

History is What Hurts

*Exploring the effects of an 'unmasterable past'
in 21st century Germany*

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Vorbei!¹ Or, Is the Past Past?

There is a pain – so utter –
It swallows substance up –
Then covers the Abyss with Trance –
So Memory can step
Around – across – upon it –
As one within a Swoon –
Goes safely – where an open eye –
Would drop Him – Bone by Bone.
- Emily Dickinson, Poem 599

A noted German leftist intellectual in the second half of the 20th century, Professor Hans Schwerte was a literary scholar and teacher who had been renowned as a champion of *Wiedergutmachung* (reparations) and celebrated for his attempts to bring his students and readers into dialogue about the crimes of the Nazis. In April 1995, it was revealed that Professor Schwerte had formerly been Hans Ernst Schneider, an 'intellectual' SS officer and assistant to Heinrich Himmler.² Schneider was 23 when the Nazis came to power, 35 as World War II came to an end and the Nazi party collapsed. Instead of hiding out in South America, like many other SS officers and Nazi party members, Schneider furtively feigned his own death in Berlin and resurrected himself as Schwerte, remarried his wife under his new name, and eventually turned to academia. During a very

successful academic career as a Germanist and university administrator, he published books and articles on Goethe, Rilke, and German-Jewish literature; he worked to ground the study of literature within the secular humanistic tradition on which German philology had earlier flourished. Even now Schwerte is remembered as one of the few professors of his generation to support and willingly engage the students of the protest movement of the late 60s and 70s, while studying the ways in which political ideology itself can be preserved and perpetuated as well as critically engaged in cultural productions such as literature. The protest movement that he supported, in addition to contesting the war in Vietnam and struggling for civil rights, was subtended by a broader objections made by the children of Nazi perpetrators in West Germany against the crimes of their parents in WWII, which students read in the older generations' silence about the Nazi years.

The Schneider/Schwerte story was a shock to Germany. How could a Nazi, an SS officer, become such a progressive figure in the Federal Republic of Germany? Had Schwerte been living a "double life," hypocritically writing a book about Faustian ideology in Germany while surreptitiously celebrating his national socialist past? The Nazi-era was over. Germany was a relatively healthy democracy. How, then, was this figure — whether amnesiac or split personality ("Once a Nazi, always a Nazi!") — able to become such a vigorous part of a democratic movement that supposedly arose through an absolute rupture with the Nazi-period? The Nazis were a thing of another time, so how could one survive in a democratic nation through any method other than impossible dissimulation? Can such a man reform and convert?

This intriguing "parable," as Claus Leggewie has called it, is at once outstandingly exceptional and disturbingly representative in contemporary German history.³ The story of Schneider-to-Schwerte is particularly instructive because, as Leggewie's book cleverly teases out, Schwerte was not the only one to have changed his name and taken up a progressive politics in post-war West Germany:

Because Germany, too, had cast off its name, the "German Reich," in 1945 and, without knowing exactly where the journey would or should have led, had gotten for itself a new name: the Federal Republic of Germany in the West; German Democratic Republic in the East. [...] The western section, in the beginning exactly as tentative, senseless and dishonest as

Schwerte, began a democratic career that was never flawless but still astonishingly successful—and was in the end, exactly like Schwerte, to be confronted again with its brown prehistory and to receive interrogations into the truth of the conversion (SS, 16).⁴

This parable, then, dispels two related myths that were popular in 1950s Germany and still maintain an appeal, albeit diminished, in certain conservative German circles today: the strangely-twined myths that explain 1945 and the defeat of the Third Reich as a “*Zusammenbruch*” (breakdown/collapse) or a “*Befreiung*” (liberation) (SS, 12). The former version of this myth holds that a discrete and definite break can be located at the collapse of the Third Reich in 1945: the Federal Republic that followed neither enclosed nor contained any continuity with the regime of National Socialism. The latter myth of “liberation,” a platitude which even Ronald Reagan managed to perpetuate in his 1985 Bitburg Cemetery speech, assumes that the German people were all prisoners and victims of the Nazis, rather than, variously, willing executioners, party members, complicit bystanders, and only rarely victims in the same sense as were those liberated from the death camps. There were Germans, of course, also subjected by the Nazis, and some who hid Jews and resisted. Such Germans were the exception, though. This myth tries to re-imagine them as the rule. Historically miming the nation’s own nominal and political turn, the narrative of Schneider-to-Schwerte illustrates that the ways in which Germany and Germans have represented their past are often mystifying, and the profusion of paradoxes in attempts to explain the Holocaust and National Socialism in German history, rather than forging a mode of constructive self-erasure, have insistently undercut their implicit goal: to narrativize a traumatic past.

