzutreten, nicht mehr besteht' (*ATA*, 26). Death indeed inhabits the characters' lives both as a caesura within them and as their constant horizon, the limit which constitutes them.

The most poignant spatial image of death in *Aller Tage Abend*, however, and that which reflects the narrative function of death most closely, is that of the hole or abyss. This image comes up in various configurations, the most distinctive of which is that of a 'klaffende Schlund' (*ATA*, 162), a gaping hole which could entice the living to fall into it. As she falls to her death in the fourth Book, the heroine feels drawn into that same 'Schlund, der sich da auftut und sämtliche Gedanken, die einer denken kann, in sich hineinsaugt' (*ATA*, 213). 'Schlund', here indicating a deep opening, is also an anatomical term used to refer to the pharynx, and Erpenbeck's text plays with this ambivalence, as when the word 'Schlund' is replaced by 'Loch', the use of which connotes a (malignly obscene) bodily opening.

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[53] E.g. *ATA*, 36, 64, 121, 144, 265. In fact, the notion of 'Grenze' is also a central theme in Erpenbeck's essays and interviews. She has often explicitly associated it with her experience of growing up alongside the Berlin Wall, which constituted a physical border between the two parts of the city (and the world). See 'Vision eines Kreises' (*KR*, 74) and 'Sich ganz weit verirren' (*KR*, 377); Jenny Erpenbeck, Ulrich Peltzer, and Ilija Trojanow, 'Politische Literatur: Gegen die herrschende Klasse', Interview by Ijoma Mangold, *Die Zeit*, 8 October 2015, https://www.zeit.de/2015/41/literatur-politik-gesellschaft-ilija-trojanow and Jenny Erpenbeck, 'Jenny Erpenbeck über "Wirklicheit" in Büchern', Interview by Ulrich Kühn, *Norddeutscher Rundfunk*, 11 October 2018, https://www.ndr.de/kultur/Jenny-Erpenbeck-ueber-Wirklichkeit-in-Buechern,journal1486.html [Both accessed 9 August 2019].

In the final Intermezzo, for example, the heroine descends the stairs five minutes later and thus misses the entrance to the underworld, 'der sich dann schon weitergeschoben hat und einem oder einer andern sein Loch hinhält. [...] Für alle, alle, alle und jeden und jede muss ein Eingang da sein. Dann hat diese Unterwelt wohl nur Löcher? Und sonst gar nichts?' (*ATA*, 241). The insistence on death being there 'für alle', in combination with the unusual image of death invitingly holding out 'sein Loch' points back to a point in the previous Intermezzo in which the heroine had considered selling the 'Öffnungen ihres Körpers' (*ATA*, 204) to survive. This in turn points to identical formulations in the first Book, when the heroine's mother also considers this possibility (*ATA*, 63). Death, then, offering up its orifice, is evoked in terms which are elsewhere used for prostitution. This association of death and sexuality is never made explicit, but it is particularly striking in its ambivalence: it makes a figure for death out of the source of life, the openings and cavities of the female body, which are also explicitly associated with life elsewhere in the novel.

In the fourth Intermezzo, for example, during the heroine's only sexual encounter with the 'sowjetischen Dichter' by whom she conceives her son, she thinks, in jagged terms, that 'sie hätte ihren Körper, und er wäre, und beide, und dann, ach, alle Öffnungen, wie? einfach verschenkt' (*ATA*, 205). The novel's recurring emphasis on both life-giving and deadly orifices points to the way in which death bores holes into the heroine's narrative only in order to bring forth new narratives. Though she does not comment on the parallelism established in the novel between corporeal openings and death, Andrea Schütte helpfully points out that another frequently used image, that of the 'Grube',[54] the burial pit, is also a 'Loch' of sorts, an opening that allows the story to continue:

> Der Tod bedeutet, in ein Loch zu fallen, das tatsächlich ein Eingang ist, eine Öffnung. In dieser unattribuierten Beschreibung passt der Tod in das Konzept des Romans, insofern mit dem Tod die Öffnung zu einer neuen Erzählung bzw. zum erneuten Anheben der Erzählung gegeben wird.[55]

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[54] E.g. *ATA*, 192, 232.
[55] Andrea Schütte, 'Grube und Grübchen. Jenny Erpenbecks Roman *Aller Tage Abend*', in *Spielräume*, ed. by Jürgen Brokoff, Elke Dubbels and Andrea Schütte (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2013), pp. 279-97, here p. 286.

The Death of Others: Five Stories of Mourning

Yet death not only opens up space for new life narratives in *Aller Tage Abend* but is also in some sense the subject-matter of these narratives, most of which are narratives of grief and mourning. As Iris Hermann suggests, each of the protagonist's 'Lebensphasen' is as much about her as about how other characters deal with the 'Trostlosigkeit' of her death through their customs, religious rituals, and gestures of mourning.[56] It is true that, in all but the third Book in the middle of the novel, the heroine is being mourned by others. Significantly, the novel begins and ends with mourning scenes. In the first scenes of the novel it is the protagonist's mother who is trying to come to terms with her death, while in the last it is her son. These scenes, like numerous other mourning scenes in the novel which cannot be discussed in detail,[57] are set in domestic spaces – familiar, familial spaces which the heroine's absence renders empty, silent, and cold. On the second page of the first Book, the heroine's mother is sitting shiva for her dead baby daughter, 'auf der selben Fußbank, auf der sie als Kind immer saß, wenn ihre Großmutter ihr Geschichten erzählte' (*ATA*, 12).

The description of the mother's mourning ritual is repeated almost verbatim two pages later, after the mother briefly thinks back to the day of the girl's birth. Yet this second time, the description is followed by a passage in which the mother realises that her mourning is not really her own, but a convention meant to console those who lose their loved ones:

> Jetzt sitzt sie auf dieser kleinen Fußbank aus Holz […], so wie sie andere in Zeiten der Trauer hat sitzen sehen. Manchmal war sie es, die Trauernden essen gebracht hat, nun hat eine Freundin ihr selbst Schüsseln mit Essen vor die Füße gestellt. So wie sie gestern in der Nacht alles Wasser, das im Haus war, ausgeschüttet hat […] weil sie es andere so hat machen sehen […], so wird sie jetzt sieben Tage da sitzen, weil sie andere so hat sitzen sehen […]. Wie Stege sind die Sitten der Menschen ins Unmenschliche hineingebaut, denkt sie, greifbare Gebilde, an denen ein Schiffbrüchiger sich wieder hinaufziehen könnte, wenn überhaupt. Schön wäre es, denkt sie, wenn der Zufall regieren würde, und nicht ein Gott. (*ATA*, 14)

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[56] Iris Hermann, 'Heimsuchung in Jenny Erpenbecks Roman *Aller Tage Abend*', in Marx and Schöll, ed., *Wahrheit und Täuschung*, pp. 145-56, here pp. 149-50.

[57] Such as the section in the fourth Book in which the heroine's adolescent son mourns his mother while silently contemplating her belongings (*ATA*, 233). There is a parallel section in an autobiographical text 'Offerene Buchführung' in *Kein Roman*, in which Erpenbeck describes the everyday items she inherited from her mother (*KR*, 30).

Though the mother's faith provides her with the ritual by which to mourn her child, it also burdens her with superstition and guilt, as she speculates that the child's death might have been a punishment for her 'sogenannte *Notzivilehe*' (*ATA*, 16), a breach of the religious law and betrayal of her ancestors' code of honour. This early scene thus casts a question mark upon the human language of grief, upon the role of received customs, traditions, and beliefs and the ability of communities to support those who mourn their loved ones. These questions will gain in urgency over the course of the novel. Yet in the very last scene, the heroine's son will also find himself inadvertently falling into set mourning rituals, crying for his mother, while at the same time wondering 'ob diese merkwürdigen Laute und Krämpfe wirklich alles sind, was dem Menschen gegeben ist, um zu trauern' (*ATA*, 283).

The novel thus begins and ends symmetrically, with scenes that evoke the characters' sense of inadequacy in the face of death. It is in such scenes of mourning, scenes where the disruptiveness, finality, and extremity of death is most strongly intimated, that the narrative generativity of death also becomes most visible: it is the protagonist's death which generates the narrative *as* a narrative of grief, and which shows this narrative of grief to be, in fact, also very much a narrative about life and the living. This connection between mourning and storytelling is powerfully suggested in the opening of the first mourning scene cited above, in which the protagonist's grieving mother sits on the same footstool on which she had sat as a child listening to her grandmother's stories, and which she has since inherited from her grandmother. The footstool thus becomes invested with narratives of both life and death, childhood and mourning – narratives which, as Part III will show, are eventually forgotten, ignored or lost.

The protagonist's own life narrative, however, is also fundamentally a narrative of grief. Though overshadowed by her own deaths, the deaths of other characters are far from marginal to the plot, not least because, unlike the protagonist's, they are singular, irreversible events. Perhaps even more than the protagonist's death, it is the deaths of others by which we keep track of the passing of time, which make the relentless course of 'natural history' felt in the background of the novel. Yet the protagonist's own mourning is also crucial to the narrative economy of her own story, as it drives her development as a character throughout the plot. When her father dies in the

second Intermezzo, for instance, she writes 'unter Tränen ihren ersten Artikel' (*ATA*, 138), a pacifist manifesto which she pieces together from scraps of his unfinished geological study on earthquakes, and joins the Austrian Communist Party. And much later, it is while mourning for her lost husband that she agrees to move from Moscow to East Berlin, where she will become a celebrated playwright. The deaths of others, especially of beloved men in her life, are transformative, life-changing experiences, driving her to political action, personal development, and professional success.

Considering the formative role of these male deaths, it is all the more striking that her mother's and grandmother's deaths are effectively silenced in and by the narrative. Throughout most of the novel, the heroine is unable to accept their fate. Only in the fifth Book, in the proximity of her own death of old age, does she imagine an encounter with her long-deceased mother, whom she had resented and antagonised while she was still alive. Yet her wishful projection, or perhaps hallucination, of a reconciliation with her mother only accentuates her inability to acknowledge and mourn her mother's death and indeed the deaths of all her relatives who were murdered in the Holocaust. The Holocaust is thus a central blind spot in a novel whose plot is driven by the protagonist mourning and being mourned by others.

The disavowed Holocaust narrative, however, is only one of several narratives which are lost through each disruption and revision of the heroine's story prompted by her deaths. In what follows, I will show that, though death *is* narratively generative, expanding and opening up the heroine's life story to other narratives, it is also disruptive, causing significant strands of the plot to be abandoned or suppressed from one version of her life to the next. While the narrative structure repeatedly 'resurrects' the protagonist and transcends the trauma of her death, therefore, it also lays bare her own incapacity to work through and overcome her family's traumatic history.

Part III

Trauma and the Fragmentation of Narrative

'Disrupted Genealogies'

As discussed in Part II, the heroine's death suspends her life story only to extend it into a different direction, one often defined and marked by the death of others. As this section will argue, however, with each extension she also appears more reduced, less free to determine herself, and, paradoxically, less knowledgeable. This is most poignantly suggested in the final Book, when the old and fragile heroine laments her 'Nichtwissen' (*ATA*, 279), all that she no longer knows or understands about the world and herself. The heroine's all-encompassing sense of loss and not-knowing in this chapter points to all the forms of knowledge which were lost through the breaches and diversions of her life: the gradually effaced narratives of other characters, the silencing of the experiences and private knowledge of other members of her family. The profound narrative disruptiveness of her death, the flipside of its generativity, thus becomes visible in the narrative through what Ulrike Vedder calls 'unterbrochene Genealogien',[58] that is, through and *as* discontinuities in the heroine's family history. These interrupted or disrupted genealogies are, much more explicitly than the geneaologies in Menasse's *Quasikristalle*, distinctly female and distinctly Jewish, though both novels end with the perspective of the protagonist's son. For the most part, however, the focus in *Aller Tage Abend* is on the relationships between the mothers and daughters of the protagonist's family, who are shown to have been estranged from one another for three generations, unaware of each other's grievances, regrets, and traumas.

The Beginning of All Suffering

The first of these traumas was inflicted on the protagonist's family long before her birth. The pogrom which killed the protagonist's grandfather and destroyed her grandparents' home is staged as the beginning of the family's 'Unglück' (*ATA*, 18), the traumatic primal scene to which all of their future misfortunes point back. It is narrated in the first Book through an extended parallelism with Lot's flight from Sodom from the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Genesis. Imagery of the protagonist's grandparents hiding to escape their attackers and of the grandfather being pulled by his murderers to the one side and his wife to another are juxtaposed with images of Lot being

[58] Ulrike Vedder, 'Lebensläufe: Zeit und Genealogie in Jenny Erpenbecks Literatur', in Marx and Schöll, *Wahrheit und Täuschung*, pp. 55-66, here p. 57.

pulled by the bloodthirsty crowds of Sodom by the one arm and the angels by the other. 'Die Engel aber', unlike the protagonist's grandmother as a young woman,

> sind stark, sie schlagen die Menschen draußen mit Blindheit, ziehen Lot wieder ins Haus und schließen die Tür zwischen ihm und den Menschen. [...] Sie hat nicht die Kraft von Engeln, es gelingt ihr nicht, ihren Mann zu sich nach oben zu ziehen, ihren Mann am Arm festhaltend bittet sie Andrej, den sie von Kindesbeinen an kennt, um Erbarmen, auch die Männer, die sie nicht kennt, darunter den mit der Axt, um Erbarmen, aber während sie die Hand ihres Mannes noch festhält, wird ihr Mann unter ihr von den Männern, die sie nicht kennt, und von Andrej, den sie von Kindesbeinen an kennt, erst beschimpft, dann geschlagen, Erbarmen, und schließlich unter ihren Augen zerhackt. (*ATA*, 21)

Upon closer reading, then, it becomes clear that the Biblical story is not, in fact, parallel to the grandmother's tragedy, but only accentuates her all too human failure to save her husband.

As a result of this, the grandmother loses her faith and begins to reject the traditions which identify her family as Jewish. Following the attack, she sells off the family home in the ghetto and moves into the town, where she takes over her husband's shop to save up for her daughter's dowry. On the basis of this dowry, she marries her daughter off to a heavily indebted non-Jew, thus selling off, to her religious parents' shock, 'für das Glück ihrer Tocher das Glück ihrer Tochter' (*ATA*, 52). Only in the first Book, however, after her daughter has been abandoned by her gentile husband, does the heroine's grandmother explain to her daughter that her arranged marriage was her way of protecting her from the antisemitic violence she had suffered herself. In the second and subsequent versions of the story, which unfold from the first Intermezzo onwards, the grandmother never confesses the truth to her daughter, and the two women become estranged from each other.

The protagonist and her own mother will similarly become estranged from one another in the third Book, after the heroine abandons her mother and sister to emigrate to the Soviet Union. There is one fleeting moment in the second Book, however, when the grandmother, who flees to Vienna to escape persecution in the provinces, almost confides in the protagonist, her granddaughter, by telling her the story of Lot.[59] Yet the protagonist never ends up learning her grandparent's story of violent persecution. Only in the third Book, as the heroine remembers going

[59] See *ATA*, 110.

to the church with her father as a girl, 'während ihre jüdische Großmutter beim Einkauf auf dem Naschmarkt am nächsten Tag vielleicht angespien wurde' (*ATA*, 176), does she begin to suspect the antisemitic abuse her grandmother had indeed suffered in silence, and the unbridgeable generational cleft that the heroine's mother's arranged marriage to a non-Jew, itself an indirect consequence of the pogrom, had opened up in the family.

The fact that the grandmother's experience of the pogrom is not passed on, that it gets lost to intergenerational memory from the second Book onwards, anticipates the suppression of the later Holocaust narrative. With the silencing of the earlier, foundational trauma in the transition from one version of the family history to the next, a transition which is induced by the protagonist's death and its undoing, the characters' capacity to share and work through subsequent traumas diminishes. The story of the heroine's maternal family's perishing in the concentration camps, however, cannot be entirely suppressed and reemerges in numerous oblique references. The narrative of the heroine's life and death in the Soviet Union contains subtle allusions to the Holocaust and is arguably an extended parallelism (rather than a substitute) for the absent narrative of her relatives' experience.

