# The Language of Silence

## West German Literature and the Holocaust

Ernestine Schlant

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# *The Language of Silence*

"*The Language of Silence* is a particularly important contribution to literary criticism. More than half a century after the Holocaust it is the first book-length study that analyzes in a critical manner how the West German novel has tried—and often failed—to cope with the burden of the past, with the legacy of the Shoah. Schlant contributes to what she misses in many German novels: mourning of the destruction of Jews in Germany and Europe."

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*—Guy Stern, Distinguished Professor of German, Wayne State University*

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## *West German Literature and the Holocaust*

ERNESTINE SCHLANT

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For my daughters Stephanie and Theresa Anne

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### *A Note on Translations*

Unless otherwise indicated, I use the published English translation of a text.

If a work has not been translated into English, my translation of the German title into English follows in parentheses after the German title; quotations in English from all such texts are my own translations.

In the bibliography, the first date in parentheses in translated publications refers to the publication for the German original; the second date is that of the English publication.

# Introduction

> Perhaps I write because I see no better way to be silent.[1]
>
> There are many kinds of silence and many ways to be silent…. Silence…speaks and is as risky as speech.[2]

In Berlin, outside the Grunewald train station where the trains left for Auschwitz, there is a monument to those who were deported and killed. It is a long straight wall of exposed concrete, perhaps 15 feet high, which appears to hold back the earth rising up behind it. Cut into the wall are the outline of human figures moving in the direction of the station. The figures themselves are nonexistent; it is the surrounding cement that makes their absence visible.

This monument, in which presence is stated as absence, and in which the solidity of the wall serves to make this absence visible, has its analogue in literature. It is my contention that in its approach to the Holocaust, the West German literature of four decades has been a literature of absence and silence contoured by language. Yet this silence is not a uniform, monolithic emptiness. A great variety of narrative strategies have delineated and broken these contours, in a contradictory endeavor to keep silent about the silence and simultaneously make it resonate. My aim in this study is to convey some sense of the multiplicity of these strategies and of the motives that prompt them.

The Holocaust has been a presence in German literature from the early postwar period to the present, and the strategies employed in the attempts to circumvent, repress, or deny knowledge of it are as much an indication of that knowledge as the often groping and inept efforts to face up to the crimes of the Nazi regime. Although the word “Holocaust” immediately conjures up the vision of concentration and extermination camps in which millions of human beings were murdered under the most horrifying circumstances, a more clearly elaborated definition is necessary for the purposes of this study.[3] By “Holocaust” I mean more than the annihilation of millions of human beings under hitherto unimaginable bestiality; I include in this definition the mechanisms, behavior, and attitudes that operated in all of Nazi-occupied Europe for the purposes of

hunting down and rounding up Jews in order to murder them. These mechanisms included the "laws" that deprived the Jews not only of their political and civil rights, but also of their human dignity. For Jean Améry, Holocaust survivor and expatriate German intellectual, these "laws," issued from 1933 on, already contained the threat of annihilation.

> The death threat, which I felt for the first time with complete clarity while reading the Nuremberg Laws, included what is commonly referred to as the methodic "degradation" of the Jews by the Nazis. Formulated differently: the denial of human dignity sounded the death threat.[4]

Ultimately these "laws" led to the establishment of what has been termed the *univers concentrationnaire,* defined by the literary scholar Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi as follows:

> The adjective *concentrationary, used* here as in the English version of [David] Rousset's memoir as a rough translation of *concentrationnaire,* is not necessarily limited in its reference to the geographical confines of the camps but may allude to the general condition of the Jew in Europe during World War II, who, whether incarcerated in a ghetto or a concentration camp, posing as an Aryan, or hiding in a barn, an attic, or a forest, was marked for extermination.[5]

"Holocaust" and *univers concentrationnaire* are not exactly coterminous; nevertheless, in the present study I shall use the word "Holocaust" in the sense of *univers concentrationnaire*.

Despite frequent allegations that Germans prefer to forget the Holocaust, the enormity of these crimes and their legacy have become part of German self-understanding. How Germans cope with this self-understanding, what strategies they have developed to omit, distort, or cushion this realization, what contexts needed to be set up in order to confront this past, what blind spots are operating to this day, will be analyzed in the following chapters.

• • •

The use of purely literary works to analyze German attempts to come to terms with the crimes of the Nazi regime—specifically, the genocide of the Jews—needs, if not a justification, at least an explanantion. As the boundaries between historiography and fiction as repositories of memory become ever more blurred and the problematics of narrativity dominate current scholarly debates, it is all the more important to point up the differences between the two fields and to focus on the qualities that distinguish literature from historiography. This study is premised on the privileged position of literature as the seismograph of a people's moral positions. Historians, political scientists, economists, and journalists are

constrained (or ought to be) by facts and other objective criteria, whereas literature projects the play of the imagination, exposing levels of conscience and consciousness that are part of a culture's unstated assumptions and frequently unacknowledged elsewhere. Because they are unconsciously held, these assumptions provide greater insight into the moral positions of a work than do its explicit opinions and images, which are often censored or the expression of wishful thinking. Literature lays bare a people's dreams and nightmares, its hopes and apprehensions, its moral positions and its failures. It reveals even where it is silent; its blind spots and absences speak a language stripped of conscious agendas. The literary works to be discussed in this study therefore reveal a level of discourse that, though it may have eluded authorial consciousness, does not elude careful literary exegesis. The British scholar Terry Eagleton speaks of a work's "sub-texts" and areas of "blindness" that reveal these unconsciously held assumptions.