Contradictory narratives about Germany’s troubled past spring from a disjoint between the ideality of a democratic republic and the materiality of a lingering fascism, a perennial rending of structure and event. Nazis were incorporated at the inception of a so-called new Germany. In 1947 Eugen Kogon noted, regarding the 10 million registered members of the Nazi party who survived the war, “We can only kill them or win them over” (SS, 141).⁵ The democratic Federal Republic of Germany was founded with (ex-)Nazis in the highest positions of the political, judicial, industrial, academic, and medical realms of society. Literally, the parable of Schneider-to-Schwerte shows us that a reductive description of the

Nazi past in Germany as "*vorbei*" is exceedingly problematic. The story also metaphorizes the paradoxical nature of the temporality of a traumatic past: that it is at once forever recalcitrantly rooted in the irrecoverable past and yet always intruding and disturbing the present through modes of inheritance and unpaid debts, abject hauntings and unhealed wounds. Public officials and elites, themselves often directly complicit, received history in ways that they did not choose, and could not simply fashion a new state in a way that could negate any transmission of the past.

Historical circumstances transmitted from the past cannot just be wished away with simple policies to restructure or manipulate. What Jan Phillipp Reemtsma has called the "*terroristic presence of the past*"⁶ weighs on the present tense in ways that make the structuring of a transformed present and future fraught with difficulties. The construction of Schneider/Schwerte's "*My name would be Schwerte*"⁷ (SS, 15) is no less of a delusive autobiographical defacement than "*My name would be the Federal Republic of Germany.*" The crimes of the Nazis, and in particular the Holocaust, seem to resist the kind of narrativization that would be able to separate the present from the past of which it is made. This paradox – that the past can be at once absent and present—is in some sense characteristic of history in general. The contradiction is even more arresting in relation to the Holocaust's temporality. Yet one of the most amazing events is that the Federal Republic of Germany, like Schwerte, was able to maintain a relatively successful democratic character after WWII, despite its problems and the presence of its National Socialist past. This paradox stands in a complex and not unproblematic causal relation to the contradictory ways in which a traumatic past is both present and absent in contemporary Germany, with the proliferation of explanatory narratives at once illuminating and obscuring the abject traces of an impossible history.

Before we can explore Germany in the 21st century, however, a little background is required to investigate how the assumptions about the past's pastness have been reiterated among stutters of undermining complication. Several events in the history of the Federal Republic of German unsettled the public and private amnesia about events that followed WWII. The 1968 student protest movement, for example, can be read as a reproduction of the conflict between the children of Nazis and their parents within the matrix of a broader movement for reform or liberation.

Some have read this conflict itself, with the help of Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* ("deferred action"), as the deferred eruption of traumatic symptoms after the event of the catastrophic historical experience of the crimes of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the silence which for over two decades had attempted to cover over such a past.⁸ The *Historikerstreit* (historians' debate) of 1987 was also a symptom of the inability of the past to remain past: the most conservative historians, among them Ernst Nolte, attempted to balance the crimes of the Nazis by defining them as reactions to what they considered the much more enormous danger posed by Bolshevism.⁹ That the definition of the Federal Republic in these examples was so closely intertwined with how the nation defined its dialogic relation to the Holocaust (in particular) and the NS-period (in general) concretizes some of the ways in which the past still played an ontological role within the present. Another important landmark—an erasure of a landmark or an attempted erasure of a land *marked* in wounded division – is the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of 1989. In a kind of inverted historical recurrence of the 1945 changes (splitting the Third Reich into two, one part of which was the Federal Republic; *Schnieder* to *Schwerte*), the two halves became a united "Berlin Republic," as Jürgen Habermas calls it, and, not unlike the earlier change to Deutsch Marks, eventually changed currency to the Euro.

Yet, if, as Karl Marx cautions, historical events occur twice, first as tragedy and secondly as farce, then reading such significance out of the similarities or inversions that exist between 1945 and 1989 would be problematic. Centrally, though, 1989 and the EU have presented a series of conditions that question the common insistence on the past's pastness, reviving the existential, epistemological, and ethical force and relevance of such questions in Germany. How are the Nazi past and the Holocaust represented in Germany today? Is the Holocaust truly "unmasterable," or has a new German identity been forged through or around it? The second part of this paper will look at some of the ways in which the past today in Germany is at once present and absent, and will also examine a series of contemporary contradictions that figure within the impossible narrativization of the Holocaust and the Nazi period, despite the relatively stable democracy that Germany has achieved.

Germany Today: "Ein Neues Deutschland"

Since then, at an uncertain hour,
 That agony returns:
 And till my ghastly tale is told,
 This heart within me burns.

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
 vv. 582-585

A popular argument in contemporary Germany, which takes different forms, is that of "a new Germany," re-sounding the assertion of a break with the past. Newspapers after WWII were named "new Germany"—and many people have used this claim to attempt to draw some kind of finish line separating the past from the present and confine the Nazi crimes to some vague 'other time' in order to undercut complicity. Obviously, this is no longer so direct a problem in Germany today as it was in the past few decades: in a real sense, all but the oldest generations of Germans are experiencing a new Germany insofar as they have no direct contact or memories of the Nazi period. These claims are delivered in such a prevalent fashion in part, though, because those who are making them are in some ways not sure of them. Part of this ambivalence is due to a ambiguous challenge in the younger generations of Germans, many members of which often wish to move away from the crimes of their grandparents by attempting to alienate themselves from all things German. There are also certain extreme examples that are unequivocally anti-Semitic, obscurantist, and borderline fascistic, as in the politician Martin Hohmann (formerly of the conservative Christian Democrat Union) who believes that Jews—themselves a "*Tätervolk*," or people of persecutors (the word *Täter* implying equivalence with Nazis)—recollect the Holocaust only to beat down the German people, bludgeoning them financially and morally. Hohmann does this with the most blatant of anti-Semitic clichés (e.g., Jews were all Bolsheviks and still are the fount of some international conspiracy against Germany). Hohmann's sentiments are a minority in Germany, and though there are others like him—and a number who, though quieter, manage to sit in the more conservative parties of Germany—there are enough people to vote such a man out of office.¹⁰ Even in more moderate and liberal circles, however, there is an