Though this is never explicitly stated, the two narratives are roughly contemporaneous. The third Book is set in the Soviet Union in 1938, the year of the *Anschluss* and the *Kristallnacht*, when the violent momentum of the Nazis' antisemitic persecution became visible across the Third Reich. It is only when the heroine is threatened by Stalinist persecution herself in that same period that she acknowledges, albeit hesitantly, the kind of discrimination her grandmother had suffered. The *timing* of the protagonist's empathy with her grandmother is the only faint clue of the genocide unravelling in parallel to the events in the third Book. Yet this faint clue retrospectively illuminates passages from the previous Books which seem to intimate in an uncanny way the violence which is yet to come.

In the second Book, for instance, the protagonist's grandmother remembers the pogrom during which her husband had been killed in a vocabulary which distinctly brings to mind crimes which would be committed a decade later:

> Gehalten hatte sie ihn, bis zum Ende, bis er nur noch ein Stück Fleisch war.[60] Aber hätte sie der Tochter das etwa sagen sollen, hätte sie ihr sagen sollen, dass auch sie, die Mutter, damals beinahe nur ein Stück Fleisch gewesen wäre, und die Tochter selbst auch, und unter ähnlichen Umständen auch ihre Kinder immer wieder nur Fleisch sein würden, die Große, die Kleine? (*ATA*, 121)

The wording of the grandmother's fear evokes images unmistakably associated with the concentration camps, images of people 'unter ähnlichen Umständen' to the pogrom being systematically reduced to mere matter, to 'Fleisch'. This reference in turn harks back to another story of dehumanisation and humiliation from the first Book, when the protagonist's bereaved father emigrates to the United States. Formerly a Habsburg civil servant with gold buttons on his uniform, the father is ordered upon arrival at Ellis Island to strip for the 'Prüfung des einreisenden Fleisches' (*ATA*, 55). The vocabulary used in this passage distinctly evokes the dehumanising medical examinations and experiments carried out in Nazi concentration camps, where all prisoners were forced to strip naked upon arrival.[61] These prescient passages from the first two Books are not only illuminated, in hindsight, from the perspective of the third Book, but also make the silence surrounding the Holocaust in the third Book all the more conspicuous, at the time that it is unfolding.

Stalin's Terror and Hitler's Mass Murders

As suggested above, however, the third Book parallels, to some extent, the Holocaust narrative it displaces from the main plot. At the end of the Book, the Soviet secret police break into the room which the heroine had once shared with her husband in a communal apartment in Moscow and deport her to a labour camp in nameless location in the Kazakh steppe.[62] The scene of her arrest is a muted version of the motif of violent invasion into a character's domestic space, which was introduced in the earlier description of the pogrom:

> Als der Fahrstuhl gegen 4 Uhr morgens, kurz vor Sonnenaufgang, in ihrer Etage anhält, hört sie es nicht, denn sie ist, am Schreibtisch sitzend, über den Papierbögen eingeschlafen. Ihre

[60] The choice of words here is identical to the first description of the pogrom in the first Book (*ATA,* 21).
[61] See *ATA*, 49-50.
[62] Like all other locations at which the protagonist dies in the five Books, this too is only unhelpfully evoked through its exact geographical coordinates (*ATA*, 192).

> Stirn liegt auf dem Wort *Wachsamkeit*, als die Beamten ins Zimmer kommen, um sie zu verhaften. Den kleinen, dunkelblauen Koffer, der schon seit langem neben der Tür bereitsteht, vergisst sie. Als im Haus wieder Stille einkehrt, steht er noch immer neben der Tür. (*ATA*, 189)

Unlike in the pogrom scene, the actual moment of violence is hurried over here. However, the references to silence returning to the house after the flurry of the invasion and to the belongings the protagonist had packed but left behind suggest the violence of her deportation in a way which echoes the silence of the pogrom's aftermath, when a small crowd of 'Schweigenden' (*ATA*, 22) gathered in the snowfall to see the ruins of their neighbours' house. The violence of the arrest in the third Book is not (or at least not overtly) antisemitic in nature. Yet by recalling the pogrom scene, it becomes not only invested with memories of past antisemitic violence, but also associated with the antisemitic arrests and violence unfolding simultaneously in what was once the protagonist's home country.

Indeed, the evocative representation of Stalinist violence throughout the third Book, which culminates in the protagonist's death in a remote labour camp, obliquely reflects the deportation and murder of her Jewish family in Nazi concentration camps. While the novel certainly does not *replace* the gas chambers with the gulags, it does draw on the similarities of the inhumane crimes committed by the two (ostensibly) ideologically opposite regimes. In one British review of Susan Bernofsky's prize-winning 2014 English translation of *Aller Tage Abend*, the protagonist's death in the Soviet gulag at the end of the third book is misread as her being 'arrested and shot' as part of Stalin's purges.[63] It is in fact quite clear that this is not the case: her death is attributed to the extreme Siberian cold and to harsh labour, which involved digging her own grave.[64] Nonetheless, the misreading of the scene in the above review suggests that the vocabulary used to describe the atrocities committed under Stalinism in the third book of *Aller Tage Abend* evokes an iconography which twenty-first century readers, in Western Europe at least, are likely to associate with the

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[63] Kapka Kassabova, 'The End of Days by Jenny Erpenbeck review—"only the inevitable is possible"', *The Guardian*, 28 November 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/28/the-end-of-days-jenny-erpenbeck-review-novel [Accessed 15 August 2019].
[64] See *ATA*, 190-2.

contemporaneous mass executions committed by the Wehrmacht during the so-called 'Operation Barbarossa'.

Yet the imagery of Siberian labour camps, Nazi concentration camps, and Wehrmacht executions is also to some extent deliberately conflated by the narrative itself. A short paragraph at the end of the second 'book' set in 1944, twenty-four years after the paragraph immediately preceding it, evokes the death of an unnamed young woman in a birch grove. This woman is presumably the protagonist's younger sister, who tries to save the deceased protagonist's diary:

> Im Jahr 1944 wird in einem Birkenwäldchen ein Heft mit handschriftlichen Tagebuchaufzeichnungen auf die Erde fallen, als ein Wachposten eine junge Frau mit seinem Gewehrkolben vorwärts stößt, und sie sich mit den Armen, mit denen sie vorher das Heft an sich gedrückt hat, zu schützen versucht. Das Heft wird in den Dreck fallen, und die Frau wird nicht zurückkommen können, um es aufzuheben [...]. (*ATA*, 132)

The scene could be read as describing either an execution or a deportation, a labour camp or death march, the evacuation of a ghetto or a mass shooting. Its non-specificity reflects the wide diffusion of similar forms of violence at that particular historical moment, while the focus on the 'Heft', rather than on the human agents, obscures the features of both the victims and the perpetrators of such violence.

The third Book alludes to the similarities between Stalinist and Nazi atrocities when the protagonist and those around her in the Soviet Union are shown to be partly aware of the parallels between crimes committed in the name of the two ideologies. In the protagonist's case, this realisation is tied to a deepening crisis of her identity and political beliefs after her husband and friends disappear at the hands of the authorities of their beloved 'junge und schöne Sowietunion' (*ATA*, 185). Her growing mistrust of the regime, however, is still paradoxically tinged with the vocabulary of Stalinist propaganda:

> Hatten sie [the protagonist and her husband] als ständig Gejagte so oft die Namen gewechselt, dass den eigenen Genossen die Erinnerung an das, was hinter ihren Namen lag, entflohen war? [...] Oder hatten sie, während sie gegen den äußeren Feind kämpften, sich diesem tatsächlich anverwandelt, ohne es selbst zu merken? (*ATA*, 180)

Though she worries her friends might have 'sich dem Feind anverwandelt', the protagonist

believes her imprisoned husband might have better chances of surviving in the hands of traitors to the regime, who at the time would have been 'Hitlers Leute' (*ATA*, 186). 'Oder will vielleicht Stalin selbst', she thinks, 'als Hitler verkleidet, der wiederum als Stalin verkleidet ist, zweifach maskiert, zweifach verlarvt und tatsächlich doppelzüngig [...] die kommunistische Bewegung noch einmal ins Hoffen zurückmorden?' (*ATA*, 186).

The protagonist's almost hallucinatory conspiracy theory that Hitler is a communist pawn whose role is to strengthen the people's faith in the regime echoes one of her communist friend's cynical, prescient suggestion earlier in this book that '[j]e schlimmer dieser Krieg ausfallen wird, [...] desto besser für uns. Damit die Massen sich von ihm [Hitler] abstoßen und uns in die Arme laufen, können die Verbrechen, die er begehen wird, gar nicht groß genug sein' (*ATA*, 168). Yet in her absurd conflation of Hitler and Stalin the protagonist seems uncannily lucid about the similarity of the atrocities committed by the two regimes. By reflecting on the murderousness of the Soviet state in these terms, the protagonist is essentially also bringing a consideration of the 'other' totalitarian regime into the narrative and, with it, an implicit acknowledgment of its crimes, which history proved to have been more than 'groß genug'.

A Multiply Fractured Narrative

Even though the protagonist is implicitly aware of the Nazi crimes, her consciousness of her own family's fate remains peripheral to her life story and self-understanding. Only towards the end of the third Intermezzo, when the war is over and the protagonist returns from the Ural Mountains to Moscow, does she remember her final letter to her mother, which had been returned to her 'schon lange mit dem Stempel *Evakuiert nach dem Osten*'. She calmly reflects that this must mean that she has 'in Wien also keine Familie mehr, wahrscheinlich nirgendwo mehr' (*ATA*, 206). Even though, as discussed above, imagery anticipating or evoking the Holocaust pervades the narrative from the beginning, even indirect references to it by the characters remain taboo.

The protagonist is unwilling to confront the meaning of the italicised, euphemistic annotation of the returned letter to her mother. As she is falling to her death in the fourth Book, she guiltily remembers breaking ties with her family while in the Soviet Union, only thinking of them

again ‘erst gegen Ende des Krieges, als sie durch ihre Arbeit beim Rundfunk erfuhr, was in den von Deutschland besiegten Ländern mit den Juden geschah’ and even then, only in a cursory effort to remember ‘wann das [letzte] Päckchen der Mutter gekommen war, 1939 vielleicht, oder 1940?’ (*ATA*, 214). She realises that her own returned letter, ‘so geschlossen und mehrfach abgestempelt, wie er zurückgekommen war, [lag] noch immer ganz unten unter den Laken im Wäschefach’ (ibid.). Her own son will find the letter, but will put it back unopened, even though he must understand the meaning of the ‘Hakenkreuz-Stempel’ (*ATA*, 233) on it and the Viennese address in his mother’s handwriting.

It is again the protagonist’s son who, in the fifth Book, while looking for a present for his mother’s ninetieth birthday in a second-hand shop in Vienna, will find the collected works of Goethe which, unbeknownst to him, his great-grandmother had salvaged from the pogrom in the first Book. Yet he decides to get her something else, ‘denn wie sollte er eine ganze Goethe-Ausgabe im Zug nach Berlin transportieren’ (*ATA*, 269). Inadvertently, then, the protagonist’s son not only passes over the chance to help his mother retrieve a dispossessed heirloom, a material reminder of past violence against her family, but also closely misses his only opportunity to connect with this family, causing the last rupture in the already multiply ‘disrupted genealogies’ which run through the novel. The stories which were hushed, ignored or refused, most importantly the family members’ experience of the pogrom and the Holocaust, will never be passed on.

Yet the ‘Goethe Ausgabe letzter Hand’, the ninth volume of which still bears the marks of it being damaged during the pogrom, and the ‘kleine Standuhr’ (*ATA*, 268) belonging to the protagonist’s grandmother will reappear towards the end of the fifth Book, in a passage which narrates how they ended up in a second-hand shop in 1990s Vienna. The circumstances of the heroine’s mother’s and grandmother’s dispossession and deportation are thus finally, retrospectively narrated in this chapter. Notably, this passage features an impersonal, omniscient narrator who focuses on seemingly secondary details and inanimate objects rather than on the characters themselves. The collected works of Goethe and the small grandfather clock thus become carriers of a traumatic history which is omitted from the main, perspectival narrative(s), functioning simultaneously as the *roter Faden* which sutures together the fragments of the family

history and the heroine's own life story and as the physical embodiment of their fragmentation. In other words, the continuity of plot created by the recurrence of these objects only accentuates the absence of historical, biographical, and familial continuities in *Aller Tage Abend*, and the diminishment and gradual erosion of familial memories and traditions.

The Goethe edition, in particular, does not function, as Helmut Böttinger writes in *Die Zeit*, as 'Ausweis einer bürgerlich-kultivierten, einer humanistischen Alternative [zu den Geschehnissen]',[65] but precisely as a constant reminder of the *betrayal* of bourgeois, humanistic values and traditions by the ideologues of the twentieth century.[66] As the edition belonged to the first Jewish character in the novel to die a violent death, the protagonist's grandfather, its continued presence only accentuates his absence, which hangs over subsequent generations like an omen of their future suffering. In all subsequent versions of the protagonist's life story, moreover, the Goethe edition remains closed.[67] No-one reads it, though various characters drag it along from one apartment to the next. Like its owners, it is uprooted by the upheaval and violence of the times; unlike them, it does survive the turbulence, but only to end up unwanted in a second-hand shop. It is therefore no marker of a tradition which could be revived, of a 'humanistischen Alternative'. Rather, the survival of the edition only emphasises how completely the tradition which had once ascribed value to it has been neglected, if not destroyed altogether.

Even more so than the Goethe edition, however, it is the 'Standuhr' from the protagonist's first home which bears witness to the rupture of familial and cultural traditions in the wake of the Holocaust. From the flashback in the fifth Book we learn that, even though it kept ticking after the grandmother's deportation, 'die kleine Standuhr ist […] zum Stillstand gekommen' when it was confiscated from the 'Leerräumen der jüdischen Sammelwohnung' by the Gestapo (*ATA*, 272). That the Jewish grandmother's clock stops during these events is a thinly veiled reference to the Holocaust as 'aller Tage Abend', as the end of the long history of Jewish life as part of the European community. Yet the narrative soon covers up the quietly apocalyptic tone of this

[65] Böttiger, 'Und immer wieder der Tod'.
[66] See also Menke, 'Erinnerungsarbeit', 411.
[67] See *ATA*, 52 and 131.

moment with bitter irony: a young Nazi officer's widow and fervent antisemite takes it home, along with a little suitcase containing the Goethe collection, winds it up, and uses it until she dies. The clock and the Goethe collection thus have an afterlife of their own, a life which outlasts and, in some sense, betrays the lives of their original owners. Once so embedded within the fabric of the heroine's life and family history, these objects are lost to her family and instead appropriated by the side of the perpetrators. As objects they are unable to resist change and witness it with indifference. Yet as they carry the physical traces of the trauma and violence that they witness through time, they make these experiences potentially (but, the ending suggests, not actually) readable to subsequent generations.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these family heirlooms fail to interconnect the generations of the protagonist's family separated by traumatic experience and the lost or repressed knowledge about it. In the end, they only exist as the measure of what has been lost and damaged in the characters' personal and collective histories, accentuating how digressive the narrative of *Aller Tage Abend* is as a whole. From the first Intermezzo onwards, the narrative unfolds by constantly taking stock of what has been wasted and lost and what might still be saved. There is a characteristically self-reflexive reference in the first Intermezzo which, I would argue, constitutes the perfect allegory for the paradoxical narrative of the novel. Going back another generation, the passage describes how the protagonist's great-grandmother, her mother's own beloved grandmother, braids the mother's hair while singing a little song,

> ein Liedchen, von einem Mann, der aus einem alten Stück Stoff einen Rock macht, aus dem Rock, als er zerschlissen ist, eine Weste, aus der Weste, als sie zerschlissen ist, ein Tuch, aus dem Tuch, als es zerschlissen ist, eine Kappe, aus der Kappe, als sie zerschlissen ist, einen Knopf, und aus dem Knopf ein Garnichts, aus dem Garnichts aber am Ende dies Liedchen. (*ATA*, 72)[68]

[68] This song will be repeated in the second Book, as the heroine's family are waiting by her deathbed (*ATA*, 124).