> [W]e are constructing what may be called a "sub-text" for the work—a text which runs within it, visible at certain "symptomatic" points of ambiguity, evasion or overemphasis, and which we as readers are able to "write" even if the novel itself does not. All literary works contain one or more such sub-texts, and there is a sense in which they may be spoken of as the "unconscious" of the work itself. The work's insights, as with all writing, are deeply related to its blindnesses: what it does not say, and *how* it does not say it, may be as important as what it articulates; what seems absent, marginal or ambivalent about it may provide a central clue to its meanings.[6]

Of all literary genres, the novel is probably richest in these unstated assumptions. Fiction is malleable and protean in its appropriation of the most diverse kinds of discourses. Even at its sparsest, it is not as hermetically closed as poetry or as situationally confined as drama. It is inclusive and panoramic. (Only film can undertake similarly encompassing narratives and there are many examples in this different artistic medium that parallel the endeavors of the novel.)

I shall confine my inquiries to the prose fiction of West Germany—specifically, to the fiction written in the postwar period, from the end of World War II and the formation of West Germany in 1949 until the unification of East and West Germany in 1990, and shall suggest post-unification developments. With unification, the political situation and intellectual climate have changed sufficiently to warrant speaking of the closing of an era. Although novels continue to be published that make the Holocaust the center of their concern, there is a shift in Holocaust discourse from literature to memorials and museums—a shift that will be discussed in the concluding chapter. At the same time, during the decade preceding unification and into the 19908, there is a noticeable

growth in minority literatures, especially literature by younger German and non-German Jewish writers living in Germany who speak about the problems of living in a post-Holocaust Germany.

Until unification, German was the language of four distinct literatures: the literatures of East and West Germany, of Austria, and of Switzerland. However, it has been maintained that compartmentalization into "four distinct national literatures matching the four major German-speaking states…is no longer possible."[7] It may be true that with the postmodern dismantling of "master narratives"—the narratives of cultural hegemony—and the increasing presence of minority literatures that affirm heterogeneous, multicultural points of view, the concept of a national literature of any stripe is losing ground. Yet in a study of *one* people's efforts to examine—or avoid examining—their particular past, I must take national and historical boundaries into account. Since the literature I discuss thematizes precisely the issues of a specific society, ignoring those boundaries would be tantamount to ignoring all-important aspects of that literature. Most important for the study at hand, ignoring the boundaries would destroy the specific context of the Holocaust and would make any such discussion meaningless.

While there was a rapprochement between the literatures of East and West Germany in the decade before the fall of the Berlin wall, their commonality rested precisely on the division: East and West German writers wrote about the division of Germany from their own particular perspectives. During the period of the cold war, the literatures of East and West Germany rested on such vastly different suppositions that comparisons can be undertaken only anecdotally. With few exceptions, East German literature made no effort to come to an understanding of the Nazi period. As a Communist regime, East Germany saw itself *ipso facto* as inimical to fascism and hence under no obligation to acknowledge its own Nazi past. Fascism was interpreted as an outgrowth of capitalism, and capitalism was still the reigning economic system in West Germany. It hence fell upon West Germany to deal with this past. Peter Schneider, respected author and astute observer of Germany's political and social scene, spoke to this difference and its implications at the time of unification, when he noted: "After the first thrill of unity, it will become clear that, on either side of the Wall, not only two states, but two societies have developed."[8]

As for Switzerland, its perceptions about itself and its role during the Nazi regime were shaped by an understanding of itself as a neutral country, at least until the recent revelations about its banks' collusions with the Nazi regime. In the postwar era, the playwrights Max Frisch and Friedrich Dürrenmatt addressed some of the psychological mechanisms that gave rise to and perpetrated the Holocaust, but they did so by appealing to reason and from the secure vantage point of distance; such a position was not available to West German writers.

Nor are Austrian writers, who began to discuss their country's own Nazi past extensively only relatively late, part of the present inquiry, again, because the political situation in Austria elicited responses different from those in West Germany. Postwar Austrian politics has cultivated the myth of having been annexed instead of admitting that Austria actively courted the 1938 annexation to Germany and it found its special status confirmed in the separate peace treaty of 1955, which guaranteed Austrian neutrality on the Swiss model. In the early postwar decades, Austria regarded its special status as exculpatory and left the Holocaust a uniquely German "problem." Only with the emergence of the postwar generation of Austrian writers, mostly those born in the 1940s and later (e.g. Gerhard Roth, Peter Henisch, Brigitte Schwaiger, and the slightly older Thomas Bernhard), was there a sustained and vigorous investigation of Austrian complicity in the Nazi past that could be compared to efforts in West Germany. And even then, the different social and political contexts led to different literary structures. One finds, for example, very little documentary literature in Austria since there were no trials to fuel it, as there were in West Germany.

In fact, the literary scholar Jean-Paul Bier has identified a fifth German literature, that of the German exiles.[9] Many of the writers in this category were Jewish and worked under the conditions of the *univers concentrationnaire;* very few of them returned to West Germany. This fifth German literature, though it is not a monolithic body of writing, reflects the ideological conditions of its genesis, which are precisely not those of postwar West Germany. It, too, lies outside the boundaries set for this study, but its contributions as German literature must be acknowledged.