urge to look forward and, if not to draw the same kind of absolute line between the past and the present, there is an emphasis on the need to turn away from the past that no where smacks of this kind of anti-Semitism. Though some argue for the necessity of such a rhetorical, cultural, and political turn for the re-entrance of Germany into the international political stage, such an attempt it is still shot through with contradictions and mystifications.

An instance of such a tendency to separate past ruin and present assertion was enacted at the 60th anniversary of the Normandy invasion, to which, for the first time, a German Chancellor was invited to commemorate D-Day.¹¹ At Normandy, Chancellor Schröder declared an end to the *Nachkriegszeit* (post-war period), and, though acknowledging the responsibility Germans had for their history, declared that that past was “conclusively *vorbei*”¹² and that “my land has found the way back into the circle of the civilized community of nations.”¹³ Though true in a sense, this latter declaration can be understood as being weakened by Schröder’s persistent attempt to declare the past conclusively over or past. As Berthold Kohler has written,¹⁴ this declaration must be understood as inscribed within political goals (e.g., sustaining German’s place in world politics), motivations that, however understandable, nonetheless depend on the specious assumption that a past can be conclusively over. Of course, there are no longer 10 million Nazi party members trying to run the country, as there were in the Federal Republic in the 50s, yet Schröder attempts to close the past off, master it within a narrative that works to distance Germany today from its wounded past without any critique of the ideology such a move benefits. David Foster Wallace has described the formation of an individual as indivisible from its past struggles: “the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle...[O]ur endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home.”¹⁵ The same can be said of the struggle to establish a national identity, which despite its unknown origins and impossible future cannot break free from its complicity in past visions and actions. To define the past of the Holocaust or the *Nachkriegszeit* as conclusively *vorbei* is for Schröder to try to define “my land” completely in the present, relegating the past to an absent nothing. However healthy a democracy Germany may be—and though there are certainly reasons to question this health, there are relatively few to cause serious concern that another Auschwitz would be likely in the

European Union—its past cannot be conclusively over so long as it (Germany) is still here.

The paradox of historical presence and absence—of a past that is past and yet still present—is exacerbated *vis-à-vis* the Holocaust. Not only is the past at once lost and intruding, but when considering the Shoah¹⁶ and the period of National Socialism we are confronted with two fundamental discursive and material truths: that on the one hand the Shoah is sheer excess, unprecedented in the forms of its messianic anti-Semitism and instrumentally scientific, medical, and industrial bureaucratic killing, too much of a historical traumatic event (a “limit event,” as LaCapra calls it) to be comfortably integrated into a linear narrative of Germany’s becoming (as Hanks Jonas puts it, “At Auschwitz more was real than is possible”¹⁷); and that, on the other hand, the Shoah is a gaping void of dreadful rents and dumb wounds, culminating in the annihilation of over 6 million Jewish lives and many others. These disturbingly anamorphic truths are also inscribed within and leave their traces throughout the historiography on the Holocaust as well as the pop culture representations that have in some ways derived from it. The Nazi genocide is at once canonized and displaced, endlessly represented and forever eluding representation in German culture and the scholarship and ways of thinking about it: as Christoph Görg puts it, “the remembrance of the annihilation of the European Jews is being raised almost to the status of a civil religion and, in doing so, removed/hidden/masked out/suppressed.”¹⁸ These contradictions at once perpetuate the misunderstanding and thus the presence/absence of the Holocaust in contemporary German self-understanding (though they are certainly not confined to Germany) and are themselves perpetuated by the Holocaust’s own paradoxes, thus figuring the Holocaust as what Dan Diner calls “the negative core of European self-understanding”:

The history of the Nazi past and of World War II are currently present and felt in a way that is without precedent in the years since 1945. [...] The integration of the Holocaust into the course of history, the construction of an appropriate historical narration for an event unprecedented in its brevity and extremity, somehow disconnected from past and future, still remains an insurmountable task. It seems that the only serious attempt to deal with it historiographically is to accept its fundamental irreconcilability with the saeculum’s core narra-

tives.¹⁹

Part of this difficulty, or even impossibility, of narrativization of the Nazi past is perhaps bound up with the fact, as Primo Levi wrote, that all the “true” witnesses to the worst Nazi crimes died in the camps. For Levi, the *Muselmann*²⁰ is the “drowned victim, the only true witness, the bereft witness unable to give testimony or bear witness” (*HIT*, 161).²¹ This kind of lack of testimony, which in Levi’s narrative always seems to subvert any pretensions to pedagogical or didactic appropriation of the experience, seems actually to have been a goal of the Nazis. We can see the importance of the effacement of testimony and destruction of evidence in the Nazi ideology within a few relevant passages from Heinrich Himmler’s Posen speech, which was given in private to upper-level SS offices on 4 October 1943, and is thus particularly telling:

I also want to make reference before you here, in complete frankness, to a really grave matter. Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it. Just as we did not hesitate on June 30, 1934 [the purge of Ernst Röhm and his SA leadership], to do our duty as ordered, to stand up against the wall comrades who had transgressed, and shoot them, also we have never talked about this and never will. It was the tact which I am glad to say is a matter of course to us that made us never discuss it among ourselves, never talk about it. Each of us shuddered, and yet each one knew that he would do it again if it were ordered and if it were necessary.

I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people....Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out [or endured this: *durchstehen*], and — excepting cases of human weakness — to have kept our integrity [or decency: *anständig geblieben zu sein*], that is what has made us hard. In our history this is an unwritten, never-to-be-written page of glory.²²

The perpetrators never meant for their crimes (“glory”) to be able to be narrativized: they were meant to remain the stuff of myth, never told, let alone understood in some kind of rigorously theoretical or intellectual mold of narrative self-conception. Yet the amount of documentation and research that historians, sociologists, and other scholars have undertaken

to combat this mythologized and mythologizing silence on the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust is astonishing.

Nonetheless, despite the incredible amount of scholarship and feats of ritual or kitsch remembrance, the Holocaust has and can have no ultimate historian to give it a narrative meaning, as both Diner and Saul Friedlander argue.²³ This lack of closure even within such surfeit of disclosure results in part because, in a Levian sense, the real witnesses can neither find their final, true voice in the present nor rest in some kind of peaceful silence. And there remain, too, the inconsistencies and the insufficient understanding of the anamorphic relation of excess and lack in the contradictory ways that we think about and attempt to conceptualize the Shoah. Friedlander references Jean-François Lyotard, who writes, "The silence that surrounds the phrase 'Auschwitz was the extermination camp' is not a state of mind [*état d'âme*], it is a sign that something remains to be phrased which is not, something which is not determined."²⁴ Germany still encloses within its identity an unclosed (un-closable?) and unspeakable wound, one that is both a kind of spilling out and overflow of boundaries, an excess, and the manifestation of a lack which cannot be articulated. As Theodor Adorno has written on the way we can think of and conceptualize history after Auschwitz, "Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with existence"²⁵: one meaning of this is that plucking a metaphysical, conclusive, stable meaning from the Holocaust is impossible.

***Gegenwartsbewältigung; Vergangenheitsbewältigung*²⁶: Past, Present, and Future; and the Politics of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung**

*Soll dieser Fluch denn ewig walten? Soll
Nie dies Geschlecht mit einem neuen Segen
Sich wieder heben?*²⁷

- Johann Wolfgang Goethe,
from *Iphigenie auf Tauris*

In the face of the intractability of this past and the endlessly contradictory modes of explanation and myth that surround it even in contemporary Germany, how could one speak about or attempt to understand

the Nazi past and its relation to Germany's present and future. Reactions to this problem are intriguingly rehearsed within and illustrated by a series of interviews about two new movies concerned in some way with Hitler undertaken by Ruth Elkins in Berlin recently.²⁸ Out of nine interviews, it is remarkable how comfortably the responses to the production of two recent movies about Hitler (which none of the interviewees had yet seen) fit into two general modes of response. Five of those interviewed believed that the past must still be examined, that the films should help to provoke a dialogue that is still on-going and must continue. Four people interviewed had various reactions that are akin to Bundeskanzler Schröder's declaration of conclusive pastness, though without Schröder's diplomacy: "Hitler was a terrible man, but it is the past. [...] my tendency, like most Germans, is to concentrate on looking forward, not back" (Rainer Vogel, 63, builder); "My generation finds it easier to concentrate on feeling ashamed about our Nazi past than face up to our current challenges..." (Marcus Rosenthal, 32, political lobbyist); "The continued discussion about Hitler and why the Germans have such a terrible past annoys me. It's over 60 years ago now. I look at it as a bad episode from which lessons have been drawn" (Ben Barth, 27, security officer); "Why should we get on our knees all the time about Hitler? [...] I really do believe that it's better for Germany to look forwards, not backwards" (Christoph Hoffman, 51, consultant).