Like the piece of fabric in the song, the protagonist's life narrative is simultaneously extended and reduced – indeed, worn thin precisely by being constantly extended. As I showed in Part I, each of her five deaths creates room for a new narrative of life. Death is therefore, paradoxically, a creative principle in the novel, offering scope for reinvention, renewal, and new beginnings. Yet with each new start in the protagonist's biography, it becomes clearer that her bonds to her family are fraying and that traditions, memories, and narratives which were passed on from generation to generation are getting lost, silenced, or forgotten. These repressed narratives, however, carry forms of the historical knowledge and experience which underpin both the family's collective identity and the protagonist's own.

The grandmother's song encapsulates this central tension between the protagonist's ever-extended life narrative on the one hand and the stories of others, stories which are diminished and lost, on the other. Like the 'Stück Stoff' in the song, the protagonist's life finally ends when, in the fifth Book, she has lost her own memories of the past, though this oblivion is preceded by the loss of those family narratives which could have completed her own life story. Ultimately, then, *Aller Tage Abend* is much more than a novel about the fall of the GDR, or even about the successive catastrophes and crimes of the twentieth century. By reflecting on the precariousness of transgenerational memories, it questions the very idea that biographies and identities can be coherently or meaningfully (re)constructed by means of narrative.

Chapter Five

Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012):

Authorial Identity in Excess

Introduction

Like Eva Menasse's *Quasikristalle* and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend*, which were discussed in Chapters One and Four respectively, Felicitas Hoppe's *Hoppe* (2012)[1] centres on the life story of a female protagonist, tracing the experiences of one 'Felicitas Hoppe'[2] over several decades. Though both Menasse's and Erpenbeck's narratives feature experimental elements (albeit, as we saw, to a different degree and to different effects), they pale in comparison to *Hoppe*, which is so self-reflexive and complex that, especially towards the end, it becomes almost unreadable. There is no conventional plot progression or sense of suspense in *Hoppe* as there is in Herrndorf's *Sand* and to some extent Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest*. Instead, there is only an unlikely and seemingly random accumulation of events and subplots. Neither is there, as there is in both *Sand* and in *Aller Tage Abend* (and arguably also in the other two texts), any scope for the reader to identify with its elusive protagonist, or indeed with any other character. Analysing the narrative not only in terms of plot but also in terms style and structure poses considerable challenges to the critic, who has to disentangle its seemingly endless loops of (self-)referentiality.

It is precisely because of these qualities that *Hoppe* undermines much more radically and explicitly than any other text in this thesis the constructs and labels which sustain its author's identity. The novels discussed in Chapters One to Four all present us with fragmentary, digressive

[1] Felicitas Hoppe, *Hoppe* [2012] (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2013).
[2] For the sake of clarity, I will hereafter refer to the protagonist as 'Felicitas Hoppe', with the name always in quotation marks. The name never features in this way in the novel, in which the author and her namesake, the protagonist, are deliberately confused. When citing from the original, therefore, I will not use quotation marks. All quotations from the novel, however, should be understood as referring to the protagonist, not the author.

or obscure narratives which subvert individual and collective identities. *Hoppe*, however, explodes the very notion of an identity narrative by merging the protagonist, narrator, and author into one solipsistic entity. By doing so, it also collapses the conventional boundaries between different literary genres. On the back cover of the paperback edition, we read that *Hoppe* is 'Hoppes Traumbiografie, in der Hoppe von einer anderen Hoppe erzählt'. The front cover, meanwhile, describes it as a 'Roman'. Given these contradictory claims, it is unsurprising that much ink has been spilt debating whether *Hoppe* is better read as a novel, a biography, or an autobiography.[3]

From the first page onwards, it subverts the conventions of all three genres. Chapter '0' [nil], an extract from (the real) Felicitas Hoppe's Wikipedia page, states her date and place of birth and profession. Immediately afterwards, however, we are warned that most information available on the author is 'reine Erfindung' (*H,* 14). From then on, a seemingly authoritative third-person narrator undertakes to explore the 'truth' about 'Felicitas Hoppe'. Her early experiences and influences are painstakingly reconstructed on the basis of her unpublished childhood writings and later published work (some of which is the real Hoppe's own), as well as from other characters' writings and oral testimonies. These characters include several fictional literary critics who are supposedly commenting on 'Hoppe's' work. Occasionally, the narrator annotates these sources, confusingly signing the annotations with the initials 'fh'. Because of 'fh', the narrative sustains throughout the tone of a well-researched biography.

Yet the reader can never quite shake off the impression that the events ostensibly pieced together from these 'primary' sources are not only presented without any logical sequence, but

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[3] See e.g. Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner, 'Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin zwischen Tradition und Transmoderne: Eine Einführung', in *Ehrliche Erfindungen: Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin zwischen Tradition und Transmoderne*, ed. by Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), pp. 15-41; Annette Keck, 'Vom Warten und Reisen: Autorschaftsinszenierungen bei Glavinic und Hoppe', in *Warten als Kulturmuster*, ed. by Daniel Kazmaier, Julia Kerscher and Xenia Wotschal (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016), pp. 23-34; Brigitta Krumrey, 'Autofiktionales Schreiben nach der Postmoderne? Felicitas Hoppes *Hoppe*', in *Realitätseffekte in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur: Schreibweisen nach der Postmoderne?*, ed. by Birgitta Krumrey, Ingo Vogler and Katharina Derlin (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), pp. 277-92; Ritchie Robertson, 'Felicitas Hoppe als letzte deutsche Reisende', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen,* pp.45-52 and Antonius Weixler, '"Dass man mich nie für vermisst erklärt hat, obwohl ich seit Jahren verschollen bin." Autorschaft, Autorität und Authentizität in Felicitas Hoppes *Hoppe* (2012)', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen*, pp. 359-88.

also fundamentally unlikely. The protagonist travels around the world, lives in Canada, Australia, and the US, gives up promising careers as a hockey player and conductor, has youthful love affairs with a (real-life) hockey legend, a (fictional) blind cricket player, and the (fictional) descendant of a (real-life) German-Australian vintner. All the while, she writes letters to her four (according to the novel, imaginary) siblings in the Lower Saxon town of Hamelin, which is also where the real Hoppe and her four (real) siblings grew up. Indeed, the author's own reality is thus overtaken by fiction at every turn of the plot, and each fiction intersects with or gives rise to multiple others. The very fact that the narrative contains autobiographical elements makes it seems all the more implausible, paradoxically compelling us to read *Hoppe* as fiction. As Florian Lippert puts it, 'die Besonderheit [von *Hoppe*] besteht darin, dass wir die "biografischen" Details der Figur als biografische Details *der realen Autorin* lesen müssen [i.e. as *auto*biographical elements], um dem Roman als Roman gerecht zu werden'.[4]

As this remark resonates with my own reading, I will refer to *Hoppe* as a 'novel', despite its self-conscious flirtation with (auto)biography. My focus will be on how *Hoppe* engages with, parodies, and ultimately completely undermines its author's identity and reputation and by extension the mechanisms of the entire *Literaturbetrie*b which sustain them. Unlike all other authors discussed so far, Hoppe does not have a background, family history or any other specific identity (apart from her being a woman) which can be invested with any particular political significance. Yet as we shall see, the reception of her work still foregrounds whatever information is available on her background as a means of interpreting her fiction, despite (or because of) her distinctly elusive way of inhabiting her public persona. Part I will explore the discourses and ideas which feed into the perception of Hoppe's being a demanding, self-reflexive, 'strong' author. Part II will look more closely at the complex ways in which narrator, protagonist, and author are aligned beneath the ostensibly polyphonic, crowded narrative of *Hoppe*. Part III, finally, will show how, by foregrounding its own solipsism, the narrative mocks its author's perceived mastery and

[4] Florian Lippert, 'Auto(r)fiktionen: Metaisierung als Wechsel narrativer und sozialer Frames am Beispiel von Felicitas Hoppes *Hoppe* (2012)', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen*, pp. 343-58, here p. 349; emphasis in the original.

ultimately renders her identity practically illegible. My aim is to show that even though with *Hoppe* the author attempts to reclaim her own public image and life narrative, she ends up, whether intentionally or not, making herself unintelligible.

Part I

Hoppe's 'Strong' Authorship

Hoppe Before and After the Büchner Prize

As mentioned above, Felicitas Hoppe (1960-) has a reputation for being a 'difficult' author, a typical 'Germanistenautorin' whose erudite references and complex plots only scholars of German literature can appreciate. This reputation was well established by 2012, the year she published *Hoppe* and came to the attention of the broader public for winning the Büchner Prize, the most important (and best paid) literary award in Germany.[5] In a 2008 study, Frank Thomas Grub observes a number of topoi which newspaper critics reiterate in relation to Hoppe's work, such as the view that 'eine Darstellung des Inhalts [ihrer Werke] problematisch, wenn nicht gar unmöglich sei'.[6] While this view has been challenged to some extent in the reception of *Hoppe*, as there have been reviewers and scholars who seriously engage with the novel's 'Inhalt', its plot,[7] other clichés about Hoppe's work still hold strong. The '"Topos des Außergewöhnlichen", der bei lobenden Rezensionen gerade auffällt',[8] i.e. the perception that her work is incomparable and thus difficult

[5] Michaela Holdenried writes that before the Büchner Prize Hoppe's work was 'ein Geheimtipp unter Literaturwissenschaftlern und in einem kleinen Teil der literarischen Öffentlichkeit geblieben [...], im Schatten des Mainstreams', often surrounded by the 'Ruch des Unzeitgemäßen, ja Extravaganten oder gar Hermetischen'. Michaela Holdenried, 'Introduction', in *Felicitas Hoppe: Das Werk*, ed. by Michaela Holdenried (Berlin: Schmidt, 2015), pp. 7-10, here p. 7.
[6] Frank Thomas Grub, 'Suchbewegungen: Felicitas Hoppe im Spiegel der Literaturkritik', in *Felicitas Hoppe im Kontext der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. by Stefan Neuhaus and Martin Hellström (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2008), 69-88, here 71.
[7] For an example of such a review see Christoph Schröder, 'Was ist hier schon echt?', *taz*, 15 May 2012, https://taz.de/!5093817/ [Accessed 22 August 2019]. The only scholarly article that does so too is by Gaby Pailer, '*Hoppe*, Hockey und der reisende Puck. Selbst(er)findung und kanadische Kindheit in Felicitas Hoppes fiktionaler Auto/Biografie', in Holdenried, *Felicitas Hoppe: Das Werk*, pp. 161-72.
[8] Grub, 'Suchbewegungen', 71.

to categorise, is still often reiterated in relation to her writings, as is the more negative cliché that her style is 'irritierend',[9] i.e. confusing or vexing.[10]

Indeed, *Hoppe* only seems to have reinforced the view shared by some of her critics that the eccentricity and complexity of Hoppe's fiction renders it irrelevant or pointless, and consequently unworthy of the prestige that comes with the Büchner Prize. As Stefan Neuhaus helpfully points out, the debate which surrounded Hoppe's winning of the prize merely reiterated the positions of a century-old debate between formalist and anti-formalist (that is, realist) models of literary fiction or, as Neuhaus writes, the debate about 'd[as] Primat von Selbstreferenz oder Fremdreferenz'.[11] Reviewers belonging to the anti-formalist camp argue that Hoppe's writing is frivolous, lacks relevance beyond itself and is therefore devoid of relatable characters and situations.[12] Those in the opposite camp, however, praise her formally elaborate, highly allusive prose.[13] A third group of critics try to reconcile the two positions by stressing that Hoppe's original prose is pleasurable to read despite being largely non-identificatory.[14]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] For an example of a review building on the cliché that Hoppe's prose is 'irritierend', see Steffen Martus, 'Das eiskalte Ritterspiel', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 3 May 2012, https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/eiskalte-ritterspiel-11321489.html [Accessed 22 August 2019].

[11] Stefan Neuhaus, '"Geniestreich" oder "artige Häkeldeckchenprosa"?', 298.

[12] E.g. Thomas Steinfeld, 'Eine mutlose Entscheidung. Felicitas Hoppe erhält den Georg-Büchner-Preis', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 May 2012, available at https://archiv.szarchiv.de/Portal/restricted/ExtendedResultList.act [Accessed 26 August 2019] and Stefan Ender, 'Stillleben mit Schaumrollen und Häkeldecken', *Falter*, 23 May 2012, https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20120523/stillleben-mit-schaumrollen-und-haekeldecken/1516320058 [Accessed 26 August 2019]). Neuhaus clearly rejects both of these as examples of 'schlechte Rezension[en]', '"Geniestreich" oder "artige Häckeldeckchenprosa"?', 300.

[13] E.g. Richard Kämmerlings, 'Schreiben ist Träumen', *Die Welt*, 16 May 2012, available at http://epaper.welt.de/archiv/list/?etag=2012-05-16 [Accessed 26 August 2019]. See also Richard Kämmerlings and Tilman Krause, 'Wie gut ist die Büchnerpreisträgerin?', *Die Welt am Sonntag*, 20 May 2012, available at http://epaper.welt.de/wams/archiv/list/?etag=2012-05-20 [Accessed 26 August 2019].

[14] Helmut Böttiger, 'Taktstock und Lippenstift', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 13 May 2012, available at https://www.buecher.de/shop/hamburg/hoppe/hoppe-felicitas/products_products/detail/prod_id/38080525/ [Accessed 22 August 2019]; Heinrich Detering, 'Eine ganze Horde von Stieren bei den Hörnern gepackt', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 March 2012, https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/felicitas-hoppe-hoppe-eine-ganze-horde-von-stieren-bei-den-hoernern-gepackt-11669871.html [Accessed 26 August 2019] and Ijoma Mangold, 'Ich ist ein Spiel mit den Worten', *Die Zeit*, 24 May 2012, https://www.zeit.de/2012/22/L-Hoppe [Accessed 22 August 2019]. See also Neuhaus, "Geniestreich" oder "artige Häkeldeckchenprosa"?', 301-2.

With *Hoppe*, I argue, Hoppe engages with the arguments used in this debate, most of which had already been formulated prior to 2012, with respect to her earlier publications. However, she does so without any intention to defend herself against accusations of difficulty or frivolity. Rather, she responds to such accusations with self-parody, by teasingly taking the kind of formal arabesques and self-referentiality she is criticised for to staggering heights. She does so, however, not to show off her stylistic mastery and capacity for playful self-reflection, but conversely to exaggerate and mock those features of her writing which have contributed to her reputation in the first place. As I will explain in the next section, being a 'strong' author connotes not only mastery, but also a self-reflexive, performative way of being in the public eye. It means not only having a trademark style, but also a distinctive, deliberate way of inhabiting one's public persona. With *Hoppe*, Hoppe perfomatively embraces her own public image in extreme and ultimately self-defeating ways.

The Model of 'Strong' Authorship

The notion of 'strong' authorship appeared in German literary criticism in the early 2000, in the wake of the influential argument for the 'Rückkehr des Autors'. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the proclamation of the 'return of the author' was essentially a demand to bring the author back into the scope of scholarly consideration not only as creator of the literary text, but also as a public figure within a complex cultural environment. In other words, it countered the 'weak' poststructuralist conception of the author as an irrelevant extratextual figure with a 'strong' conception of the literary author as performing a public role. While the terms 'weak' and 'strong' are not used in the debate about the 'return of the author', the term 'strong author' in particular has subsequently been used to refer to authors who, like Hoppe, are willing to experiment with their *Autorschaftsinszenierungen* and who engage with their own reception, whether through public visibility or by cultivating a distinctive style.[15]

[15] Keck, 'Vom Warten und Reisen', 34.