For one overarching reason, I have confined myself in this study to a discussion of non-Jewish writers. In presentations of postwar German literature, there is frequently no distinction made between East and West German writers or, in studies of either country, between Jewish and non-Jewish writers. This seems to me a grave oversight, since the conditions under which Jewish and non-Jewish writers write and the perspectives they bring to their work are separated by the abyss of the Holocaust. The elimination of the crucial distinction between victims and perpetrators can itself be viewed as an attempt to level and equalize their separate histories. There is a large body of literature by survivors and witnesses, and it is vastly different in tone, perspective, and outlook from that written by the generation and successor generations of the perpetrators. For the victims, "the literature of atrocity is concerned with an order of reality which the human mind had never confronted before, and whose essential quality the language of fact was simply insufficient to convey."[10] In an effort to find a language more suitable than "the language of fact," techniques of irony, of the macabre, of the laughter of despair, and of gallows humor became part of the narrative strategies of the victims, whereas the perpetrators who have not

experienced the boundless sufferings, torture, and death, shy away from "inappropriate" attitudes, seeking safety in *Betroffenheit* (consternation).

Some may find this distinction—and especially my exclusive focus on the texts of the perpetrators and their successor generations—objectionable, arguing that such an analysis perpetuates the view of the victims as the "other" and turns them into objects deprived of individuality. But inclusion of Jewish authors as subjects who present their own perspectives would have changed the focus of this study. It would no longer have been an investigation into how the successor generations of the perpetrators are trying—or not trying—to come to terms with a past that is constituted by the legacy of the Holocaust. If, in this study, Jewish voices are heard, they are filtered through the consciousness of a non-Jewish author. In most instances, however, the reader will take note of the Jewish voices as absences only—and understand the implicit challenges to break down the "language of silence" and the demands that the view of the other as object must be erased by the interest in the other as subject. The novels discussed here by no means exhaust the many different attempts in West German literature to come to any terms with the Nazi past. But they offer a cross section of techniques and points of view that betray the "subtexts" and blind spots of the "language of silence."

Consideration must also be given to the fact that Jews were not the exclusive victims of the Holocaust, that "gypsies and Poles, political prisoners and asocials, criminals and homosexuals were all incarcerated and exterminated."[11] Political prisoners are the subject of a considerable body of literature. Since they were opponents of the Nazi regime, their sufferings were invested with a sense of pride and there was no need for strategies of silence. The murder of the Sinti and Roma and other minorities has not received much acknowledgment, perhaps because their numbers were comparatively small and the survivors remained silent. The fact that these minorities are virtually not presented in literature indicates that their fate has not penetrated to levels of unstated assumptions, where articulation would become imperative.[12] If literature is the seismograph of a people's conscience, then this void tells its own story. It is the genocide of the Jews that holds the central place in the acknowledgment of the atrocities of the Nazi regime and that stirs the ever renewed efforts at articulation—an articulation that includes the many strategies of silence.

### *The Different Kinds of Silence*

Some comments are in order with respect to "silence." Silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions. Silence is constituted by the absence of words but is therefore and simultaneously the presence of their absence.[13] This is where the image of the Grunewald memorial is most pertinent: language becomes the

cover and the coverup for a silence that nevertheless operates and becomes audible only through words.

For the purposes of this study, some rudimentary differentiations concerning silence are in order. It has been suggested that there are two kinds of silence: "The first comes from too much knowledge, while the second is a refusal to become aware. This second silence is the escape into which memory and guilt are repressed."[14] One might be tempted to identify "too much knowledge" with the silence of the victims and the "refusal to become aware" with the silence of the perpetrators, but such an identification ignores the undoubted fact that the perpetrators kept silent because they had "too much knowledge" and that many victims, in an effort to survive after they survived the Holocaust, took refuge in a "refusal to become aware" of the atrocities to which they had been subjected. A more useful separation may be one that distinguishes between the silence *of* the Holocaust and the silence *about* the Holocaust.

The silence *of* the Holocaust is not the concern of this book. The silence *of* the Holocaust is the silence prompted by the horror of the atrocities committed. Here, controversy has arisen over the notion that the Holocaust, as an unspeakable reality, defies conceptualization in language, let alone literary language. This silence recognizes that, in the words of the historian Saul Friedländer, "our traditional categories of conceptualization and representation may well be insufficient, our language itself problematic," but he concludes that "in the face of these events we feel the need of some stable narration: a boundless field of possible discourses raises the issue of limits with particular stringency."[15] This complex ambiguity of silence and narration is particularly evident in Elie Wiesel, who has been one of the most adamant proponents of silence despite the fact that his oeuvre seems to contradict his position.