Several things are notable in this latter set of answers: The common notion that the Holocaust was an "episode," with the parlance of contemporary sitcom reality or medical-psychological discourse, ostensibly implies that the Nazi period was part of some kind of serialized work or progression, or momentary illness, which has had some kind of horizontal culmination or healing in the Germany of today, and that, as such, we should not look beyond that which is immediately in front of us but must continue with the progression. The tendency to medicalize a cultural and political problem, an oft-employed method of the Nazis themselves, persists in Germany. Posters around the country read "Don't give AIDS a chance."²⁹ Similar signs—same colors, same style, etc—replace "AIDS" with "Nazi." The displacement or equation of "AIDS" with "Nazis" tropes National Socialism as an active disease, genetically transmittable, with no ostensible cure. The tropological conflation also has a problematic implication for those who have AIDS, as if they were somehow evil.³⁰

We can also note in these comments that the notion of 'looking back'

has been construed as somehow subversive, destabilizing the progress “forward” into the future, coeval with the assumption that what is done is done. Frustration accompanies attention to the consideration that the past is not resolved as pure, coherent and unobtrusive linear antecedent to the present.

Without a conception of history, however, there may very well be no future, as Walter Benjamin—a philosopher, literary and cultural critic who (Jew and Western Marxist) was himself a victim of the Nazis—knew well. Benjamin understood that an abundance of information (around the Holocaust, for example, about which there seems to be an infinite roar of data) does not necessarily mean something like historical understanding (or what Nietzsche might call a true historical sense). Benjamin writes, prophetically, in the shadow of WWII in the spring of 1940:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. [...] A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.³¹

For Benjamin, the only way we could have a “redeemable past” and forge a “redeemable” future—which implies a kind of representability and interpretability which has not been able to narrativize the Holocaust—is to attempt to snatch the glimmers of meaning that fling up or can be sublimely exploded out of the contemplated past while we are blown backwards into the future.³² Sam Durrant reflects: “Written in the spring of 1940, Benjamin’s angel seems preternaturally aware of the Holocaust

to come, even though, or rather *precisely because*, his gaze is fixed unwaveringly on the past" (*PNWM*, 8). In a radical mutation of Hegel's owl of Minerva, then, Benjamin tells us that our understanding can only come through this kind of engagement with the present/absent past of a history we did not entirely experience. Whether or not the Nazi past and Holocaust can be narrativized or redeemed, the mystifying and contradictory ways of (mis)understanding it transcended, is a question that can only be thought by studying and considering the past in ways that problematize simple notions of progress and the assumption of a past conclusively *vorbei*.

An example of how this act of fixing our gaze on the past while being propelled into the future might be done, I would like to mention the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung,³³ where I did my research for this paper while I was working as a research assistant in the summer of 2004. The idea of unqualified progress—and of having to avert one's eyes from the past in order to move forward—is, in sociological terms, a privileging of praxis above theory. The impatience toward 'theory' (and contemplation of the Nazi and Holocaust past) and the subordination of it to praxis go hand-in-hand with the insistence that the past is conclusively *vorbei* and Germany must move unequivocally into the world political stage, with the assumption that the gaze toward the past that Benjamin proposes would make Germany's 'progress' politically incongruous. But as Adorno has written,³⁴ "The leap into praxis will not cure thought from resignation so long as it is paid for with the secret knowledge that this course is simply not the right one" (*Res*, 201). As long as the contradictions and myths still surround the Holocaust and the Nazi past, we cannot simply turn away and work merely in the realm of things practical and present. A Benjaminian gaze into the past while we are projected into the future is required if we do not want to resign ourselves simply to the wrong kind of praxis. Simply to turn away and move unselfconsciously into the future is to promise that the past will never be conclusively past, and always already to be haunted by it in the very process of that turning-away's impossibility.

Many would say that the Hamburger Institut has "resigned" by fixing its gaze critically on the past itself rather than affirming a radical program of revolutionary action. One question is repeated time and again: have the Hamburg Institute's researchers, many of whom had been in-

volved directly in the protests of 1968, grown complacent, settling with “merely” academic work?

To answer this question, the recent exhibit (with accompanying lectures, discussions, and films) that the Hamburger Institut devoted to the crimes of the Wehrmacht is instructive. The exhibit was primarily meant to deconstruct one major myth in German culture surrounding the years of the Nazis, the myth of a “Wehrmacht free of moral taint.” Few Germans today would publicly claim that the SS officers did not play an instrumental role in the Nazi genocide, but a prevailing myth in Germany has for years been that the Wehrmacht, the German army that fought on the Eastern Front, battled with dignity and honor, and had no part in the crimes of the SS or the Gestapo. Historians and other scholars have argued for a long time that this was a myth lacking any historical evidence, but the German public—even in the 21st century—found it difficult to think that the Wehrmacht had committed the acts of murder, rape, pillaging and arson in which the evidence shows their collaboration. The Hamburger Institut took on the very unpopular but extremely important task of demolishing this mystifying allegory. In the face of objections and protests that such an exhibit shamed every German’s grandfathers and set the progress of the nation back 50 years, the Hamburger Institut—its eyes fixed on the past – resisted the mythologization and sought to subvert the contradictory and deluded ways in which people in 21st-century Germany conceptualize their relation to the past and that past’s relation to their (and their nation’s) present and future.