'Strong' authorship, therefore, does not reflect on the value of literary texts, but rather refers to how authors performatively assume their public, professional identities. Such a performative understanding of contemporary authorship underlies my discussion of how all the authors in this thesis are received, as well as of how they position themselves towards their reception. As we have seen, they all self-consciously participate in the construction of their public identities, even if their fiction is often sceptical about the validity and meaning of these identities. Arguably, however, none of these authors inhabits the 'strong', performative notion of authorship as emphatically as Hoppe. In a 2005 article Michaela Holdenried suggests that Hoppe's work signals 'eine Rückkehr zum Konzept selbstbewusster Autorschaft';[16] a decade later, she sees the return of the author 'kongenial erfüllt' in Hoppe's masterful *Selbstinszenierung* in *Hoppe*.[17] With this novel, Holdenried argues, Hoppe 'erschien mit Verve auf der Bühne des literarischen Betriebs' and claimed for her own identity narrative the 'starke Erzählstimme, wie gebrochen, unfassbar und polyphon diese […] sein mochte', which is to be found in her fiction.[18]

Notably Hoppe herself regards a 'strong' presence as a necessity in the contemporary literary scene. 'Um auf dem Markt zu bestehen', she writes in a 2016 essay, 'muss man ein in jeder Hinsicht *robuster* Autor sein'.[19] Yet the way she elaborates on her conception of what a 'robuster Autor' is suggests that she understands 'strong' authorship as a deceptive kind of performance. A 'strong' author, according to Hoppe, stages 'seine Abwesenheit, seine Weigerung, sich der hungrigen Öffentlichkeit zu präsentieren' not in order to achieve 'die Erlösung des Textes durch Anonymität, sondern, im Gegenteil, die Aufladung des Textes durch die Präsenz der Abwesenheit seines Autors'. What she writes next, however, is most revealing: 'Erfolg durch Abwesenheit setzt

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[16] Michaela Holdenried, 'Ein unbekannter Stubengenosse Schillers, das Tropenverdikt Ottiliens und die Suche nach dem Berbiolettenfell. Anmerkungen zur postmodernen Zitationspraxis und Autorschaft im Werk von Felicitas Hoppe', *Goethezeitportal*, Forum: Postkoloniale Arbeiten/Postcolonial Studies, 11 July 2005, http://www.goethezeitportal.de/fileadmin/PDF/kk/df/postkoloniale_studien/holdenried_hoppe.pdf [Accessed 22 August 2019], 1-18, here 17.
[17] Holdenried, Introduction, 7.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Die verkaufte Aura: Autorschaft als Geschäftsmodell', in *Wie aus Theorie Praxis wird*, ed. by Oliver Ruf, Verena Hepperle and Christoph Hamann (Munich: text + kritik, 2016), pp. 67-78, here p. 68; my emphasis.

allerdings Prominenz voraus. Keinem Neuankömmling auf dem literarischen Markt wird es je gelingen, die Aufmerksamkeit der Kritik durch die Abwesenheit seiner Person auf sich zu ziehen'.[20]

'Strong' authorship in Hoppe's understanding seems to be a function of an author's control over their public image, a form of authority that only comes with recognition. As we saw in Chapter Two, Herrndorf struggled to assert this kind of control over his own image in *Arbeit und Struktur*; the nihilistic ending of *Sand*, I argued, was the moment which unintentionally exposed the limits of his authorial control. *Hoppe* similarly points to the limits of the author's control over her work, yet does so in a very different way, namely, by over-defining Hoppe's identity and literary authority in order to stage her 'Präsenz durch Abwesenheit', a characteristic shared by her protagonist (e.g. *H*, 221). In the following sections, I will first discuss how Hoppe stages herself as an elusive figure in *Hoppe* and then show how this mode of self-representation fits in with her commitment to nonrealist, imaginative fiction.[21] It is these two strategies together which, in my view, make Hoppe's fiction so hard to read, and which contribute the most to her reception as a 'strong' author in the sense discussed above.

Authorial Disappearing Acts

According to Svenja Frank and Julia Ilgner, a significant part of Hoppe's performance of 'strong' authorship is her 'dominant metapoetische[s] und autokommentierende[s] Rezeptionsverhalten'.[22] The most characteristic way in which Hoppe engages with her own reception in *Hoppe* is indeed through a form of rhetorical prolepsis. This means that she constantly creates a critical distance from the protagonist's works, many of which are Hoppe's own, in order to preempt potential (and existing) objections to her own writing and always stay one step ahead of her critics. Indeed, I

[20] Ibid., 74.
[21] I will be referring to Hoppe's 'nonrealism' rather than to her 'anti-realism' throughout this chapter. This is because the term 'anti-realism' most commonly refers to philosophical doctrines which are sceptical about the existence of objective truths. Nonrealistic art or literature, by constrast, is more simply that which does not aim to simulate or faithfully represent reality. The term therefore better describes Hoppe's fiction, which privileges the subjective imagination (of both author and reader) over the verisimilitude of situations and characters.
[22] Frank and Ilgner, 'Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin', 24.

would argue that as a whole, Hoppe's self-stylisation in her writings, lectures, and interviews can be seen as a proleptic gesture, an effort to keep her public image as ambivalent and elusive as possible. Her authorial self-performance is assertively self-defensive, a way of guarding herself against being 'pinned down' and reduced to her biography.

As she writes in *Sieben Schätze* (2009), her *Poetikvorlesungen* given at the University of Augsburg, the 'Biografisierung' of literary texts, i.e., 'de[r] Trend, Werke im Doppelpack mit dem Leben ihres Autors nicht nur zu verknüpfen, sondern auch zu vermarkten'[23] is as prominent a phenomenon as ever, despite the fact that 'the return of the author' clearly did not call for a return to biographical criticism. This, she argues, consistently limits the possible interpretations of an author's work. In the light of this lecture,[24] *Hoppe* can be read as mocking biographical readings of literature with a narrator who engages in a reverse sort of biographism, using the protagonist's literary work to make implausible assumptions about her biography. 'Es ist mehr als offenkundig', the narrator tellingly states in *Hoppe*, 'dass die […] Schriftstellerin […] nicht aufschreibt, was sie erlebt, sondern lediglich erlebt, was längst geschrieben steht' (*H*, 234).

It is tempting to see this reverse biographism as a warning to the reader not to search for the 'real' Hoppe behind 'Hoppe', the author behind the protagonist: if 'Hoppe's' life is already contained in her writings, then these are all we need to get to know her. The author's own presence is superfluous. Indeed, despite 'Hoppe's' strong presence in the text, Hoppe the author is silent, withdrawn throughout. Yet this authorial withdrawal is, Lippert suggests, in itself a 'strong' gesture, 'eine Art Rückeroberung und Wiederverrätselung der allzu "öffentlich" gewordenen Autorinstanz und -biografie'.[25] Antonius Weixler sees 'ein Verfahren der Entautorisierung' at work in *Hoppe*, 'durch das sich die *Autorin* als eine Abwesende und Verschwindende inszeniert'.[26] For Lippert and Weixler *Hoppe* demonstrates in practice the kind of authorial disappearing act that Hoppe seems to have in mind when she writes of the 'Aufladung des Textes durch die Präsenz der

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[23] Felicitas Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze: Augsburger Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2009), p. 55.
[24] In a way that, as we shall see in the rest of this chapter, is typical in *Hoppe*, the narrator cites this lecture, which she, however, attributes to 'Hoppe' (*H*, 172).
[25] Florian Lippert, 'Auto(r)fiktionen', 344.
[26] Weixler, 'Autorschaft, Autorität und Authentizität', 362-3; my emphasis.

Abwesenheit seines Autors'.[27] In a similar vein Frauke Meyer-Gosau argues that *Hoppe* is Hoppe's way of proclaiming herself 'zum literarischen Phantom'.[28] Hoppe's self-effacement behind the fiction of 'Hoppe', then, is the mark of 'strong' authorship in that it simultaneously proves both her mastery over her public image and her masterful fiction-writing.

Telltale Traces

In a footnote to an article written seven years before *Hoppe* was published, Holdenried notes that, in her writings, 'die Autorin Hoppe inszeniert sich paradoxerweise gerade durch (vermeintliche) Zurückhaltung'.[29] The addition of the parenthetical comment, however, makes the statement anything but a paradox. Indeed, the rest of Holdenried's article makes it clear that Hoppe's withdrawal behind fiction 'for its own sake', which will be discussed in more detail in the next section, is an assertive and deliberate gesture by which the author leaves her traces 'gerade in de[m] hinweisenden Charakter der Zitationstechnik, de[m] Anspielungsreichtum und de[m] diskursiven Horizont [ihrer] Anspielungen'.[30] In *Hoppe*, Hoppe appropriates the vocabulary critics use to describe her playful self-effacement in her fiction to describe the elusiveness of her fictional namesake. Indeed, just as Holdenried sees Hoppe's 'Anspielungen' as traces of her authorial presence, fictional critics and other characters in *Hoppe* point to the protagonist's habit 'Spuren zu legen, um sie gleich darauf wieder zu verwischen' (*H*, 221).

The theme of 'Spuren', of leaving traces, is indeed explicitly and implicitly present throughout the novel. Quentin Blyton, 'Felicitas's' piano teacher in Adelaide and her boyfriend Joey's father, is secretly smitten with his teenage son's girlfriend, in what can be viewed as one of

[27] Hoppe, 'Die verkaufte Aura', 74.
[28] Frauke Meyer-Gosau, 'Pied Piper & Partners. Wie die Schriftstellerin Felicitas Hoppe mit ihrem Roman über eine Schriftstellerin namens Felicitas Hoppe die Phantasie wieder an die Macht bringt' in *Felicitas Hoppe*, ed. by Peer Trilcke, (Munich: text + kritik, 2015), pp. 80-4, here p. 82-3.
[29] Holdenried, 'Ein unbekannter Stubengenosse Schillers', 9 (footnote 41).
[30] Ibid., 17.

the novel's many nods to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*.[31] In his memoir *Growing up in Adelaide,* Quentin describes his pupil as being

> 'immer in Eile […], immer irgendwohin unterwegs, nie zu fassen ('Flüchtiger als ein Säcken Helium', wie später ein deutscher Kritiker in einem ganz anderen Zusammenhang schreiben sollte./fh), weil sie so sehr mit dem reinen Dasein beschäftigt ist, dass sie sich dabei selbst zum Verschwinden bringt, ständing auf der Flucht, aber nicht vor etwas davon, sondern auf etwas hin […]'. (*H*, 184; in quotation marks in the original)[32]

Yet her elusiveness, he continues, comes with the contradictory desire to mark her way, to leave a trail behind her. Thinking of how the spirited 'Felicitas' would have been had she lived a century earlier, he imagines her pioneering her way through the Australian desert, alone with her backpack. '[Sie] hätte unterwegs ihre Initialen (FH) in alle Bäume und Steine geritzt', he adds, '[w]omöglich ist das ihr geheimer Wunsch: zu verschwinden, damit man sie suchen muss, Präsenz durch Abwesenheit' (ibid.).

This is a pivotal passage in the novel: it suggests that 'Hoppe's' 'Spuren' might perhaps look like her initials, which consist of the same letters by which the narrator marks her interventions in the text. While the capitalisation of 'FH' keeps up the pretence that the protagonist is distinct from the narrator, who signs as 'fh', the fact that a bracket is included in the text, making unnecessarily explicit exactly what initials 'Felicitas Hoppe' would carve in the tree barks, draws attention to the near-identity (barring capitalisation) of the protagonist's and narrator's

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[31] Drawing on an argument presented by Neuhaus in his 2012 (see: Stefan Neuhaus, 'Felicitas Hoppe', in *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, https://www.munzinger.de/search/document?index=mol-16&id=16000000707&type=text/html&query.key=XCTEPItB&template=/publikationen/klg/document.jsp&preview= [Accessed 27 August 2019]), Ekelund points out a number of implicit references to *Lolita* in *Hoppe*, such as the theme of 'Hoppe's' supposed kidnapping by her 'Entführervater' (*H,* 23). Ekelund argues that the relation between the texts allows for an 'enchanted reading' of *Hoppe*, of the kind which has been systematically theorised in reference to Nabokov's novel. Lena Ekelund, 'Die magischen Künste des großen Humbug: Zur Bedeutung der kinderliterarische Intertexte in Felicitas Hoppes Roman *Hoppe* (2012)', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen*, pp. 87-109, here p. 91.

[32] The motif of leaving traces has been used to describe both the author's and the protagonist's characteristic elusiveness. 'Hoppe's' elusiveness, however, is also sometimes conceptualised in the novel through the topos of flight, *Flucht*. Patterns of flight arise from the beginning, as the protagonist's parents' are said to forcefully fled Silesia: 'Die niedersächsische Welt der Felicitas Hoppe, ihre Kindheit in der katholischen Diaspora als drittes von fünf Kindern keinbürgelicher, aus Schlesien vertriebener Eltern […] entpuppt sich als Kulisse unaufhörlich neuorganisierte Fluchten nach innen' (*H*, 17). See also: Ekelund, 'Die magischen Künste des großen Humbug', 95; Lippert, 'Auto(r)fiktionen', 356 and Keck, 'Vom Warten und Reisen', 33.

initials. Moreover, this passage by Quentin Blyton serves as a reminder that initials are above all a form of signature: if 'FH' stands for 'Felicitas Hoppe', then 'fh' might well stand for Felicitas Hoppe. Holdenried notes that there is frequently 'eine Art Hitchcock-Effekt' in Hoppe's writing; she always has a way 'sich flüchtig selbst ins Bild zu bringen und damit auch eine *Signatur* der eigenen unverwechselbaren Autorschaft'.[33] Indeed, 'fh' is, more than the protagonist bearing her own name, Hoppe's own signature in the text. Quentin's unnecessary but revealing reminder of what 'Hoppe's' initials are is as close as the text comes to admitting the identity of its author and its narrator, even if the reader instinctively (if arbitrarily) takes this identity for granted all along. As we shall see in Part II, the implicit identity of the author and narrator gets even more complicated when the narrator is aligned first with other characters writing on 'Hoppe', and finally with 'Hoppe' herself.

Despite her various alignments, however, 'fh' still serves primarily as an authorial signature, as a reminder of Hoppe's 'Präsenz durch Abwesenheit' throughout the novel. As I see it, Hoppe's adherence to this principle is also closely related to her adherence to nonrealist, imaginative fiction. A comment on another one of her texts, the 2006 novel *Johanna*,[34] a fictionalised version of the story of Joan of Arc, reveals how her two commitments are connected. Hoppe claims, namely, that the best way of evoking a character, especially a historical one, is through 'de[n] Nichtauftritt der Hauptfigur. Präsenz durch Abwesenheit. Platz für die Vorstellungskraft'. [35] This comment suggests that the author's strategy of self-representation by staging her own absence is a means, above all, of engaging her reader's imagination—and giving free reign to her own. Indeed, for Hoppe, imagination and inventiveness are not a matter of personal preference but a requirement of all fiction writing. Her body of work is marked by her emphatic and self-reflexive use of poetic licence, of the 'grundsätzliche Recht des Schriftstellers auf die gestalterische Freiheit seines Werks auch jenseits etablierter Konventionen und Erwartungen'.[36] As the next section will

[33] Holdenried, 'Ein unbekannter Stubengenosse Schillers', 12; my emphasis.
[34] Felicitas Hoppe, *Johanna* [2006] (Frankfurt a.M: Fischer, 2008).
[35] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Auge in Auge: Über den Umgang mit historischen Stoffen', *Neue Rundschau*, 118.1 (2007), 56-69, here 56.
[36] Frank and Ilgner, 'Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin', 27.

briefly show, *Hoppe* reflects Hoppe's signature commitment to imaginative fiction both explicitly and implicitly.

Hoppe's Commitment to Imaginative Fiction

Throughout *Hoppe*, there are near-constant references to 'Erfindung' and 'Erfindungen', both in the sense of 'invention(s)' and of 'fiction(s)'. The protagonist's father Karl Hoppe, for example, is strategically cast as a 'Patentagent', a person whose job it is to protect the originality of inventions, as well as an amateur 'Erfinder' who advises his daughter 'alles selbst zu erfinden: "Nimm nie in die Hand, was du nicht selbst erfunden hast"' (*H*, 18). 'Hoppe''s own penchant for imaginative inventions is also repeatedly stressed: 'Felicitas war […] unschlagbar', Lucy Ayrton, her first landlady in Adelaide says, 'eine blühende Phantasie, keine Ahnung, was wahr, was erlogen war, sie war eine große Erfinderin' (*H*, 149). Like the author herself, the protagonist shows an unabashed lack of interest in reality. Even as a child, the narrator claims, 'Hoppe war, was ihr Werk betrifft, […] gar nicht daran interessiert, Schnittmengen mit der Wirklichkeit zu bilden' (*H*, 33). 'Geschichte und Geographie', the coordinates of objective reality, '[waren] nachweislich nicht mehr für sie als einfache "Bausteine im Kasten meiner großen Erzählung"' (*H*,121). 'Hoppe's' rejection of realism is, paradoxically, a realistic element of Hoppe's own self-representation in the novel and consistent with how she claims to perceive the task of fiction.