The question of whether or not literature is an appropriate vehicle to express and to remember the crimes of the Nazi regime surfaced soon after the end of World War II, when Theodor Adorno, the eminent social philosopher and a returned exile, stated that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."[16] While his exegetists have interpreted this sentence in a variety of ways, Adorno himself amplified his position a few years later: "The question…'Does living have any meaning when men exist who beat you until your bones break?' is also the question whether art as such should exist at all," and he explained further: "The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it."[17]

Adorno's apprehension was shared by many and by some was supported in its radical consequence: "I firmly believe that art is not appropriate to the holocaust. Art takes the sting out of suffering…. It is therefore forbidden to make fiction of the holocaust. Any attempt to transform the holocaust into art demeans the holocaust and must result in poor art."[18] This intransigent position was, if not

refuted, nevertheless modified by the scholar of Holocaust literature Lawrence Langer, who suggested that Adorno prejudged "perhaps too dogmatically" and proposed instead:

> [A]n essential characteristic…of almost all the literature…is not the tranfiguration of empirical reality…but its disfiguration, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader's sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it is intrinsically eliminated.[19]

The first objection to art giving voice to the Holocaust was of a general nature ("Art takes the sting out of suffering"). Another, related objection was more specific. Art, by definition, imposes order and creates meaning, while the Holocaust defies any such attempt. Here again, Langer counters Adorno and answers by shifting from a categorical position to one of technique:

> The validity of Adorno's apprehension that art's transfiguration of moral chaos into aesthetic form might in the end misrepresent that chaos and create a sense of meaning and purpose in the experience of the Holocaust (and hence, paradoxically, a justification of it in aesthetic terms) depends very much on how the artist exploits his material.[20]

The concern that aesthetic "transfiguration" might justify even the grimmest reality is rooted in the concept of the autonomy of a work of art and is frequently connected with a devaluation, even a rejection of reality. Severance of the two realms—art and reality—culminated in high modernism, of which Adorno is one of the highest points and last expounders. Yet the very existence of the Holocaust invalidates the aesthetics of high modernism and imposes a redefinition not only of art but of humanity and of the world that humanity created. It seems anachronistic, if not outright false, to evaluate the literature of the Holocaust according to definitions which the very existence of the Holocaust has destroyed. In 1966, seventeen years after his severe pronouncement, and possibly swayed by the extraordinary Holocaust poetry of Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs, Adorno recanted when he said: "The enduring suffering has as much right to expression as does the tortured man to scream; therefore it may have been wrong that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written."[21]

Still another set of objections to a literary presentation of the Holocaust centers on the problematics of language—specifically, on silence and speechlessness. George Steiner, the distinguished Cambridge scholar, has advanced positions that needed to be answered, particularly in relation to the

German language. When he asserted that "the world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside reason. To speak of the unspeakable is to risk the survival of language as creator and bearer of humane rational truth," he proposed to relegate Auschwitz to silence in order not to contaminate human language.[22] Yet a language that serves only as the "creator and bearer of humane, rational truth" and expurgates the frightening, inhuman, and unspeakable aspects is a censored language, and is on the road to becoming as barbaric as any of the manipulated languages of totalitarian regimes. The language Steiner desires would not retain the memory that is perhaps the only meaningful association we can have with Auschwitz: never to forget the abyss of inhumanity of which man is capable.

To succumb to a moral or aesthetic imperative that demands the silence of the Holocaust would be tantamount to acknowledging the very barbarism of which Auschwitz stands as the horrifying exemplar. It would extend the inhumanity of the action to the inhumanity of nonarticulation. It would signal the capitulation of the human mind and of human language to the polemics of those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened. The Holocaust, as an unspeakable reality, paradoxically demands speech even as it threatens to impose silence. As the scholar of Holocaust literature Alvin H.Rosenfeld has observed, that speech "may be flawed, stuttering, and inadequate, but it is still speech."[23]

If the silence *of* the Holocaust can be articulated only as paradox and (in the words of Saul Friedländer) a "probing of the limits of representation," silence *about* the Holocaust is of a different order. There is the silence into which victims have retreated and there is the silence of the perpetrators, the silence that is the subject of this book. Much has been said about German efforts to repress, deny, or avoid speaking about the Nazi regime and the genocide. But every strategy, conscious or unconscious, employed in the service of this denial is also an acknowledgment. One can as easily maintain that West German postwar literature has continually been aware of the Holocaust,[24] and that the silence, contoured by a vast number of narrative strategies, is its most expressive indicator. If silence is an admission of knowledge, then the paramount question is: What knowledge about the Holocaust is being repressed, denied, avoided, and how does this avoidance find expression?

### *The Corruption of Language*

Literature uses words to strategize silences, to contour avoidances, to reveal unstated assumptions, to disclose what it wants to hide or deny. To return to the guiding image of the wall outside Grunewald station, one can say that without the wall (the body of literature), the empty spaces cannot be perceived. Yet the language which makes up that literature is not neutral; it is shaped—indeed, created—by historical circumstances and political pressures. This material is used to construct the analogous wall, and it determines the contours that limn the

empty spaces. Just as the wall and the material quality of the wall stand in an intimate and reciprocal relation to the gaping spaces, so language and silence mutually condition each other. A brief discussion of the language available to, shaping, and shaped by the postwar generations seems therefore in order.

After the collapse of the Hitler regime, there existed profound doubts about the viability of the German language itself. Ezrahi notes that its "syntax, style, and symbolic associations were profoundly and abidingly violated by what came to be known as 'Nazi-Deutsch,'" as it tried to reconcile "the incompatible goals of maintaining precise written records of Nazi deeds while camouflaging them in euphemisms for the outside world."[25] The corruption of the language in this fashion led the German critic Heinrich Vormweg to regret that no "linguistic denazification" took place and that the young writers who started to write after 1945 could not design a radically new, uncontaminated language.[26] According to him it was not enough to present critically Nazi key words such as "hero," "vassal's allegiance" *(Gefolgschaftstreue),* "Volk," "blood"; the language needed to be cleansed of the unconscious associations of deeply imprinted speech habits.