Against the grain of such mystifications, the Hamburg Institut provides a mode by which we might try to work through the past, by attempting to deconstruct ‘inauthentic’ mystifications, always complicating contradictory modes of explanation, even if we can never get conclusively beyond them. If “working through” does mean, as Maurice Blanchot writes “to keep watch over absent meaning,”³⁵ then with “a firm grasp upon possibility” (*Res*, 202), the Hamburg Institute – and all who refuse to abrogate ‘autonomous’ thinking in the face of the demands to look forward – keeps its gaze focused on the past while being projected into an unknown future. By retracing the ignored future left latent in a past of ruin, such a gaze desires to transmute the paradoxes that have (de)formed the presence/absence, excess/lack of the darkest hours in Germany’s history into what Cathy Caruth calls a “possibility of history,” “a point of departure,”³⁶ without reifying them into another chimerical narrative.

"A nation, like an individual," Terry Eagleton writes, "has to be able to recount a reasonable story of itself, one without either despair or presumption. As long as it veers between idealization on the one hand and disavowal on the other, it will behave exactly like Freud's neurotic patient, afflicted by reminiscences."³⁷ Yet forging such a narrative often demands the exclusion of other narratives, self-delusion, or false surmise. Thus that reasonable narrative—however much it must be the goals of our scholarship and (individual/national) self-conceptualization—must not bow to the kind of nationalism that demands a completely integratable narrative in the same way that it demands of each co-national an "integral personality": for, as Buruma writes, the Holocaust and crimes of the Nazis are "a portion of history that cannot be integrated" (*WG*, 190). Germany, like James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, may think that "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake."³⁸ Yet "to dream that one has awoken only to discover that one hasn't is just more of the nightmare."³⁹ Chancellor Schröder's announcement of a past conclusively past, it seems, may have been a little hasty, for the ultimate abysmal ruin of genocide and mass destruction presents itself as an irrecoverable past, one which can be neither recuperated nor 'covered over'. Though there are few reasons to fear another Auschwitz in western Europe any time soon, we must keep our eyes fixed on the past while we are blown into the future in order to struggle, tirelessly, mutually, for the "reasonable" or "redeemable" narrative that will never settle for the mystificatory modes of explanation that are still present in Germany and the world today. Such modes of explanation are still very much a part of the struggles to construct a 21st-century Germany identity, one which alternatively attempts with varying degrees of urgency, pathos, and self-delusion to confront and to evade with marked ambivalence the tragic past which is its historical inheritance. We must, then, learn how to live "among the dead" without trying to fill up what Philip Gourevitch calls the "omnipresent...absences"⁴⁰ with narratives that would immediately be complicit in the injustice of their necessity.

Endnotes

¹*Vorbei* is a German adverb that hovers, almost untranslatable, between *over*, *past*, *finished* and *gone*. Such ambiguity (for example, something can be over but not gone, and gone but not finished, etc.) surrounding the question of whether the adverb qualifies a verb that is acting on or being enacted by something present or something absent is truly appropriate for the questions I hope to pose and deal with in this paper. [All translations from the German are mine unless otherwise noted].

²Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945) was Reichsführer of the SS, head of the Gestapo, Minister of the Interior from 1943 to 1945, and organizer of the mass murder of Jews and many other non-Aryans during the Third Reich.

³Claus Leggewie, *Von Schneider zu Schwerte: Das ungewöhnliche Leben eines Mannes, der aus der Geschichte lernen wollte* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1998), 15; hereafter abbreviated SS.

⁴“Denn auch Deutschland hatte 1945 seinen Namen ‘Deutsches Reich’ abgelegt und sich, ohne genau zu wissen, wohin die Reise ging und überhaupt gehen sollte, neue Namen zugelegt: Bundesrepublik Deutschlands im Westen, Deutsche Demokratische Republik im Osten.[...]Der westliche Teil Deutschlands hat, anfangs genauso tastend, bewusstlos und verlogen wie Schwerte, eine demokratische Karriere begonnen, die niemals lupenrein und doch überraschend erfolgreich war – um am Ende, genau wie Schwerte, wieder mit der braunen Vorgeschichte konfrontiert zu werden und misstrauische Fragen nach der Aufrichtigkeit der Konversion gestellt zu bekommen.”

⁵“Man kann sie nur töten oder gewinnen.”

⁶“Die terroristische Präsenz der Vergangenheit.” Quoted in: Christian Schneider, Cordelia Stillke, and Bernd Leineweber, *Trauma und Kritik: Zur Generationengeschichte der Kritischen Theorie* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2000), 13; my italics.

⁷“Mein Name sei Schwerte.”

⁸One interesting version of an argument like this, which sees this conflict between the parents and children doubled in that between the generations of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, is (alluded to already): Christian Schneider, Cordelia Stillke, and Bernd Leineweber, *Trauma und Kritik: Zur Generationengeschichte der Kritischen Theorie* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2000). Jean-François Lyotard might call this description of delayed traumatic “effect” —without implying direct causality—the “paradox of the future anterior” (*The Postmodern Condition* [Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984], 81). See also: Ronald Mather and Jill Marsden, “Trauma and Temporality: On the Origins of Post-Traumatic Stress,” *Theory & Psychology* (Sage Publications, 2004), Vol. 14(2): 205-219.