In her lectures, Hoppe frequently and demonstratively contradicts her own claim not to have a 'poetics', a theoretical rationale which runs through all of her writing.[37] In *Sieben Schätze*, for instance, she outlines a clear set of beliefs about the form and function of fiction, at the heart of which is a distinction between realist and nonrealist writing:

> [Ich] ziehe […] die gesamte Literatur auf zwei einfache Leinen: Auf der einen hängt, was versucht, der Wirklichkeit auf die Schliche zu kommen, folglich Wirklichkeit mit literarischen Mitteln simuliert, während auf der anderen hängt, was diesen Prozess umkehrt: Hier wird mit den Mitteln der Wirklichkeit Literatur simuliert. Während also im ersten Fall die höchste Kunst darin besteht, eine Geschichte echt erscheinen zu lassen, *wie im wirklichen Leben*, besteht im zweiten Fall die Kunst darin, die Wirklichkeit so erscheinen zu lassen, als sei sie nichts als reine Erfindung, womöglich ein Märchen.[38]

[37] See Torsten Hoffmann, 'Geistesgegenwart: Felicitas Hoppes Poetik des Interviews', in Trilcke, *Felicitas Hoppe*, 65-73, here 68.
[38] Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 82; emphasis in the original.

Though she adds that there is 'keine Frage nach der Qualität der jeweiligen Literatur' implicit in her distinction, 'sondern buchstäblich eine Frage der Weltanschauung dessen, der schreibt',[39] her comments elsewhere suggest that she does in fact value the latter, nonrealist kind of literature more highly. In a 2008 speech on how she understands the notion of 'Geistesgegenwärtigkeit' in the practice of writing literature, Hoppe argues that rigorously adhering to realism in fiction is a sign that 'der Künstler [here meaning 'the author'] sich selbst ausschließlich kanonisch oder kaufmännisch denkt. Oder, weit enger und plötzlich beklemmend, im moralischen Dienst "unserer Zeit"'.[40] For Hoppe, the opposite of such deliberately 'relevant' writing is what she calls '[e]ine auf Erkenntnis ausgerichtete Erzählung', which demands 'in erster Linie [die] fabelhafte Radikalisierung [der Erzählung]'.[41]

Like her authorial 'disappearing acts' discussed above – her *Selbstinszenierung* by drawing attention to her elusiveness –, her explicit rejection of realism also has a proleptic, pre-emptive function. By indicating how her work should be read and what kinds of writing it should be compared to, it attempts to stave off the kind of accusations of irrelevance that we discussed in the first section of Part I.[42] Despite this intention, her penchant for 'Erfindung' is often viewed, she

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Über Geistesgegenwart', in Neuhaus and Hellström, *Felicitas Hoppe im Kontext,* pp. 11-26, here 19.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Hoppe admits that her primary inspirations are not canonical literary texts but rather traditional texts of imaginative fiction, 'das ort- und zeitlose Märchen, […] die Sage, die einen historischen Kern hat, wie den Rattenfänger von Hameln, und […] die Legenden, die von verbürgten Geschichten oder Biografien ausgehen'. Felicitas Hoppe, 'Andere trinken Schnaps', Interview by Cornelia Geißler, *Frakfurter Rundschau*, 17 December 2012, https://www.fr.de/kultur/literatur/andere-trinken-schnaps-11305272.html [Accessed 22 August 2019]. For Hoppe, the fairy tale, which derives from oral storytelling traditions and has no single, authoritative author (see Anna Bers, 'Hoppe und die alten Herren. Zum Umgang mit Kanoninstanzen und Klassikern bei Felicitas Hoppe', in Trilcke, *Felicitas Hoppe*, pp. 9-16, here p. 9) exemplifies the kind of non-authoritative narrative which she aims to write, the kind of narrative which '[speist] sich nicht aus Selbstsicherheit, sondern aus dem Wunsch nach Selbstvergewisserung'. Felicitas Hoppe, 'Sieben auf einen Streich. Konstanzer Vorlesung' in *Neue Rundschau*, 116.1 (2005), 150-64, here 163. Such claims implicitly provide Hoppe's readers and critics with instructions as to how the author intends her texts to be read (i.e. as extended fairy tales). Indeed, her characters are very often 'flat', fairy-tale-like types. They have a narrative function, but no psychological depth to make them relatable. 'Hoppe' is not only sometimes described as such a 'type' herself, but is also said to have (much like the real Hoppe) an

admits, as though it implied her need to substitute with exciting narratives her sheltered childhood in a socially and culturally homogeneous provincial German town, a childhood about which there is, in the eyes of her critics, '*nichts zu erzählen*'.[43] Accordingly, her 'fabelhafte Radikalisierung' of her own biography in *Hoppe* is sometimes seen as an attempt to make up for her uneventful childhood and youth, which, by her own admission, consisted 'räumlich und zeitlich betrachtet aus nichts als lauter Nebenschauplätzen'.[44] Dirk Weissmann argues in a slightly different vein that the protagonist's itinerant, cosmopolitan youth in *Hoppe* is not (only) a corrective of the author's 'monoculturalism', but 'eine kritisch-polemische Distanznahme'[45] from the assumptions which underpin the debate about *Migrationsliteratur.*

As discussed in Chapter Three with regards to how Stanišić's *Vor dem Fest* was received, it is commonly argued that authors 'mit Migrationshintergrund' are more interesting, by virtue of their transcultural biographies, than 'monocultural' authors writing in their mother tongue.[46] Weissmann argues that Hoppe counters such claims in *Hoppe* by inventing a migrant background for her alter ego which obliquely draws on the her own family history of migration and persecution as *Ostdeutsche* after the Second World War.[47] While it is true the protagonist's family background of flight and displacement in *Hoppe* is to some extent aligned with that of the author's own ancestors, the suggeston that Hoppe claims a migrant background for herself in *Hoppe* makes the novel sound unfairly revisionist. Unlike Menasse, Stanišić, and Erpenbeck, all of whom have written about or publicly discussed their family histories and the ways in which they have shaped their respective identities, Hoppe rarely, if ever, mentions her family history. On the one occasion

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'anhaltende (gelegentlich naiv anmutende) Liebe zu Märchen, Sagen und Legenden aller Art' (*H*, 119). See also Eigler, '*Hoppe* zwischen Autofiktion und Metafiktion', 151.

[43]Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 113; emphasis in the original.

[44] Ibid., 111.

[45] Dirk Weissmann, '"Vor dem Hintergrund von Hoppes Mehrsprachigkeit zeigt sich die Diskussion um ihr Werk heute unvermutet in einem neuen Licht." Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit in Felicitas Hoppes *Hoppe* (2012)', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen*, pp. 389-412, here p. 402.

[46] See e.g. Ilija Trojanow, *Döner in Walhalla. Texte aus der anderen deutschen Literatur* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2000), 13. Similarly to Biller, Trojanow claims that authors with a background of migration come with interesting biographies, which in turn allow them to produce more exciting literature than those without such a background.

[47] Weissmann, 'Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit', 403-4.

where she does, she also qualifies that '[d]as Wirtschaften mit ererbten Schicksalen […] erscheint mir bis heute geschmacklos'.[48] By giving her fictional alter ego in *Hoppe* a *Migrationshintergrund*, she ironically comments on the kind of biographism which underpins not only the debate on *Migrationsliteratur*, but more generally the discussion of contemporary literature in Germany. In Part II below, I will look more closely at how autobiographical facts are fictionally exaggerated or distorted in *Hoppe*. I will explore the ways in which the novel 'inflates' the figure of 'Hoppe' by implying her identity with the narrator, as well as with other characters. This will allow me to show, in Part III, how the novel turns the author's identity into something of a solipsistic joke.

Part II:

The Fiction of Polyphony

Fiction and Truth in *Hoppe*

In the introduction to this chapter, I argued that the elements of *Hoppe* which are drawn from the author's own biography only make the fiction in *Hoppe* more plausible. Its autobiographical elements paradoxically lead us to read *Hoppe* as a novel. In light of Hoppe's commitment to the 'fabelhafte Radikalisierung' of narratives, however, this no longer seems like a paradox. Looking more closely at how exactly (autobiographical) fact and fiction intersect (and clash) in *Hoppe* will allow me to show more clearly how the protagonist, narrator, and other characters are in fact one and the same. Arguably the most confusing part of the novel is not the beginning, where the narrator claims that everything we know about 'Hoppe's' early life is invented. Rather, it is the novel's realistic ending, the publication of 'Hoppe's' first collection of short stories entitled, like the real author's first major publication, *Picknick der Friseure* (*H*, 326).[49] In a 2016 article, Hoppe comments that because it ends with the publication of *Picknick*, '*Hoppe* ist […] nichts als der

[48] Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 111.
[49] Her actual debut was the self-published volume of short stories *Unglückselige Begebenheiten* (1991). See Weissmann, 'Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit', 391 (footnote 8).

Anfang einer allzu langen Geschichte […]'.[50] What she implies in this comment is that *Hoppe* could be read as the real author's prehistory, and 'Hoppe' not as her alter ego but as a younger version of herself, an author in the making.

Indeed, there are further points of convergence between what we know of the author and what we are told about the protagonist in the novel which would seem to support this reading. Hoppe has referred to her own 'frühes germanistisches Studium in den USA',[51] for instance, and has documented her travels around the world in her 1999 novel *Pigafetta*.[52] Yet these elements are not foregrounded in any way in the novel itself. Like *Aller Tage Abend*, which blurs the distinction between real and imaginary events through the unstable use of grammatical mood, *Hoppe* not only seamlessly combines fact and fiction, but presents us with multiple coherent fictional subplots which run in parallel and feed into each other.[53]

The novel's main sub-plot, that of the protagonist's invented family in Hamelin, for example, is significant neither because it corresponds to what we know of author's real family, nor because it is the protagonist's wished-for childhood, a reverie of small-town life which is only meant to accentuate her cosmopolitanism. Rather, what makes it central to the novel is its sheer consistency and generativity as fiction. Not only does the Hamelin storyline accompany and enrich the fiction of the protagonist's Canadian childhood and Australian adolescence; it also brings forth a number of further, smaller stories and intertextual references, such as that of the Pied Piper and his rats, of the children he leaves behind, and of an idyllic medieval market square.[54] These sub-fictions take on a life of their own in the narrative independent from the protagonist's imaginary Hamelin family. The result of this process is much more than a classic mise-en-abyme structure;[55] in *Hoppe*, fictions which exist on different levels of narrative reality are not neatly embedded within each other but are parasitically, messily inscribed upon each other, written over and within

[50] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Sollen sie pfeifen und winken', in Frank and Ilgner, *Ehrliche Erfindungen*, pp. 11-13, here p. 13.
[51] Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 73.
[52] Felicitas Hoppe, *Pigafetta* [1999] (Frankfurt a.M: Fischer, 2006).
[53] See Weixler, 'Autorschaft, Autorität und Authentizität', 373.
[54] The legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin is first explicitly introduced in *H*, 55-6.
[55] Lippert, 'Auto(r)fiktionen', 349.

one another until they become a single, all-encompassing, barely legible 'master' fiction which explodes the flimsy framework of realism – the few convergences with the author's actual biography – which contains it.

In other words, *Hoppe* opens up a host of alternatives and possibilities within (its author's own) fixed biographical reality and identity. These new possibilities are not eventually exhausted, as they are in *Aller Tage Abend*, but keep producing new alternative narratives of their own. Occasionally, reality threatens to immobilise fiction, as when 'Felicitas', devastated by Wayne Gretzky's (well-documented, real-life) marriage to Janet Jones, reflects in dismay that 'immer könnte alles auch anders sein […], aber am Ende kommt es ja trotzdem so und nicht anders, es kommt, wie es nun mal kommen muss' (*H*, 316). Yet this reality is always stubbornly reclaimed by and reabsorbed into fiction: soon after this thought, 'Hoppe' calls Wayne to congratulate him, and the two reminisce fondly about their shared childhood memories on the ice rink. Upon closer reading, however, it becomes evident that the different subplots in the novel are not merely digressive, but almost infinitely *re*gressive. Because of this, *Hoppe* gives the impression of being a kind of *Spiegelkabinett* in which 'Hoppe's' (and by extension Hoppe's own) image is multiplied and inflated to the point of becoming unrecognisable.

Performance as Narrative Principle

For the most part, it is the authoritative narrator 'fh' who creates the impression that identities in the novel are duplicated and mirrored in almost infinite regress. This is because 'fh' not only mediates the real and fictional 'sources' ostensibly penned by others about 'Hoppe' but eventually reveals herself to be behind all these sources and thus essentially 'Hoppe's' creator. Below, I will look at evidence from the novel which suggests that at one point or another, 'fh' inhabits the narrative positions of most of the other characters in a kind of roleplay, which is ultimately a process of self-multiplication or self-diversification. This process on the level of the narrative is reflected on the level of the plot, as the protagonist herself is constantly said to perform, to transform herself into others.

There are indeed incessant references to 'Hoppe's' literal and metaphorical performances, the roles she assumes in the course of her life, her love of costumes and of being on stage. As a celebrated author, she counts 'in rund vierzig Jahren weit über fünftausend Auftritte in über zweihundert Ländern in unterschiedlichen Kostümen und Rollen' (*H*, 15), while in her short-lived career as a conductor she makes her name as a 'großartige Performerin' (*H*, 206), 'völlig furchtlos, um nicht zu sagen skrupellos' (*H*, 207). Even her stint as a waitress at the Hahndorfer Schützenfest, a festival organised by the expatriate German community in Hahndorf, Adelaide, is nothing but 'ein Schauspiel' (*H*,222). Finally, her students at the University of Oregon later remember her for her 'etwas unfreiwillig clownesk[e] [Auftritte]' (*H*, 304). Even more numerous are the references to 'Hoppe's' inborn theatricality and tendency to exaggerate which complement the references to her 'Auftritte' and 'Schauspiele'.

These references to performance and roleplay can be read as metanarrative comments, comments on how the characters in *Hoppe* come into existence only as rhetorical effects, by occupying different performative positions, more like the puppets in 'Felicitas's' father's 'Kaspertheater' (*H*, 13) than fully fledged human beings.[56] The references to the 'Kaspertheater' at the beginning and throughout the novel are particularly significant, as puppetry, unlike traditional drama, always necessitates a puppeteer. *Hoppe* often reads like a puppet show: its characters bear a curious resemblance to each other, pointing partly to the fluidity of their performative positions but, more importantly, to the manipulative authority which controls them. This controlling authority is 'fh', who, as discussed in Part I, can be read as an authorial signature.

The Questionable Authority of 'fh'

'fh's authority as a 'textkritisch geschulte [...] Biographin',[57] a sober, critically-minded mediator of unreliable accounts on 'Hoppe's' life, is deeply ambivalent. Only on rare occasions does the information she provides fill real gaps in the narrative, explaining some of the protagonist's more

[56] See Pailer, '*Hoppe*, Hockey und der reisende Puck', 164.
[57] Eigler, '*Hoppe* zwischen Autofiktion und Metafiktion', 148.

obscure or private references.[58] Most of her comments are gratuitously encyclopaedic or philological. For example, she gives information about historical forms of hockey, the protagonist's sport of choice, provides the titles of books only casually mentioned in the character's accounts, or the dates and locations of events to which the characters refer in passing. In other instances, she corrects details in the various characters' accounts by citing supposedly objective evidence, in much the same way that the manipulative narrator of *Sand* corrects the limited, bigoted or intoxicated characters' perceptions.[59] Elsewhere, her comments are not only unnecessary but distracting and obstructive. At the beginning of chapter four, for example, 'fh' recites the motto on the 'Wappen der University of Adelaide' (*H*, 205), even though it is of no consequence and actually makes it harder, rather than easier, for the reader to follow the plot.

Most often, however, 'fh' makes claims which are outright contradictory or misleading. On the one hand, she often uses the *Konjunktiv I*, the present subjunctive, to indicate her doubts about various characters' claims about 'Hoppe', incessantly comments on how difficult it is to be accurate, and indeed occasionally thematises her own uncertainty, most often by using constructions starting with 'ob'.[60] On the other hand, she reassures the reader that certain details are 'deutlich', 'sicher', 'tatsächlich', 'fraglos' or 'faktisch' exactly as she presents them, though even these reassurances are sometimes contradictory in themselves.[61] Most suspicious of all, however, are the completely unnecessary translations she provides.