As late as 1959, George Steiner asked what the German language could express after it had been dehumanized and "infected not only with these great bestialities" but also "called upon to enforce innumerable falsehoods."[27] However, a few years later, in an optimistic postscript to this assessment, he conceded a new vitality to the German language and he saw this vitality directly related to attempts to confront the crimes of the Nazi past. He now found: "It is precisely by turning to face the past that German drama and fiction have resumed a violent, often journalistic, but undeniable force of life."[28]

### *The Inability to Mourn*

The psychological mechanisms operating in this silence have perhaps been best captured by the social psychologists Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their study *The Inability to Mourn,*[29] a book that was pathbreaking at its time and that has influenced the discourse concerning the German silence about the Holocaust to this day. Published in 1967, after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt/Main from 1963 to 1965, but before the explosive student movement of 1968, it sought to explain the apparent lack of an affective "working through" of the crimes of the Nazi regime. The Mitscherlichs found the West German "inability to mourn" rooted in the country's inability to mourn the loss of its Führer (23). This mourning would have necessitated an understanding of themselves and of the sociopsychological reasons why Hitler was—had been allowed to become—the all-powerful idol. They explained this need for an idealized leader as resulting from a historically conditioned weak national ego that sought refuge in obedience, resented this

obedience, and overcame the aversion to it by increased idealization of the leader to whom it was obedient (22) and with whom it identified narcissistically (63).

Following Freud, the Mitscherlichs posit two means of expressing bereavement: mourning and melancholy. Mourning expresses the pain over the loss of an other, while melancholy causes in the melancholic (and here they quote Freud) "an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale" (26). With the loss of the "exalted and deified object" (22) and the realization of the enormity of the crimes committed, there would have occurred "a loss of self-esteem that could hardly have been mastered, and a consequent outbreak of melancholia in innumerable cases" (26). The Mitscherlichs then use this core thesis to advance their hypothesis:

> The Federal Republic did not succumb to melancholia; instead, as a group, those who had lost their "ideal leader," the representative of a commonly shared ego-ideal, managed to avoid self-devaluation by breaking all affective bridges to the immediate past. This withdrawal of affective cathecting energy, of interest, should not be regarded as a decision, as a conscious, deliberate act; it was an unconscious process, with only minimal guidance from the conscious ego. The disappearance from memory of events that had previously been highly stimulating and exciting must be regarded as the result of a self-protective mechanism triggered, so to speak, like a reflex action (26).

Yet this avoidance came at great cost. The Mitscherlichs identified several aspects: (a) a "striking emotional rigidity" as the only response "to the piles of corpses in the concentration camps, to the disappearance into captivity of entire German armies, to the news of the slaughter of millions of Jews, Poles, and Russians, and to the murder of political opponents in one's own ranks" (28); (b) a de-realization of the past (including a de-realization of the former attachment to the magnified idol), which also facilitated the abrupt switch to identifying, without much inner conflict, with the victors, and which "helped ward off the sense of being implicated" (28); and (c) an enormous collective effort of postwar reconstruction, in which the Mitscherlichs see the expression of a "manic undoing of the past" (28).

The Mitscherlichs emphasize that the defense mechanisms of denial, repression, and de-realization led to a "tremendous impoverishment of the ego" (63) and, together with the "manic" attempts at economic reconstruction, to a "psychic immobilism" (63) —that is, to apathy and indifference. An important aspect of this de-realization bears on the abruptness in the switch of identification and its consequences: as Adolf Hitler and the ego investments in him were de-realized, the German people needed to see themselves as duped and as victims (45/6). This self-identification as victim is part of the defense

mechanism and further blocks any access to a genuine empathy with the sufferings inflicted upon one's fellow human beings, upon the other as subject, not object.

Since Freud's interest was invested in the individual, one must further address the legitimacy of arriving at more widely applicable statements and inquire into the relation of the individual to the larger social context, which ultimately includes the problematics of individual vs. collective responsibility and/or guilt. In this study, I follow to a large extent the thinking of Dominick LaCapra, scholar of European intellectual history, as he has struggled with the perceived "binary opposition between the individual and society" and has suggested that "what happens to the individual may not be purely individual, for it may be bound up with larger social, political, and cultural processes that often go unperceived."[30] He points to the necessity of public forums and the need for "suitable public rituals that would help one to come to terms with melancholia and engage in possibly regenerative processes of mourning" (213). While there have been an increasing number of "public rituals" staged (particularly around the 40th and 50th anniversaries of significant events during the Nazi regime such as the "night of broken glass," the liberation of Auschwitz, the end of World War II), none, with the possible exception of Chancellor Willy Brandt's visit to the Warsaw ghetto, has had an affective impact that would involve the entire personality and thus lead to genuine expressions of mourning. In fact, one can maintain, as I will in this study, that despite increasingly available knowledge about the Holocaust, Germans individually and collectively have been unable to work through and to mourn the crimes perpetrated, if working-through demands "the possibility of judgment" that is "argumentative, self-questioning, and related in mediated ways to action." If not accompanied by affective mourning, public rituals will assuage the individual's conscience without self-questioning and will foreclose any insight into the need for action in whatever mediated ways.[31]