⁹This re-writing of history also implicitly affirms the unfounded Nazi banality that all Jews were Bolsheviks and all Bolsheviks Jews.

¹⁰See Jeffrey M. Peck, “You are Making it Difficult, Mr. Hohmann: Some personal thoughts on Anti-Semitism” (*American Institute for Contemporary German Studies Advisor*, November 36, 2003). Since the original writing of this paper in the summer of 2004, there has been a dark change in this corrective tendency, retroactively making it seem like a mere palliative. The NDP (National Democratic Party) won 9.2% representation in Saxony’s state parliament in elections last year, capitalizing on growing discontent (particularly in the east) with the more mainstream parties. (The NDP is an extreme right wing, all-but-nominally neo-Nazi political party. A government attempt to outlaw the NPD, which has often been accused of fomenting hate crimes against foreigners and Jews, failed in 2003 after Germany’s Supreme Court threw out the case on account of a bureaucratic technicality.) It does not look like integration into parliament has done much to bring the NDP into the mainstream political process: On January 27, 2005, a moment of silence was observed in parliament across the nation, in order to honor the victims of Nazi aggression on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The 12 representatives of the NDP party in Saxony rose and walked out of the parliamentary meeting in protest of this minute of silence.

¹¹In the summer of 2004 the Chancellor was Gerhard Schröder who, not coincidentally, was the first Bundeskanzler without direct recollection of WWII.

¹²“Die Nachkriegszeit ist damit endgültig vorbei” [The post-war period is with this (the invitation he was given to attend the Normandy commemoration) conclusively over.] (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Monday, 7 June 2004, Nr. 130/24 D, page 1).

¹³“Mein Land hat den Weg zurück in den Kreis der zivilisierten Völkergemeinschaft gefunden.” (Ibid.).

¹⁴Ibid., “Kommentar: Des Kanzlers D-Day.”

¹⁵David Foster Wallace, “Laughing with Kafka,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 1998.

¹⁶Since contradictory explanations and meanings, myths, and problematic conceptualizations are so important here, one should note that the term *Holocaust* is itself etymologically a troublesome one. The word implies that those murdered by the Nazis were a “burnt sacrificial offering” to God, a term which many find to beg the question of a full recovery and redemption which would seem impossible, as Giorgio Agamben has argued (*Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. David Heller-Rapzen (New York: Zone Books, 1999); see particularly pp. 31-40). But so, also, is the Hebrew appellation *so’ah* (or *Shoah* in English and French) dubitable—meaning devastation or catastrophe—because it is used in the Hebrew Bible often to imply a kind of divine punishment—an argument that anti-Semitic ultra-orthodox Jews have made often, referencing the death of over 6 million Jews as punishment for the secular sin of Zionism. (See “Hohmann bei Israel-Gegnern,” in *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 29, 12 July 2004, pp.16. This short article discusses, also, how such anti-Semitism among ultra-orthodox rabbis has attracted Martin Hohmann, whose idea of the Jews as a *Tätevolk* I have discussed above.) Furthermore, the alternative use of the term *extermination* is by no means blameless, as it is “a component of the discourse of pest control” that the Nazis themselves employed (Dominick LaCapra, “Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben” in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity and Critical Theory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004), 169; hereafter abbreviated *HIT*). The labyrinthine and obstacle-fraught nature of naming this crime of the Nazis—the fact that no term is innocent or unproblematic and so many vie for priority—is doubtless a part or emblematic of the difficulty of understanding and narrativizing it. (For myself, I will agree with LaCapra and employ a multiplicity of terms (Holocaust; Auschwitz; Shoah; Nazi genocide), recognizing that I am always implicated in and by them and attempting to show the ways in which they are complicit in the presence/absence of the Nazi past in Germany even today.)

¹⁷Quoted in Geoffrey H. Hartman, “The Cinema Animal: On Spielberg’s Schindler’s List,” *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 88.

¹⁸“Das Angedenken an die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden wird geradezu in den Status einer Zivilreligion erhoben und dabei ausgeblendet.” [The ambiguity of *ausgeblendet*—that it could signify removed, hidden, masked out, or suppressed—is indicative, again, of the ambiguity of this past’s presence and absence. Has it been removed in some kind of historical-surgical operation? merely hidden? disguised by some kind of mask?] In: Christoph Görg, “Gescheiterte Trauma-Therapie,” soon to be published online in the Trauma Research Net newsletter: www.traumaresearch.net, ed., Cornelia Berens (Hamburg: Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, 2004).

¹⁹Dan Diner, “The Destruction of Narrativity,” in *CM*, 68; 78.

²⁰*Muselmann* (Muslim) was a “prejudicial appellation [that] was [concentration] camp slang for the absolutely exhausted and beaten down who had given up hope in life and led a living death” (*HIT*, 157-158; 15n.).

²¹See Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage International, 1989).

²²Lucy Dawidowicz, ed., *A Holocaust Reader* (West Orange, N.J.: Behrman House, 1976), 132-33.

²³Saul Friedlander “Trauma and Transference,” *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 117-139;

hereafter abbreviated as *TT*.