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[58] E.g. Hoppe's reference to 'Naturkatastrophen' is 'vermutlich eine Anspielung auf *Cyclon Tracy*' (*H*, 152).

[59] For instance, 'fh' parenthetically corrects 'Hoppe's' naïve account of Adelheid, the 'deutsche Prinzessin' who was 'weggefangen und nach England verkauft, wo sie Königin wurde und jede Menge Kinder hatte, die allerdings nicht ihre eigenen waren', by writing, '(Hier die Fakten: Adelheid von Sachsen-Meinigen (1792-1849) wird im April 1818 mit […] Wilhelm Heinrich von Großbritannien […] verlobt, der aus einer morganatischen Ehe mit der Schauspielerin Dorothy Blend bereits zehn Kinder mit in die Ehe bringt […]' (*H*, 108).

[60] E.g. 'Ob Wirklichkeit oder Erfindung, sei dahingestellt' (*H*, 101).

[61] E.g. 'Sicher ist […], auch wenn sich das faktisch nicht nachweisen lässt' (*H*, 89).

Her translations of English phrases and book titles, which are often free, sometimes 'bis hin zur Verfälschung',[62] might imaginably help readers with no English follow the plot.[63] However, the translations of German phrases, names, and titles into English under the pretence of citing their original versions are not only unnecessary but actually impede the flow of the narration and confuse the reader.[64] Indeed, one of these translations is conspicuously wrong: 'fh' translates the 'ausgeklügelte Versteckspiele' (*H*, 117) attributed to 'Hoppe' by one critic as 'all kinds of tricky hideaways', instead of 'a sophisticated game of hide-and-seek'. Moreover, 'fh' elsewhere points out somebody else's wrong translation into German, writing that 'Hoppe's' essay 'How to exercise on the Ocean' appeared in 'deutscher Übersetzung unter dem missverständlichen Titel *Wie man das Weltmeer trainiert*' (*H*, 97), without registering that the English title '*on* the Ocean' is itself not only ambiguous, but also grammatically questionable. With this as with other comments, therefore, 'fh' casts doubt on her own authority just as she attempts to draw attention to it.

What makes 'fh''s authority most suspect, however, is its reach, the fact that it is diffused into every nook and cranny of the narrative. In her role as *Herausgeberin* of 'Hoppe's' biography,[65] she administers the narrative and grants us access to the narratives of the various characters. Yet as I shall show in the following section, it soon becomes clear to the reader that 'fh' not only grants us access to sources about 'Hoppe' but rather creates these sources herself, usurping the voices of other characters. In this she resembles Frau Schwermuth, the archivist from *Vor dem Fest*, who not only administers, but implicitly also writes the village history herself. The difference is that 'fh' does not merely write 'Hoppe's' biography from her own perspective, but rather from a range of different positions: that of the protagonist, her father Karl, and the various

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[62] Florian Lippert, 'Die Phrasen dreschen zurück. Zur Subversion von Sprichwörtern, Redewendungen und Formeln bei Felicitas Hoppe', in Holdenried, *Felicitas Hoppe: Das Werk*, pp. 267-80, here 277. An example of such overly free translations which distort the meaning of the original is '"You are so goddamn fairytalish!"/"Du bist und bleibst eine Märchentante!"' (*H*, 208).
[63] Though Weissmann righlty points out even such translations into German are unnecessary 'in Anbetracht der Sprachkompetenz des impliziten Hoppe-Lesers'. 'Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit', 398.
[64] E.g. '"Und sage mir keiner (don't tell me/fh) […]' (*H*, 119).
[65] See Weixler, 'Autorschaft, Autorität und Authentizität', 368-70 (footnote 36).

fictional critics and scholars who appear in the novel. Most significantly, however, she also takes on 'Hoppe's' own position, writes as 'Hoppe' as well as about her. As I show below, it is by ostensibly introducing a range of real and fictional intertexts into the novel, all of which, in reality, are self-citations, that 'fh' transforms into and appropriates the positions of all the other characters in turn.

(Pseudo)Intertexts

The intertexts used in *Hoppe* are partly Hoppe's real, published writings and partly invented pseudointertexts written either by 'Hoppe' or by other fictional characters, such as 'Hoppe's' fictional critics.[66] Though initially the real author's writings are distinguished from 'Hoppe's' childhood writings,[67] the distinction is not upheld for long.[68] 'fh' thus implicitly merges the author and protagonist's archives: Hoppe's published work is attributed to 'Hoppe' and vice versa, 'Hoppe's' unpublished early writings to Hoppe. Making things more complex still, there are occasionally real intertexts which are neither by Hoppe nor by 'Hoppe', but which are rather meant to indicate 'Hoppe's' childhood influences. Though the most prominent of these real intertexts is the tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, there are also, as Lena Ekelund points out, frequent references to 'kanonische Texte der Kinderliteratur',[69] such as Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*.[70] Yet 'fh' seems to be suspiciously selective in attributing such references to their sources, suggesting that she may not be as rigorous an editor as she claims to be.

However, the (pseudo)intertexts which ultimately give away how 'fh' as being the author rather than merely the editor of the intertexts attributed to both 'Hoppe' and Hoppe, are, confusingly, those ostensibly written by others *about* 'Felicitas Hoppe'. This category of

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[66] For a definition of 'pseudointertexts', see Andreas Böhn, 'Schatzsuche und falsche Fährten. Intertextualität bei Hoppe', in Holdenried, *Felicitas Hoppe: Das Werk*, pp. 253-66, here p. 259.
[67] Hoppe's real works are cited by their title and year of publication, whereas 'Hoppe's' works are only cited by their title.
[68] Some real intertexts are not dated, while some pseudointertexts are. Conversely, an arbitrary selection of invented texts are dated. E.g. '*Wort und Sinn*' (*H*, 41), '*Fische am Haken*' (*H*, 79) or '*Reines Tun*' (*H*, 191).
[69] Ekelund, 'Die magischen Künste des großen Humbug', 89. See also Krumrey, 'Autofiktionales Schreiben', 282 and Keck, 'Vom Warten und Reisen', 32 for discussions of 'Hoppe's' references to these children's books.
[70] E.g. *H*, 234.

pseudointertexts includes (described) photos and postcards, interviews, as well as notes and letters other characters have written to the protagonist. By including such diverse invented intertexts, 'fh' creates an impression of intermediality as well as of polyphony. The most problematic of these invented intertexts is Karl Hoppe's, the protagonist's 'Entdecker'- and 'Entführervater''s 'Aufzeichnungen', which 'fh' characterises, in a contradictory manner, first as 'weit verlässlicher' (*H*, 72) than 'Hoppe's' own writings but later as 'eine insgesamt wirre Buchführung' (*H*, 175).

Despite this caveat, 'fh' cites Karl's notes as proof that the protagonist's family in Hamelin are only imagined, and by extention to confirm the 'master' fiction in the novel, the 'reality' of her Canadian childhood and Australian adolescence. Ultimately, however, it is Karl Hoppe's notes that blow 'fh''s cover as a fictional narrator and commentator and reveal the text's polyphony to be an illusion: as soon as his notes are shown to be 'fh''s invention, all other cited sources become suspect, too. This moment occurs in the fourth chapter, while 'fh' is supposedly citing from '*Buch F*', a book that Viktor Seppelt, 'Hoppe's' Australian boyfriend, is writing about his life with her. Karl interrupts the narrative at the point when Seppelt remembers that 'Felicitas's' father hated the traditional marksmen's festival in Hahndorf, to comment, '("Hahndorf ist eine historishe Lüge!"/kh/Karl Hoppe/fh)' (*H*, 224)**.** Even though this intervention is made in 'fh's' own parenthetic style and signed 'fh', it is preceded by the initials 'kh', which are then explicitly attributed to Karl Hoppe. 'kh', however, is only slightly different from 'fh', the product of a shift in one of the two initials which make up the narrator's signature. This variation, however subtle, betrays 'fh's' instability, the ease with which she slips into another role, another narrative position.

That 'fh' inhabits various perspectives and personas is clearest when she cites (fictional) critics and 'Hoppe' scholars ostensibly to give an overview of 'Hoppe's' reception. Some have seen this as the novel's main proleptic gesture, an effort to pre-empt criticism by formulating all possible objections to *Hoppe* already within the novel.[71] Yet, like Karl Hoppe in the passage cited above, all these critics are only further manifestations of 'fh', positions she teasingly occupies.

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[71] See Eigler, '*Hoppe* zwischen Autofiktion und Metafiktion', 145 and Pailer, '*Hoppe*, Hockey und der reisende Puck',166.

This has not been lost on the novel's real commentators: Andreas Böhn, for instance, notes that Yasmine Brücker and Tracy Norman are 'Hoppes stilistische Wiedergängerin[nen]',[72] while Julika Griem points out that citing fictional critics allows 'Hoppe von wechselnd benannten Positionen aus zu sprechen' and 'gewährt der vervielfältigten Autorfigur und Erzählinstanz Kontrolle über die multiperspektivische Erzählung von Leben und Werk'.[73] Tellingly, Hoppe herself in one instance describes literary critics as her alter egos, 'weil sie mir erlauben, mit meinem eigenen Werk zu Werke zu gehen'.[74] In light of this, it makes perfect sense that the fictional critics in *Hoppe* should be nothing than further alter egos of the author's alter ego 'fh'.

There is, finally, one passage in which 'fh' explictly reveals her identity with the protagonist and thus closes the circle of her transformations. Towards the end of the narrative, as the protagonist finds herself in New York, we catch a glimpse of 'fh' in a seemingly unguarded moment of non-identity with herself: 'Und plötzlich tritt jene Stille ein, die Biographen bekanntlich seit jeher beunruhigt, weil sie so schlecht recherchierbar ist. Hier seht ihr mich (hier meint fh offenbar sich selbst/fh), aber wo steckt Felicitas?' (*H*, 246). Though at first sight the distinction between 'fh' and 'Felicitas' is preserved here, the parenthetical comment explicitly opens up a divide within 'fh' herself, suggesting the existence of an 'fh' who writes and an 'fh' who comments on 'fh's' writing. Up to this point, however, the only figure with these initials who has been writing is the protagonist, 'Felicitas Hoppe'.

The significance of 'fh's' self-division lies, then, in the fact that she briefly confuses her own position and that of 'Felicitas Hoppe'. By doing so, 'fh' punctures once and for all the already implausible fiction of her objectivity, the fiction of her distance from the protagonist. However, since 'fh' is also, as we saw in Part I, the *author's* alter ego, the moment when she is revealed to

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[72] Böhn, 'Schatzsuche und falsche Fährten', 264-5.
[73] Julika Griem, 'Bleibt alles im Spiel? Ludische Motive und Strategien in Felicitas Hoppes Prosa' in Trilcke, *Felicitas Hoppe*, pp. 41-50, here pp. 46-7.
[74] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Exerzitium und Abenteuer: Ein Gespräch mit Felicitas Hoppe über den autobiografischen Gehalt ihres neuen Romans *Hoppe*, über kluge Kritiker und anstrengende Lesungen', Interview by Holger Heimann, *Börsenblatt*, 179 (2012), 27-8, here 27. Hoppe makes a similar point in 'Glück und Unglück des studierten Schriftstellers', in *Texte, Wissen, Qualifikationen: Ein Wegweiser für Germanisten*, ed. by Thomas Rathmann (Berlin: Schmidt, 2000), pp. 197-8.

be identical to the protagonist also undoes the protagonist's distance (and difference) from the author. Put more simply, 'fh', Felicitas Hoppe, and 'Felicitas Hoppe' are revealed at this moment to be a sort of narrative trinity. They express the same form of agency in three different figures, from three different positions. Beyond this, 'fh' also occupies a number of additional personas, diffusing and transforming this narrative agency almost beyond recognition.

The logic behind this process of duplication and multiplication can well be described as what Weissmann calls 'das Paradox einer Identität der Non-Identität'.[75] Contrary to Weismann, however, I argue that this process is endlessly resourceful rather than paradoxical or problematic. It is the identity of 'fh', 'Hoppe' and Hoppe which both creates and helps resolve the moment of greatest uncertainty. The point where the protagonist becomes 'schlecht recherchierbar', opaque, unknowable, and elusive, is also the moment where the author, narrator, and protagonist most clearly appear to be the same entity, familiar and omnipresent. Hoppe notably continues this game of self-diversification beyond the end of the novel, signing the acknowledgments at the end of the book with '(fh)', and publishing in parallel to the book an interview on her publisher's website featuring 'fh' as the interviewer and Felicitas Hoppe as the person interviewed.[76] This paratext turns the tables once again on the division of roles between author, narrator, and protagonist in the novel, placing Hoppe, the author, in the position of having to explain to 'fh' that '*Hoppe* ist keine Autobiographie, sondern eine Biographie über Felicitas Hoppe' and, 'fh' in turn, in the position of commenting on Hoppe's answers to the questions she asks herself. Finally, in a nod to her then most recent novel, Hoppe refers to herself as 'Hoppe' in her acceptance speech for the Büchner Prize, though 'fh' does not feature in it.[77] Like this speech, *Hoppe* too creates the impression of a person talking about herself in the third person in what can best be described as either a schizophrenic narrative or, more sympathetically, a one-woman show. The staggeringly complex

[75] Weissmann, 'Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit', 390 (footnote 5).
[76] Felicitas Hoppe, '"Das beste, was bislang über Hoppe geschrieben wurde!" Fünf Fragen von Felicitas Hoppe (fh) an die Autorin von *Hoppe* (Hoppe)', *Felicitas Hoppe*, January 2012, http://www.felicitas-hoppe.de/site/fhoppe/interview [Accessed 21 August 2019]).
[77] Felicitas Hoppe, 'Dankrede von Felicitas Hoppe', *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung Webpage*, 27 October 2012, https://www.deutscheakademie.de/de/auszeichnungen/georg-buechner-preis/felicitas-hoppe/dankrede [Accessed 21 August 2019].

network of repetitions, leitmotifs, recurring allusions, puns, and images throughout the novel[78] confirms the impression that 'fh' is citing neither 'Hoppe', nor others writing about her, but only ever herself.

Part III

Identity as a Solipsistic Joke

In this final part of the chapter I will argue that the intertexts and self-citations discussed above as part of 'fh's' transformations eventually overburden the narrative to the extent that it closes in upon itself and becomes almost unreadable. With its constant self-references, *Hoppe* loses any vestiges of the plot it initially seems to have and refuses to make the kind of autobiographical sense that its title (and cover blurb) promises. Rather than light-handedly evading a coherent public persona, and thereby confirming her 'strong' authorial identity, as some of the critics discussed in Part I suggest, Hoppe self-consciously stages an exaggerated, exhausting, and ultimately distorting performance of this identity in *Hoppe*.

Considering how self-reflexive the novel is overall, it is unsurprising that it also thematises the weight of its own self-referentiality. One of the most prominent leitmotifs in the novel is indeed that of 'Last', burden. This motif is extended by frequent references to the protagonist's omnipresent backpack which, as Weixler points out, is also part of the author's own standard attire.[79] 'Hoppe's' attachment to her backpack is introduced early on in the novel. Many of her (fictional) critics see it as a metaphor for her ostensibly 'superficial' prose: after 'Hoppe' allegedly appears 'auf einem Podium in Tokio' with her backpack on, 'die Presse spekulierte über den Inhalt des mittlerweile angewachsenen Gepäcksstücks: "Reine Leere. Verbergungsstrategien. Warum lässt sie nicht einfach den Reißverschluss auf und lässt uns einen Blick ins Innere werfen?' (*H*, 15). In the course of the novel, however, this backpack functions as a reminder that 'Felicitas'

[78] E.g. 'Hoppe's' love for postage stamps 'mit dem Schiffsmotiv' (*H*, 45 and *passim*) and her 'absolutes Gehör' (*H*, 60 and *passim*). For a typology of recurring 'zitierte Phrasen' in Hoppe's work, see Lippert, 'Die Phrasen dreschen zurück', 269-75.
[79] Weixler, 'Autorschaft, Autorität und Authentizität', 365 (footnote 32).

is constantly in motion but also increasingly homesick, longing for all she leaves behind with each new adventure.