Another point to be considered, and of importance for this study, is that of the passage of the generations. The Mitscherlichs published their study in 1967 and thus had a perspective of more than twenty years after the end of the Nazi regime to formulate their conclusions. Since that publication, another three decades have passed and the generation of those who lived during the Nazi regime is rapidly dying out. The Mitscherlichs could still clearly identify the generation of the perpetrators as the one characterized by an "inability to mourn," yet in subsequent years it has become obvious that the successor generations are equally burdened with their elders' legacy, and that they, too, may be unable to recoup the affective dimension required for genuine mourning—not remorse for deeds they did not commit or mourning for a Hitler who to them is at most a historical figure, but a mourning for the parents' generation, the deeds committed by them, and for the victims.

Later in this study, I will discuss the burdens under which the successor generations are laboring as they have tried to confront the legacy of their parents. In the present introductory context it may suffice to refer to the conclusion that Eric Santner, a scholar of German film and literature, has drawn when he states that "the second generation inherited not only the unmourned traumas of the parents but also the psychic structures that impeded mourning in the older generation in the first place."[32] Based on this insight, he can offer only dim prospects for the future, even as he includes the third generation: "To carry out their labors of self-constitution the second and third generations face the double bind of needing symbolic resources which, because of the unmanageable degrees of ambivalence such resources arouse, make these labors impossible" (45).

As I hope to show, roughly every decade and a half the successor generations developed different strategies and different approaches in their attempts to fashion an identity for themselves and come to terms with the legacy of their elders. Yet "coming to terms" is not equivalent to "working through," and it leaves the victims and the crimes as unmourned as they have always been.

## *The Break in Civilization*

The Holocaust has shattered all previous assumptions about the nature of humankind and the perfectibility of society, creating, in the words of the Israeli and German historian Dan Diner, a "break in civilization."[33] It opened an abyss in the definition and self-perception of human beings, an abyss reflected in language and narrative strategies. Eric Santner suggests that the break in civilization constituted by the Holocaust is replicated in a "rhetoric of mourning" that appeals to "notions of shattering, rupture, mutilation, fragmentation, to images of fissures, wounds, rifts, gaps, and abysses" (7). This is the realrn of disorientation, disfigurement, disarticulation, displacement, discontinuities, and disjunctions, a realm that post-Holocaust art has tried to inhabit. For a discussion of this realm, Santner further relies on the deconstructionist concepts of decenteredness, instability, and nomadism, and on the need to tolerate difference, heterogeneity, nonmastery. The deconstructionist Barbara Johnson makes an even tighter connection between deconstruction and the Holocaust when she states that "it may well be that [deconstruction] has arisen as an attempt to come to terms with the holocaust as a radical disruption produced as a logical extension of Western thinking."[34]

The undercurrents in this understanding of the postmodern as post-Holocaust (and evident in Johnson's statement) are arguments disavowing the Enlightenment's faith in progress. The Holocaust has destroyed the "master narrative" of the "liberation of humanity,"[35] and the idea of "the redemption of modern life through culture,"[36] that is, the idea of the perfectibility of humankind. Zygmunt Bauman takes this line of reasoning even a few steps further when he

asserts: "It is our Western Civilization which the occurrence of the Holocaust has made all but incomprehensible…"[37]

And indeed, the analyses in the following chapters will in some cases show a literature of ruptures, disfigurements, displacements, and involutions. Other examples, however, suggest a desire for and tendency toward continuity. This desire for continuity can be seen as an attempt to deny the radical break constituted by the Holocaust. The desire for the reconnection with a historical past in which the Holocaust would be a horrifying anomaly negates its shattering impact in favor of the fantasy of a totalizing and "normalizing" worldview.

The following chapters will suggest how West German authors have attempted, in a variety of strategies spanning more than four decades, to address these problematics. I will give an account of their efforts, their failures, their blind spots, their conscious agendas, and their unconscious desires, and show how the silences enveloping the Holocaust speak the language of ambiguity, indeterminacy, instability, and absence, but speak a language, nonetheless.

### *A Word on Organization*

The sequence of the chapters follows roughly a chronological order. This arrangement helps to show how the nature of the silence has changed over the decades and has even become compatible with a knowledge of and discourse about the Holocaust. Heinrich Böll (chapter 1) is a member of the generation that tried, in the first postwar decade, to find its literary voice in the "literature of the rubble," while struggling to free itself from a language infested with Nazi ideology and impoverished by clichés. Wolfgang Koeppen, who wrote at the same time but made his literary debut at the end of the Weimar period, retained a sense of pre-Nazi language and therefore felt free enough to attack the Nazi language, its taboos, and the thinking that went with them, although with minimal success.

About a decade later (chapter 2), the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 and the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt/Main from 1963 to 1965 provided an official, "objective" language in which to speak about the crimes of the Holocaust. This "documentary" language had a great impact on all literary genres but was appropriated differently by various writers. Alexander Kluge radically subverted the supposed objectivity of documents, showing that even documents are man-made and hence serve the specific interests of those who create them. Using a great variety of literary techniques, he constantly reminds the reader that even in the most "objective" of documents one is confronted with subjective statements. Günter Grass, by contrast, evinces no such skepticism toward objective facts and the ability of language to convey them. He uses documents for pedagogical purposes, to teach the young, upcoming generation about the Holocaust and address simultaneously the problematics of German identity.