²⁴Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 56-7.

²⁵Theodor Adorno, "Meditations on Metaphysics," in *Negative Dialectics* [1966], trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 361-365.

²⁶Working through/coping with the present; working through/coping with the past.

²⁷"Is this curse then to last for ever? Is / this people never to rise again / through a new blessing?"

²⁸Quotes from these interviews were published as an appendix to an article in the British newspaper *The Independent* in an article by Steve Crawshaw, "A nation faces its demons," 13 July 2004, on some contemporary cinema in Germany that deals with the Third Reich and Hitler. It is an interesting article that optimistically avers that Germans are dealing with their past more effectively than ever because more and more taboos are broken down every day. It is an interesting argument because, though in one sense it is correct, Crawshaw also (unwittingly?) enacts the mode in which the supposed breaking down of these taboos has really been nothing of the sort and in no substantive way adds up to a greater narrative understanding of the Holocaust for Germany. What Crawshaw considers a positive "loosening up" of Germans in the ways that they think of Hitler (really Germans, he banally quotes a director, "are not so *verkrampft*, so uptight") has ostensibly led him to write an article that never mentions the Nazi genocide or the Jews and only once very indirectly quotes a theoretical "someone" who mentions the Holocaust. This process of normalizing Germany and "facing its demons" by complicity erasing its victims, however unintentional, as Ian Buruma puts it, "runs the danger of accepting the absence of the Jews, even of cannibalizing the memory of victims for the purpose of reconstructing Germany history" and, with it, identity (Ian Buruma, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), 190; hereafter abbreviated *WG*.)

²⁹"Gib AIDS keine Chance." [There is a photographic image in the final draft.]

³⁰The notion of Nazism as a genetically transmittable disease, a congenital problem that is so far incurable, seems especially questionable, and indeed has been one of the main objections to Daniel Goldhagen's purported argument, as the Washington Post's Richard Cohen puts it, "that there is something indelibly spooky about Germans—a gene in the culture that outsiders cannot detect and that gets passed from generations to generation." (Quoted in: Peter Schneider, "For Germans, Guilt Isn't Enough," *The New York Times*, 5 December 1996. Whether Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executions* actually avers as much has been a matter of much debate.)

Though the thought of Nazism as some kind of (moral/cultural/intellectual) breakdown of the (societal) immune system is at first alluring, it becomes more and more suspect upon closer examination. Because in some sense, of course, this kind of medicalization and aestheticization merely re-appropriates uncritically the Nazi diction toward and representation of Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies and other "inferior peoples." The idea of Nazism as an incurable disease contradictorily clears the carriers of responsibility: a Nazi can hardly be blamed for falling into the worst kind of instrumental reasoning if it is due to his or her genes. This interpretation of Nazism as congenital, incurable disease, then, manages to read even contemporary Germans as potentially guilty while assuring them as a nation that it is not their fault. This interpretation of Nazism, by no means marginal, has engendered further mystification, undercutting the attempt to narrativize and understand the period and the crimes of National Socialism. Like the desire to see the past as past, such a mythos offers an ineffective means of marginalizing a persistent problem rather than activating the necessity of critically engaging it.

Such an idea of Nazism as disease is not entirely new, perhaps: During the early 1960s at the Eichmann trial in Israel, Eichmann sat enclosed within a glass booth. He became known, and is known today, as "The Man in the Glass Booth." The Israelis built the booth for his protection, because they were worried that someone would preempt the trial and attempt to kill him before a ruling was made; but one cannot help but notice in the construction, also, the consideration (conscious or otherwise) that Eichmann would somehow *infect* the people in the proceedings, and thus had to be quarantined.

³¹Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 264 (thesis XVIII, B); 257-58 (thesis IX).

³²The physicist Stephen Hawking ponders something like this when he asks "Why do we remember the past and not the future?" and Sam Durrant locates a similar concern when he quotes from the book *Fugitive Pieces*, "it is your future you're remembering (21)." (Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 8; hereafter abbreviated PNWM.) Kierkegaard, too, theorized a concept of what he called "remembering forward" as repetition, which in the Danish (*Gjentagelse*) more literally means something like "taking again."

³³The Hamburger Institut is actually, in complex and not entirely unambiguous ways, working in the tradition of the Frankfurter Institut für Sozialforschung, with which Benjamin himself (like his friend Adorno) was affiliated. This relation will be explored briefly here, but could prove an interesting topic for further comparative research.

³⁴Theodor Adorno, "Resignation," *The Culture Industry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 198-203; hereafter abbreviated *Res*. Readers should note that my argument about the Hamburger Institut is deeply indebted to Adorno's defense of Critical Theory and, implicitly, the Frankfurter Institut.

³⁵Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 42.

³⁶Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 187.

³⁷Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (New York: Verso, 1995), ix

³⁸James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, [1920] 1986), 2.377.

³⁹Terry Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 65.

⁴⁰Philip Gourevitch. "Among the Dead." In: *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*, M. Roth and C. Salas, ed. (Los Angeles : Getty Research Institute, 2001), 63-73.