At the same time, however, the backpack also stands for her stubbornness, her unapologetic eccentricity, and, to some extent, also her emotional 'baggage'. As Meyer-Gosau points out, it is the backpack which holds the protagonist back from making it as a hockey player and conductor; both times, she is at least partly barred from further training or practising because of her insistence on keeping her backpack on.[80] Eventually, it becomes clear that 'Felicitas's' backpack is nothing but a burden and an obstacle, a weight she does not put down because she *can't*. As I argue below, this crucially indicates that the identity narrative in *Hoppe* is so self-referential that it often slips out of Hoppe's authorial control, in much the same way that the overly nihilistic ending of *Sand* bears witness to Herrndorf's estrangement from the violence of his own novel.

The Text's Referential Burden

Apart from the motif of the 'Rucksack', there are a number of direct references in various contexts to the notion of 'Last' and to things being 'lästig'.[81] In turn, these references also cast the protagonist's fondness of donkeys,[82] traditionally depicted as carriers of heavy loads, in a different light. The implicit association between the protagonist's backpack and the burden theme becomes explicit towards the end of the novel, as her mentor at the University of Oregon, Professor Haman, remembers her once suffering a feverish delirium during an illness:

> Immer wieder klagte sie über eine entsetzliche Schwere in den Beinen und bat darum, man möge ihr endlich diese lästigen Ketten von den Füßen nehmen, die ihr das Gehen so mühsam machten. Es sind nicht die Ketten, sagte ich, es ist bloß dein Rucksack, was kein Wunder ist bei dem, was du so alles mit dir herumschleppst. (*H*, 321)

This scene retrospectively colours all previous references to the backpack, revealing it to have been more of a crippling encumberance than an eccentric accessory all along. At the same time,

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[80] Meyer-Gosau, 'Pied Piper & Partners', 80.
[81] E.g. '[Die] Last, nach der Ankunft in wechselnden Wohnungen und Häusern ein Kinderzimmer einzurichten' (*H*, 14).
[82] See e.g. *H*, 59.

however, the reference to the protagonist's burden also reflects back on the text itself, which by this point also lugs a heavy network of intertexts, cross-references, and self-citations along with it onto each new page. In other words, the fact that the backpack eventually becomes more or less explicitly 'lästig' to the protagonist also suggests that her narrative as a whole is conscious of its own overdetermination.

Lippert confirms that the motifs and 'Leitphrasen' in Hoppe's work neither produce a sense of coherence nor increase its plausibility, but instead only celebrate the complete '*Abwesenheit* von Plausibilität'[83] within it. Unlike other experimental postmodern texts, Lippert continues, *Hoppe* '[strebt] keinen Ausbruch aus dem unendlichen Zeichenspiel [an], sondern [übererfüllt] gewissermaßen dessen Regeln'.[84] Many other critics resort to a similar vocabulary to describe the novel's referential complexity: Griem for example comments on its 'überdeterminierte Semantik', which makes 'aus Bewegung Wiederholung und aus Kontrolle Schließung',[85] and Böhn on the 'kalkulierte Ungenauigkeit' produced through 'das Aufgehen der einzelnen Textspur in der Fülle der Bezüge'.[86] These critics' references to the text's 'Fülle' or 'Überfülle' open up a way of reading *Hoppe* as a narrative so overburdened with references that it overwhelms, disorients, and ultimately disengages its reader.

As we saw in Chapter Four, *Aller Tage Abend* is also dense with allusions and repetitions. These create a sense of formal coherence which is at odds with the discontinuity of the protagonist's identity and family history. *Hoppe*, by contrast, is so full of recurring references and self-citations that it is hard for the reader to follow. 'Dass sich die Bezugnahmen nur selten in bedeutungsstiftende Einzelverweise überführen lassen', Frank and Ilgner rightly note, 'sondern vielmehr scheinbar zufällige Reminiszenzen sowie *en-passant*-Allusionen den Erzähltext [*Hoppe*] grundieren, ist einer wirkungsästhetisch motivierten Unbestimmtheitspoetik geschuldet'.[87] The notion of a 'poetics of uncertainty' aptly describes the way Hoppe disorients her reader precisely

[83] Lippert, 'Die Phrasen dreschen zurück', 270; emphasis in the original.
[84] Ibid., 179.
[85] Griem, 'Bleibt alles im Spiel?', 47.
[86] Böhn, 'Schatzsuche und falsche Fährten', 253.
[87] Frank and Ilgner,'Felicitas Hoppe als Erzählerin', 25.

by *over-orienting* her. Indeed, the greatest source of uncertainty is not the blurring of the boundaries between autobiographical and fictional elements, but rather the perpetual and self-conscious reassertion of these boundaries until they have lost all meaning and function. The motif of the protagonist writing 'immer über die Ränder hinaus' (*H*, 263, 324) arguably reflects how the novel as a whole renders narrative conventions such as temporal sequences, geographical specificity, and a clear distinction between narrative voices and levels of reality irrelevant. Without such boundaries, the narrative merely seems to consist of a succession of overlapping detours and subplots. Predictably, it thematises its own digressiveness by pointing to the protagonist's own

> ausgeprägte Abneigung gegen Landkarten und Stadtpläne, von Reiseführern ganz zu schweigen, dafür eine Vorliebe für Seiten- und Nebensstraßen, für Umwege und unvermutete Richtungswechsel, die ihren Begleitern, wenn sie welche hat, […] ein Höchstmaß an Zuneigung und Geduld abverlangt. (*H*, 230)

Even though Hoppe has frequently stated her intention 'nicht in erste Linie Verwirrung, sondern, wenigstens zum Ende hin, Ordnung zu stiften',[88] reading *Hoppe* is a similar experience to getting an overly detailed response when asking for simple directions to navigate an unknown territory. In his review of *Hoppe* Helmut Böttiger proposes that Hoppe's confusing over-orientation of the reader, which is also at the root of her reputation for impenetrability,

> gleicht dem, was der seit den Brüdern Grimm berüchtigte Rattenfänger mit den Kindern der Stadt Hameln anstellt: Die Autorin scheint lockende Töne von sich zu geben und erzählt wundersame und fabelhafte, wie aus der Zeit gefallene Geschichten, man folgt ihr erst mal bereitwillig, und plötzlich befindet man sich an einem Abgrund.[89]

Böttiger's comment allows us to add the *Rattenfänger* to the long list of figures which function both as characters and as metanarrative references in *Hoppe*. Like Cetrois in *Sand*, the *Rattenfänger* in *Hoppe* is a red herring, a figure which is supposed to provide the reader with an anchoring point in the narrative, but which instead confuses her and leads her further into the novel's tangled web of references.

Indeed, most recurring references in *Hoppe* have this function: rather than opening up the novel to interpretations, they force it to close in upon itself; rather than helping the reader, they

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[88] Hoppe, 'Auge in Auge', 67. See also Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 21, 71, and 76.
[89] Böttiger, 'Taktstock und Lippenstift'.

frustrate the reader's capacity to follow the plot. The novel's overdetermination is therefore a form of narrative solipsism, a (paradoxically loquacious) refusal to communicate meaningfully. 'fh's' way of occupying different narrative positions in order to simulate polyphony, to keep up the pretense of dialogism,[90] ultimately causes the narrative to become hermetic and incomprehensible. Instead of real polyphony, there is only a single narrative voice, distorted into multiple others who are citing, echoing or interrupting each other in a seemingly endless loop.[91] Appearances to the contrary, the only voice heard in *Hoppe* is 'fh's' own, and with it 'Hoppe's' and Hoppe's.

Hoppe's solipsism is thus an extreme consequence of Hoppe's own perception of what her writing does, or should do. Her attitude is indeed twice summarised in *Hoppe*, first by 'Hoppe's' conducting teacher Melville Drugs and then by Professor Haman, who advise her, 'es geht nicht darum, verstanden zu werden, sondern sich verständlich zu machen' (*H*, 290 and 325). Hoppe herself similarly claims in an interview that writing is really an effort to make herself intelligible to *herself*, 'mich mir selber verständlich machen',[92] since she considers that making oneself understood to others is ultimately impossible. 'Das heißt [aber] nicht', she emphatically adds, 'dass ich nicht kommunizieren will'. It is just that, in her perception, the communication takes place *outside* the text, 'später, wenn ich auf das Publikum treffe'.[93] There is no real exchange between author and reader through the text itself; their supposed dialogue, she claims, is 'ein formaler, kein echter'.[94] Upon closer reading, then, it becomes clear that claiming that *Hoppe* is

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[90] 'Dialogism' is a term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin to emphasise 'the dialogic nature of all discourse, the fact that language (even that which performs as monologue) is oriented towards the discourse (word, voice or utterance) which has preceeded it, and that which it anticipates […]. This layering and multivoicing both downgrades the individual subject as intentional source of meaning, and emphasises the socially located and constructed nature of meaning'. Patrick Williams, 'Dialogism', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 104-5. According to Bakhtin, the novel as a genre not only accommodates the dialogism of language, but embodies it on the level of form. Their dialogical form allows novels to exhibit the 'plurality of languages of class, gender, region, or ideology', i.e. the 'heteroglossia' which Bakthin sees at work in modern societies. Patrick Williams, 'Heteroglossia', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 213. I argue here that *Hoppe* only *pretends* to be a dialogical novel because its numerous characters are in fact only roles, discursive positions, occupied by the narrator, 'fh' (who is in turn identical to the author and protagonist).

[91] Hellström makes a similar argument about the misleading impression of polyphony created in *Verbrecher und Versager*. 'Zur Position von Erzähler und Leser', 32.

[92] Hoppe, 'Das Erfundene rettet einen vor gar nichts', 74.

[93] Ibid., 75.

[94] Ibid., 78.

solipsistic is consistent with the author's own conception of her writing and her desire to question and problematise the conditions of literary communication.

The Last Laugh

Ultimately, and perhaps predictably, *Hoppe* also thematises its own solipsism. It partly does so by depicting the protagonist as self-absorbed and inattentive to those around her. She is shown to be talking constantly and often without regard for her listeners. It is repeatedly stressed throughout the novel that she has a proclivity for chattering away, and does so in several foreign languages (which include, to Viktor Seppelt's surprise, German, 'die künstliche Sprache der Oper, oft dirigiert, nie erreicht' [*H*, 218]). 'Andauernd verliebt in Wörter (*H*, 32), 'Hoppe' overwhelms whomever happens to be around her with stories both invented and 'true', i.e. in line with the 'master fiction' of her biography.

For example, as she plans her never-to-be-realised wedding with Viktor Seppelt, he recounts, she tells him 'die andere Hälfte der Wahrheit' about her life, speaking 'ununterbrochen, während ich [Viktor] im Dunkeln hinauf an die Decke starrte und versuchte, drauf zu kommen, wonach sie roch, bis ich langsam einschlief. Zwischen zwei Träumen wachte ich auf um festzustellen […], dass Felicitas immer noch sprach' (*H*, 216). Professor Haman, who looks after 'Felicitas' while she is ill, will similarly later report, 'drei Tage und drei Nächte lang habe Felicitas unaufhörlich gesprochen. (Das dürfte vermutlich übertrieben sein. /fh) Am Morgen des vierten Tages (der erste Adventssonntag) ist die Krise überstanden: "Felicitas hörte auf zu reden und schlief endlich ein"' (*H*, 322).

Both the protagonist's chattiness and her multilingualism can ultimately be seen as self-reflexive elements, as comments on the novel's own verbosity. Weissmann, for instance, argues that one of the functions of 'Hoppe's' purported multilingualism is to sarcastically justify her — and by extention the author's – 'idiosynkratisch[en] Stil im Deutschen' by attributing it to her 'fiktiven fremdsprachigen Sozialisation'.[95] Yet the protagonist's chattering is only humorous up to

[95] Weissmann, 'Zur Inszenierung von Mehrsprachigkeit', 399.

a certain point. As the narrative nears its end she poignantly accepts what she has been fearing all along, namely that there is nothing and no-one else behind all the words, conversations, and voices:

> Nur hier, auf dem Teppich am Telefon, sind wir kurzfristig frei und in Sicherheit, reden und singen wie Wasserfälle, egal, wer wen anruft, wer mit wem spricht, denn in Wahrheit sprechen wir nur mit uns selbst. Wir flüstern uns alles ins eigene Ohr und singen, ganze Nächte hindurch, alles in Schlaf, was am anderen Ende verzweifelt versucht, wach zu bleiben und Antwort zu geben, aber hörst du mir überhaupt zu? Ja, ich höre dir zu, nur dass du meine Stimme mal wieder mit deiner verwechselst, du sprichts nicht zu mir und ich nicht zu dir, weil du gar nicht auf Antwort wartest, sondern nur sprichst, um zu werden, was du längst bist: mutterseelenallein. (*H*, 291)

It is this feeling of loneliness, the frustration of failed communication, which the reader of *Hoppe* shares with the protagonist. This is the only moment in the novel when the reader can imaginably identify with 'Hoppe': when the protagonist is diminished, isolated, and finally *singular*, shown to be as frustrated and confused by her own monologue as the reader. Yet this identification is fleeting, as 'Hoppe' cannot help resuming her usual chatter. As the fictional critic Kai Rost puts it,

> dann ertappt man sich bei dem weit heftigeren Wunsch, das Buch endlich aus der Hand zu legen, um endlich mal wirklich mit ihr zu reden oder, was noch viel besser wäre, überhaupt nicht zu reden, sondern sie kurzfristig zum Verstummen zu bringen, damit endlich jene Stille eintritt, von der ich seit Jahren träume. (*H*, 296)

As the fictional critics in the novel are nothing but variations of Hoppe's own persona, this can be read as her own desire for the kind of silence which provides space for true communication and allows her to be known beyond the echo chamber of language. Yet the narrative does not grant her this wish by ebbing away into silence. Instead, it seems to unexpectedly dissolve into laughter – a laughter whose object is unclear.

This laughter is encoded in the initials of the protagonist's professor, 'Prof. Dr. phil. Hans Herman Haman' (*H*, 297), who helps her get a teaching job at the department of German Languages and Literatures at the University of Oregon. The alliteration in his name at first gets lost amongst the numerous other alliterative names in the narrative.[96] Yet that the alliteration in

[96] E.g. both Bamie Boots, 'Felicitas's' hockey coach, and Bojana Baton, a student of hers, are abbreviated as 'BB' (*H*, 64, 304), while (the real) Glenn Gould is referred to as GG (*H*, 285), an abbreviation which could have also been used for Gil Gott, a colleague of the protagonist's in the States.

Haman's name involves the letter 'H', an initial shared by the narrator, the protagonist, and the author, adds an additional layer of meaning to it. Only three pages after he has been introduced to the narrative, Haman is referred to as 'H.H.Haman' (*H*, 300), and is thereafter called simply 'HHH', like 'fh' without full stops or spaces in between the letters. It is hard to overlook the fact that the all-too-deliberate sound effect produced by the initials – initials which, unlike 'fh', are capitalised and thus stand out even more in the body of the text – is the sound of laugher, a resounding 'hahaha'. 'HHH', though a latecomer to the narrative, is a key figure: an unintentional ersatz father to 'Felicitas',[97] he is also the only character in the novel apart from the protagonist herself in whose own writing 'Felicitas' is fictionalised[98] and, finally, the one who first discovers her literary talent: 'es ist […] Hans Herman Haman gewesen, der Hoppe entdeckt hat. Und es ist kein anderer als HHH gewesen, der dafür sorgte, dass man seiner Geschichte auch Glauben schenkte' (*H*, 326).

If 'HHH' is the character who discovers 'Hoppe' and helps her become an author – the author of *Picknick der Friseure* –, he is also the one who makes *Hoppe* itself possible. The fiction of the novel's origin, then, seems to culminate in the thinly veiled sound of laughter in this key character's name. 'HHH' is an unsettling, solipsistic laughter which accentuates the gratuity of the whole weighty construct that is *Hoppe*. *Hoppe*, in turn, makes the identity of Hoppe herself seem like an impenetrable in-joke. Yet reading more closely, it becomes obvious that the text's laughter does not become audible only right at the end; in fact, the narrative has constantly been laughing at its own pretentiousness and ambition. At the premiere of Melville Drugs' opera *Alexander*, for example, 'Hoppe' has a laughing fit:

> es war nicht das erste, auch nicht das letzte Mal, sie neigte zu schrecklichen Lachanfällen, die ihr hinterher immer peinlich waren, sie hatte sich einfach nicht unter Kontrolle. Manchmal kam es auch vor, dass sie mitten in den Proben für irgendein ungeliebtes Stück, egal ob sie spielte oder dirigierte, in ein beinahe hysterisches Gelächter ausbrach, weil ihr blitzartig irgendetwas einfiel, das mit dem Stück nicht das Geringste zu tun hatte, für sie ein untrüglicher Beweis dafür, dass die Komposition nichts taugte. Gegen mangelnde Qualität ist Selbstbeherrschung kein Mittel, sagte sie. (*H*, 210)

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[97] 'Man darf davon ausgehen, dass Hoppe und Haman, der zwei Jahre älter als Karl war, eine Art ideale Wohngemeinschaft bildeten' (*H*, 312).