The 1960s saw the first postwar generation grow into adulthood. As in the United States, it was a generation involved in protest movements, in marches and demonstrations for various political causes. In the United States, the civil rights movement and the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam were the focus of protest. In the Federal Republic of Germany, it was the discord among the generations, particularly the younger generation's demands to know what their parents had done during the Nazi regime. Transferred from the personal to the political arena, these protests and demonstrations escalated into terrorism. Just as the number of participants in the demonstrations was huge, so was the number of novels, written in the 1970s, after the political activities had died down. The economic crisis following the oil shock of 1973 (and, in the United States, the conclusion of the war in Vietnam and Watergate), along with a simple exhaustion of activist fervor, contributed to the general mood of the 1970s, which was overall one of introspection and of taking account. (In the political arena, this mood turned toward concerns with the environment and formed the basis of a new party, the Greens.) Because so many of the novels of the 1970s are occasioned by similar interests (an exploration of the parental role in the Nazi past) and follow similar patterns of autobiographical exploration, it has become customary to group them together as the "novels about fathers and mothers" (chapter 3). Built on the publicity surrounding the trials, the knowledge of the Holocaust in these novels is a given. However, the use to which this knowledge is put relegates it to silence once again. This knowledge is not concerned with the victims and their sufferings but is an instrument in the battle with the parents.

Hanns-Josef Ortheil shows that the concern with the parents' role during the Nazi past can be so consuming that the lives of both parents need to be analyzed (chapter 4). While an exploration of the life of the mother provides the male protagonist with some understanding of his own burdened childhood, only the journey into the self after the death of the father can set the protagonist free on the road to a mature adulthood. The Holocaust is here seen as an event that has significantly—and silently—shaped the lives of both parents, who then raise their son as they labor under this burden. Ortheil traces the parents' inscriptions on the psychological makeup of the next generation, yet the Holocaust as the "break in civilization" and as suffering and death inflicted upon millions of people remains outside the circumference of his concerns.

Hermann Lenz (chapter 5), born in 1913, is one of the oldest writers presented in this study. In his case, the impetus to write autobiographical fiction is an attempt to understand his own generation, the parent generation against whom "the generation of 1968" rebelled. In a major effort, he subjects his entire life to the scrutiny and observations of one (himself) who has remained an outsider. To date, nine volumes of this life have been published. *New Times* (1975) records his military service on the Eastern front. The atrocities committed by the German

military during World War II in Poland and Russia have only in the last decade and a half come to the foreground of scholarly and public discussion. It is therefore of great interest to find out what the protagonist knew, what he witnessed, and how he coped. In this novel, the workings of memory and the recording of silences are, so to speak, the main actors. Fissures, gaps, and discontinuities—the arsenal of postmodern/post-Holocaust literary tools—are the distinguishing characteristics of Lenz's narrative. *New Times* is a demonstration of how the devastating impact of knowledge was kept at bay.

Gert Hofmann (chapter 6), who died in 1993, did not participate in the trend of autobiographical fiction. His enormously impressive prose oeuvre spans hardly more than the last decade of his life and many of the novels and novellas that he published in these years go obsessively over the same ground—the Nazi era. Split perspectives, fragmentations, silences are the means by which he shows the impact of the legacy of the Nazi regime on the postwar generation, and that generation's accommodation—or lack of accommodation—to West Germany's postwar prosperity as a covering up of the crimes of the Nazi past. Through his disjointed (and in some instances half-insane) protagonists he shows the tremendous toll the past takes on the present when this past has never been openly mourned or worked through but instead is repressed and covered with silence.

From the 1980s on, the literature that tries to work through the Holocaust cannot be easily typified. Literature concerned with the Holocaust continues to be written at an unremitting pace, and the nature of the "language of silence" undergoes further changes. Chapter 7 focuses on three novels with Jewish protagonists—a 1967 novel by Alfred Andersch and two novels of the mid-1980s by Peter Härtling and Gert Hofmann. These novels respond from their divers points of view to the annihilation of many millions of individuals by attempting to restitute personal identity to Jewish victims. Blind spots and omissions reveal Andersch's and Härtling's difficulties in imagining their protagonists' suffering; only Hofmann, in *Veilchenfeld,* has depicted the humiliation and destruction of a Jewish victim in terms that restitute personal identity to that victim and allow him to emerge as the subject of his own history. All three novels raise the question of whether or not and within what limits nonvictims can ever imaginatively and affectively create an empathic identity with the sufferings of the Jews—and whether a better approach to overcoming the language of silence and mourning the victims would not start with what Robert Schindel has suggested in his novel *Gebürtig:* an apology followed by the amends implicit in the invitation "Come back. You are welcome."[38]