[98] 'Eine kleine von Herman Haman verfasste Erzählung (*Woodcutter*/*Holzfäller*/1987) berichtet uns Folgendes: "Sie (gemeint ist vermutlich Felicitas/fh) stach sofort ins Auge"' (*H*, 298).

In *Hoppe*, Hoppe is laughing at herself, at an invented life which is so utterly implausible that it allows her to flout the rules of both realist (auto)biography and of the novel, to disregard notions of measure and order, and to ignore the expectation that she live up to her own mastery. 'HHH' is the hybristic laughter of breaking the rules, the result of what Hoppe in an interview calls 'eine literarische *Selbstüberhebung*'.[99] With *Hoppe*, Hoppe fulfils her own dictum of the author who is 'jederzeit bereit, mit den Ungeheuern des Überflusses einen fröhlichen Pakt zu schließen',[100] and thereby also her own artistic ideal: 'Kunst [ist]– was sonst? – reiner Überfluss' she claimed in her Büchner Prize acceptance speech, 'und […] nur Überfluss [macht] gute Gesellschaft'.[101]

Conclusion

The sound of laughter in her 'discoverer's' name—or is he perhaps her inventor?— suggests that Hoppe's excessive self-referentiality in *Hoppe* is deliberate, a form of narratively productive but exhausting self-mockery. At one point in the novel we are reminded of an interview the protagonist allegedly once gave at the Goethe Institute in Chicago. Amused by 'Hoppe's' passionate answers, her fictional interviewer Jerome Keith Chester, 'soll […] gelacht haben, wobei er sich allerdings die Hand über den Mund gehalten habe, worauf Hoppe ihrerseits bemerkt haben soll, niemand müsse sich für sein Lachen schämen, überhaupt sei Scham nicht nur in literarischen Fragen höchst unproduktiv' (*H*, 120). With her fictional autobiography, Hoppe unabashedly makes a joke of herself, the 'strong', self-confident author and public intellectual.

However, by overinflating a narrator and protagonist who, respectively, bear her own initials and name, Hoppe does not merely make her own authorial identity seem playful and elusive, a gesture which would only *confirm* the critical conception of Hoppe as exemplifying a

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[99] Felicitas Hoppe, '"Ich habe nie Kompromisse gemacht." Ein Gespräch mit Felicitas Hoppe', Interview by Linus Schöpfer, *Tages-Anzeiger*, 5 June 2012, https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/buecher/Ich-habe-nie-Kompromisse-gemacht/story/12745410 [Accessed 22 August 2019]; my emphasis.
[100] Hoppe, *Sieben Schätze*, 228.
[101] Hoppe, 'Dankrede von Felicitas Hoppe'.

'strong', assertive and self-reflexive author. Instead, she allows the narrative of her identity to collapse under the weight of its own references, distorting her image beyond recognition and, indeed, almost beyond readability. In this way Hoppe shows notions of authorial authority to be inherently double-edged and contradictory, both productive and destructive, hybristic and self-defeating. Whereas all other authors discussed here engage with, nuance, and undermine their public image in their fiction, Hoppe takes hers to the point of self-destruction, thus powerfully challenging the dominant discourses of authorial identity (and identity politics) in both the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb* and its academic counterpart.

Conclusion

Uncertain Identity Narratives in and beyond Contemporary Novels in German

In her 2016 essay 'Die verkaufte Aura',[1] Felicitas Hoppe reflects on the notion of 'aura' in her characteristically quirky way. She traces how it 'transformed' in the popular imaginary from a minor deity in Greek mythology to the unique and elusive quality of artworks which, in Walter Benjamin's account,[2] is lost as soon as they are reproduced and commodified, and finally into a commodity in its own right with the rise of the phenomenon of 'celebrity' as we know it today. For Hoppe, this development also explains the simultaneously auratic and commercial nature of contemporary authorship. Books, in Hoppe's view, have long lost their aura and become commodities. This is partly the doing of literary authors themselves, who 'schon vor Jahrzehnten damit begonnen [haben], die Aura des Buches auf fröhliche und produktive Weise zu demontieren'.[3] Paradoxically, she argues, it is publishers, reviewers, and booksellers who are trying, as a sales strategy, to preserve a sense of the aura of books. This is because 'der Literaturmarkt will auf eigentümliche Weise beides: bares Geld und magisches Gold, das verkäufliche Produkt und seine unverkäufliche Aura; denn mehr als jeder Markt bedarf er großer Illusionen, um ein Markt zu sein'. It is precisely because it deals in 'Illusionen', she continues, that 'er rollt wie Teppiche Klappentexte, Wettbewerbe, Stipendien und Preise aus und verteilt, Hand in Hand mit den Wissenschaften, Gastprofessuren und Poetikdozenturen'.[4]

As we have seen, every single one of the authors discussed in this thesis has at one point or other been funded by a literary prize, held a *Poetikdozentur*, or at the very least given rows of

[1] Hoppe, 'Die verkaufte Aura', 67-78.
[2] In his seminal essay from 1936, 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1.2, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1974), pp. 431-508.
[3] Hoppe, 'Die verkaufte Aura', 68.
[4] Ibid., 67-8.

interviews and public readings. There is indeed a demand for authors to be publicly present within the framework of such events which seems to be, if not unique, then at least particularly characteristic of the German-speaking context. Hoppe attributes this to the nature of the German-speaking readership. Not only are readers in German-speaking countries relatively well educated and willing to engage with difficult, experimental, and conceptually dense prose fiction, she optimistically suggests, but they also welcome debate about intellectual and moral issues.[5] Literary authors often function as mediators of (and in) extra-literary discussions and debates. This is why at events such as lectures and public readings, for example, an author must prove 'dass er dreierlei kann: literarische Geheimnisse schmieden, Moral predigen, und anschließend heiter und unterhaltsam Konversation über beide zugleich treiben'.[6]

Hoppe's essay powerfully makes explicit the very insight which led her to write *Hoppe*: that in combination, the particular mechanics of the German literary market and the expectations of its readers place unique pressures on literary authors. Indeed, what seems to be asked of them is precisely that they substantiate their work by 'backing' it through their own public personas. 'Es geht weder um Bücher noch um Brote' in the contemporary *Literaturbetrieb*, Hoppe argues,

> sondern um Geschichten, und zwar nicht um Geschichten, die geschrieben werden, sondern um die Geschichten derer, die sie schreiben. Jeder Autor, der einmal seine Zeit an einem Messestand abgesessen hat, weiß das, und jeder Autor versucht regelmäßig, das zu vergessen, weil er glauben möchte, sein Buch spräche für sich. Aber wie sprechen Bücher ohne Autoren? Es geht nicht um das Buch, sondern um seine Aura. In anderen Worten: um seinen Autor.[7]

It is hard to imagine a more concise or apt way of summarising the paradox which has been at the heart of German literary life in the past decade: the author, as the embodiment of the work's aura, the 'story behind the story', as it were, is also its biggest selling point. What motivated the inquiry in this thesis in the first place was, in essence, exactly the question of how the 'Geschichten' in

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[5] It is worth mentioning that the issue of *Die Zeit* published as I was writing this conclusion introduces a new regular debating section with the admonishing headline 'Lasst uns streiten!'. The issue features opinion pieces from known *provocateurs*, such as authors Maxim Biller and Thea Dorn. This suggests that the middle-class, educated and centrist readership which the *Zeit* usually attracts continues to have an appetite for debate, not least as the political situation in Germany, with the gains of the AfD, is getting increasingly tense. 'Zeit für ein neues Ressort: Lasst uns streiten!', *Die Zeit*, 5 September 2019, https://www.zeit.de/streit/index [Accessed 8 October 2019].
[6] Hoppe, 'Die verkaufte Aura', 70.
[7] Ibid., 72.

fiction relate, reflect, or challenge the 'Geschichten derer, die sie schreiben'. As the discussions in the previous chapters have shown, however, recent novels tend to challenge this distinction: authors' own stories and performative identities are not peripheral to their fiction, but feed into it in nuanced and complex ways. And vice versa: their fictional work underpins or redefines their identities.

Put differently, authorial (*Selbst-*)*Inszenierungen* are part and parcel of the literary work. The prevalent model of literary authorship in twenty-first century Germany (and arguably also Austria) is no longer 'political', as in the post-war decades, but arguably in some sense identity political.[8] Authors performatively talk and write about their personal and family histories, publish opinion pieces on current affairs, keep blogs, speak at universities, represent certain perspectives and political positions. Their fiction reflects their concern with the political implications of different individual and collective identities, but also more fundamentally questions the possibility of coherent identity narratives altogether. While none of the texts discussed in this thesis jettisons the notion of identity altogether, they all share a sense that identities are by necessity incomplete, fragmented, and contradictory. It is in this sense that, I have argued, fiction written in the past decade is *uncertain* about identities. The novels discussed in this thesis all convey this sense of uncertainty, whether on the level of their structure, through their experimental use of narrative perspective and voice, by manipulating the possibilities of grammatical mood, or through intertexts and self-referentiality.

Each of the five texts indeed responds to the challenge of narrating a life, a person, a sense of self or community in a particular way. Xane, in Menasse's *Quasikristalle*, is refracted through others' perspectives, like light through (the titular) quasicrystals. Yet the chronological succession of these perspectives paradoxically upsets their symmetry and exposes the ways in which they nuance, contradict or clash with each other. The protagonist's own identities (like the identities of

[8] In the sense that it is centrally concerned with the political implications of identity, not in the loaded sense of the term as it is used in the context of contemporary US politics. For the latter (more common) sense, see Cressida Heyes, 'Identity Politics', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2008), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/identity-politics, 2018.

the focalisers and other characters) are thus constantly relativised. Herrndorf's *Sand*, too, makes use of a changing perspective and narrative voice, as well as of a range of intertexts from different (non-literary) media, to first involve its reader and then disengage her from its amnesiac protagonist's suffering. With an unexpected acceleration of the narration and a radical shift in narrative perspective in the last chapters, the main plot, which revolves around the mystery of the protagonist's identity, is coldly abandoned. In *Vor dem Fest*, meanwhile, Stanišić stages, through an unstable first-person plural narrator, the tensions within a village collective. Fürstenfelde is threatened by its own fundamental heterogeneity, by the voices of the individuals which constitute it. Yet what ultimately shows the village community to be shaky is its own dogged attachment to its problematic, homogeneous history. Similarly, Erpenbeck's *Aller Tage Abend* also questions whether historical narratives can function as a basis of collective and individual identities, as the constant stop-starts in the protagonist's life narrative cause narratives of family trauma—narratives constitutive of collective and personal identity—to be lost. Hoppe's *Hoppe*, finally, collapses the conventional distinctions between the protagonist, the narrator, and the author herself, endlessly reinventing the author's own identity to the point where it becomes completely distorted.

Even though the five novels reflect on the implications of uncertain identities in their own distinctive ways, there are striking similarities between their respective literary 'agendas'. On the one hand, the novels by Menasse, Erpenbeck, and Hoppe are all to some extent concerned with biography, with how a person's—and specifically a woman's— identity can emerge through the narrative of her life. Fundamentally, they ask similar questions: what makes up a person? How can one's self-understanding be reconciled with the views of others? What, if anything, is certain or objective about a life story? Menasse and Erpenbeck approach these questions with (varying degrees of) pessimism. 'Ich weiß nicht, woran man einen Menschen erkennt' (*ATA*, 279), the elderly Frau Hoffmann bleakly thinks, or perhaps tells her son, at the end of *Aller Tage Abend*, revealing above all her inability to find and recognise *herself* in her own fractured biography. Hoppe, meanwhile, implicitly rejects the idea that there is such a thing as objective identity, but does so in a paradoxically affirmative way, by playfully drawing out one of the most extreme forms of identity, i.e. complete solipsism. On the other hand, Herrndorf and Stanišić do not seem

to be concerned with the challenges of biography. Their novels move away from notions of the 'individual', whether by erasing a character's distinctive features, as Herrndorf does with Carl/Polidorio in *Sand*, or by focussing instead on questions of collective identity, as Stanišić does in *Vor dem Fest*. Both authors, moreover, are concerned with how identities and narratives are eroded by violence, history, and by violent history.

Yet there are arguably many other, equally productive parallelisms to be drawn between the identity narratives in these five texts. Indeed, though the similarities outlined above helpfully summarise some recurring concerns across the novels, they also problematically imply that the authors' concerns relate to their gender. I certainly do not mean to suggest that female authors remain content to grapple with an age-old, inward-looking, relationship-centred kind of life writing, while male authors look at broader, more overtly political narratives of identity. As we saw in Chapter Four, *Aller Tage Abend*, is centrally concerned with the erosive effects of a violent history on individuals and families, while as discussed in Chapter Three, *Vor dem Fest* contains passages which read like a collective biography. In addition, a gendered division does not hold because Hoppe's take on identity actually differs significantly from that of all other authors studied here. Indeed, *Hoppe* sits squarely between the two kinds of identity narratives outlined above: unlike the 'biographies' of *Quasikristalle* and *Aller Tage Abend*, it does not circumvent the individual figure at its centre, but neither does it seek to transcend the notion of individual identity as Stanišić and Herrndorf do in their novels. Instead, it endlessly reproduces the individual through a narrative kind of mitosis, like a self-dividing cell producing cells identical to itself. In other words, Hoppe *cuts through* and moves beyond the concept of the individual, whether fictional or real.

Of course, it is hard to make a general statement about how identity features and functions in German contemporary literature on the basis of these five texts. Scholarship on *Gegenwartsliteratur*, like *Gegenwartsliteratur* itself, is inevitably always a work in progress. Five novels, moreover, are a small sample which cannot, should not, be taken to be representative of more general directions in the field. However, I argue that the texts discussed here do exemplify some of the most pertinent questions and problems surrounding the notion of identity right now.

This thesis takes stock of these questions and problems. It is a *Bestandsaufnahme* of a constitutive uncertainty about identity which is characteristic of the cultural climate of the 2010s in Germany and beyond. The experimental identity narratives discussed here are the product of this uncertainty, of a sense of unease which is as diffuse as it is profound. Thirty years after the *Wende*, authorship in the German context is undercut and constituted by this sense of unease: authors need to be both commercial and auratic, both available and elusive. The precarious, fragmented or 'unravelling' identities in the five novels discussed here do not only generate experimental fictional narratives, but also reflect their authors' fundamental uncertainty about identities, whether their own or their fictional characters'.

Xane's story, for example, loosens the screws, as it were, on the author's own Jewish, Austrian and female identity, showing them to be, like everything else, relative. The story of Carl/Polidorio's suffering in *Sand* reveals the limits of Herrndorf's tightly controlled authorial self-image in the face of terminal illness as detailed in *Arbeit und Struktur*. The collective voice of Fürstenfelde lays bare the individual voices which constitute it only to smother them, in a way that nuances the contradictory status of 'migrant' authors like Stanišić who, like the individual villagers, are at once 'outsiders' to the literary canon *and* forcefully made to be part of a 'migrant' community. The way the protagonist of *Aller Tage Abend* loses touch with family narratives and traditions the longer she lives comments, in turn, on how history can fracture and frustrate individual life-narratives, including Erpenbeck's own. Most transparently, *Hoppe* repeats and exaggerates Hoppe's own public performance until the author herself is entirely obscured. These authors' ambivalent relationship to their public role, a seemingly extra-literary, 'contextual' detail, clearly seeps into their fiction and influences it in fundamental ways. But crucially, the opposite happens, too: these authors' experimentation with narrating identities also urges us, sometimes gently and sometimes forcefully, to reconsider our conception and expectations of contemporary authorship.

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