The 1980s, the decade that ended with unification, was a decade of literary, academic, and political controversies that centered in one way or another on the Holocaust. Chapter 8 examines the most important ones. The various anniversaries of events that occurred in the Nazi regime were commemorated in

ceremonies and speeches and frequently gave rise to vigorous public debates, beginning in 1985, when President Reagan, at the invitation of and accompanied by Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, visited Bitburg military cemetery, which contains the graves of soldiers of the Waffen-SS. On the literary scene that year, Rainer Werner Fassbinder provoked demonstrations and sit-ins with his anti-Semitic play *Garbage, The City and Death,* and a year later, the Historians' Controversy erupted over whether the Holocaust was a unique event in history or comparable, for example, to Stalin's terror. In 1988, Philipp Jenninger, the president of the Bundestag, was forced to resign because of a speech he gave on the 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht,* the "night of broken glass," in which he employed Nazi language in a misunderstood attempt to demythologize it. The Holocaust also figured significantly in the debates surrounding German unification in 1990. Günter Grass argued against unification because of Germany's past history. In his view, since a united Germany had instigated two world wars and brought immeasurable suffering, a divided Germany would be a better guarantor against future German aggression. By contrast, Martin Walser, another prominent and popular West German author, felt that West Germany had learned its lesson in the forty years since its inception. It had become a stable democracy and had proved a reliable ally of the West; unification would acknowledge that lessons can be learned. Political developments overrode Grass's concerns but their debate highlights the continued significance of the Holocaust for German self-understanding.

Literature written after unification continues to be occupied with the Holocaust. Chapter 9 discusses the efforts of some novelists—efforts missing in earlier West German literature—to introduce a dialogue between Jews and non-Jews. Bernhard Schlink uses the pattern of the novels of generational discord to find out about the Nazi past of a person loved by the protagonist, but his portrayal of a Holocaust survivor as subject rather than object is still brief and tenuous. Peter Schneider uses Berlin as the most appropriate setting for personal and political separations and "couplings" (the title of his novel). Coupling includes friendship with Jews and his novel explores the fragile grounds on which these relations are built. In *The Emigrants,* W.G.Sebald looks for common elements in the lives of uprooted and alienated people. He begins to mourn the destruction of Jews in Germany—a unique achievement in German literature—and gives voice to the culture and the lives that were destroyed. Here, the language of silence is broken and a long-delayed melancholy emerges.

No concluding chapter can bring this complex topic to a closure; mine will point to a shift of discourse in two new directions, one within literature, one outside it. There are today in Germany numbers of young German Jews and Jews writing in German who are making their voices heard. Their writing differs from the literature of Holocaust survivors in that they belong to the successor generation and address issues concerned with living in post-Holocaust Germany.

Impatient with the German "inability to mourn," they determine how they want to be perceived and accepted—not as objects but as subjects of their own history with voices of their own. As Peter Schneider's novel acknowledges, their presence will have an impact on the novels written by non-Jewish writers struggling with the attempt to overcome ever-new metamorphoses of the language of silence.

At the same time, it is becoming apparent that literature, an art for private consumption, is no longer the primary field of discourse about the Holocaust. Starting with the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials in the 1960s, German awareness and acknowledgment of the Holocaust has become increasingly public. The second shift in direction is toward the most public of arts—architecture. Recently constructed or planned memorial sites, memorials, and museums have provoked a degree of public controversy that emphasizes the general knowledge of the Holocaust but also the conflicted and unresolved attitude in confronting it.

The Holocaust is as much a permanent part of German history as it is of Jewish history. How it is to be memorialized is an issue that will continue to be in the forefront of discussions. In the public sphere, commemorations may become—or are already in the process of becoming—institutionalized, thereby relieving the Germans as a group of personal memory work. But individuals, and among them the artists as seismographs of a people's conscience, continue to struggle with the Holocaust and may, as Sebald's example shows, begin to mourn the destruction and loss.

# *one*
# The First Postwar Decade
## *Heinrich Böll and Wolfgang Koeppen*

> Speaking is silver, silence is gold.
>
> *German proverb*

The end of World War II and the first public realizations of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime called out for voices that would speak to these horrors. As early as 1946, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers posed "the question of German guilt"[1] and Eugen Kogon published *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System behind Them,* based on his experiences as an inmate at Buchenwald.[2] Yet even as the Nuremberg war crimes trials were taking place and the atrocities of the Nazi regime were exposed, denial and rationalizations began to prevail. These attitudes were further strengthened since most Germans were absorbed in their own postwar misery, brought on by the considerable destruction of the cities, the influx of many millions of refugees and displaced persons, the lack of food, and the generally chaotic conditions in the country. Most Germans were pre-occupied by three questions: how to get food, how to find housing, and how to locate missing family members. The incipient cold war and the farce of the denazification trials, which Jean-Paul Bier has characterized as "a crafty system of fakes, truncated biographies, and exchanges of mutually accommodating testimony" only hardened this posture.[3] The "missed opportunity to account for the past"[4] allowed the Germans to believe in a collusion with the Western allies, since the West seemed to need the recently defeated in drawing up the cold war's battle lines, and created a presumption of innocence since few war criminals were rigorously punished.

Still shackled to the Nazi indoctrination of striving for "higher ideals," the literature of the immediate postwar years was dominated by "vague feelings of guilt, the appeal to the ideals of the 'essential' and the 'higher,' one's own sufferings, and the relief over having managed to escape."[5] In the early postwar months, Thomas Mann provoked extensive controversy when he declared from his exile in the United States that "it was not a small number of criminals" who were