

Rereading Monika Maron

Text, Counter-Text and Context

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Introduction

Monika Maron is one of the most significant authors of her generation. She is an accomplished essayist, a critically acclaimed novelist, and a trenchant social and political commentator. She is the recipient of many literary awards, including the Kleist Prize and the Carl Zuckmayer Medal. Together with Erich Loest and Uwe Tellkamp, she was awarded the *Deutscher Nationalpreis* in June 2009. The interest in her writing is reflected not only in such accolades from her peers, but also in the extent and frequency with which her texts are being translated. Her oeuvre is thus reaching a growing international readership.

Monika Maron began her writing career as a journalist. In the mid-1970s she was a regular contributor to the East German weekly newspaper *Die Wochenpost*. Even as she embarked upon her journalistic career, she clearly felt confined by the GDR state and was already testing out the boundaries of the official discourse system, particularly in her articles on Bitterfeld, the East German town that was to become synonymous with environmental pollution. Her debut novel *Flugasche*, published in West Germany in 1981, chronicled the problems of a journalist confined by official narratives. Scathing in its depiction of environmental conditions and of journalistic practice in the socialist state, the novel was denied publication in the GDR. This began a pattern that was to be repeated until 1989; it was only after the collapse of the socialist state that her novels finally secured an East German readership.

‘Lebensentwürfe, Zeitenbrüche’: Monika Maron’s Biography

In this study I will explore the work of a provocative and dissenting literary voice that has been constant in its critique of socialist practice in the GDR. Maron’s biography charts a complex relationship with the GDR state, from initial identification to rebellion, from a collaboration of sorts to radical rejection.

During her address 'Lebensentwürfe, Zeitenbrüche', delivered at the 2002 *Historikertag*, the biennial German Historians' Conference, Monika Maron reflected on the fashioning of individual biographies and on our limited autonomy in this respect: 'Obwohl wir ahnen, sogar wissen, wie klein unser Spielraum zwischen Schicksal und Zufall ist, kämpfen wir verzweifelt um [...] unsere selbst gestaltete Biografie.'¹ She spoke of our deep-seated desire to bestow meaning, albeit retrospectively, on our biography. It was precisely this need to bestow meaning on her family's past and thus to arrive at a better understanding of her own identity that had led to the composition of the autobiographical text *Pawels Briefe*, published in 1999.

Monika Maron was born in Neukölln, a working-class area of Berlin, in June 1941. Her maternal grandparents, the Jewish-born Pawel Iglarz and his Catholic wife Josefa, had converted to the Baptist faith and were subsequently disowned by their respective families. They left their native Poland and arrived in Berlin in 1905. Pawel established a successful tailoring business in Neukölln, where the family lived until his expulsion from Germany in 1939. He and Josefa returned to Poland; their four children remained in Berlin. Pawel was executed in 1942. *Pawels Briefe: Eine Familiengeschichte* spans three generations and situates Maron's turbulent family biography within the interstices of twentieth-century German history. 'Das Schicksal unserer Familie ist wie ein Muster in das Schicksal dieses Landes eingezeichnet',² Maron explained in an interview, thereby emphasising the exemplary and typical aspects of her family story.

In *Pawels Briefe* Maron seeks to reconstruct a family biography that historical forces had brutally ruptured. In so doing, she explores her own identity and those figures that shaped it, in particular her grandfather Pawel and mother Hella. Her Jewish ancestry meant that Hella was prevented from marrying Walter, the man who had fathered her child. Monika thus grew up without paternal influence, surrounded, instead, by a group of strong female

1 Monika Maron's lecture at the *Historikertag* in Halle was published the following day in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* as 'Lebensentwürfe, Zeitenbrüche. Vom Nutzen und Nachteil dunkler Brillen: Wer es sich zu einfach macht beim Rückblick auf seine Geschichte, beraubt sich seiner Biografie', 13 September 2002, p. 18.

2 Michael Hametner, 'Von Opfern, die Täter wurden', *Börsenblatt für den Deutschen Buchhandel*, 26 June 1992, pp. 40–44 (p. 42).

figures, including Hella and Hella's sister Marta. A dedicated communist, Hella ensured that her only child received the appropriate socialist education: Monika was a member of the Young Pioneers, the communist youth organisation. 'Ich war das Kind von Kommunisten,' Maron announced in the very opening sequence of her autobiographical essay 'Ich war ein antifaschistisches Kind,' written in 1989: 'Ich habe gelernt, daß die Welt sich nicht in Nationen teilt, sondern in Klassen.'³ Mother and daughter moved from West to East Berlin in 1951. Maron welcomed the move to a community of political and ideological equals: 'Nun war ich gleich mit allen, glaubte ich. Ich wohnte auf der Seite der Wahrheit und der historischen Sieger. Ich war zehn Jahre alt und das Wort Kommunist war für mich ein Synonym für guter Mensch. Alle Menschen, die mir nahestanden und die ich liebte, waren Kommunisten' (*Begreifungskraft*, p. 17). This identification with the state was to define her childhood and early youth.

Hella's marriage in 1955 to Karl Maron, Chief of the People's Police and GDR Interior Minister from 1955 until his retirement in 1963, sealed the relationship between personal story and official GDR history. In her essay 'Ein Schicksalsbuch,' written in 1997, Maron described her childhood and earlier youth in terms of this symbiotic relationship between individual and state: 'aufgewachsen in einer Familie, die sich mit der DDR nicht nur identifizierte, sondern sie auch repräsentierte.'⁴ Hella's marriage to Karl Maron marked a caesura in her daughter's life. The relationship between stepdaughter and the man whom Maron was to describe ominously as her 'biographisches Schicksal'⁵ in *Pawels Briefe* was fraught from the outset. The strained father–daughter

- 3 Monika Maron, 'Ich war ein antifaschistisches Kind,' in *Nach Maßgabe meiner Begreifungskraft: Artikel und Essays* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), pp. 9–28 (p. 9). The essay collection was originally published by S. Fischer in 1993. I will be referring to the paperback edition. Quotations from this volume of essays will be followed in parentheses by the word *Begreifungskraft* and the relevant page number.
- 4 Monika Maron, 'Ein Schicksalsbuch,' in *Quer über die Gleise: Artikel, Essays, Zwischenrufe* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2000), pp. 7–23 (p. 13). Quotations from this volume of essays will be followed in parentheses by the words *Quer über die Gleise* and the relevant page number.
- 5 Monika Maron, *Pawels Briefe: Eine Familiengeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1999), p. 83. Quotations from the text will be followed in parentheses by the abbreviation PB and the relevant page number.

relationship is a topos throughout Maron's writing. In *Stille Zeile Sechs* the protagonist's confrontation with an ageing communist functionary is simultaneously a revisiting of her own childhood, which was overshadowed by her father's allegiance to communism at the expense of paternal affection. 'Das Schlimmste ist, wenn draußen die gleiche Macht herrscht und das gleiche Gesetz wie im eigenen Haus,'⁶ Rosalind comments, thus allowing Maron to foreground the politicisation of the private sphere in the GDR.

Hella and Monika suddenly belonged to the GDR nomenklatura, living in the fashionable district of Pankow, which was inhabited by prominent communist officials. As befitted the stepdaughter of the Interior Minister, Maron attended the Wilhelm-Pieck school. Despite such preparation for a model communist life, the young and wilful Monika had other ideas; as Marcel Reich-Ranicki observes: 'Der schönen und vermutlich steil aufwärts führenden Karriere in der DDR stand nichts im Wege – nur sie selbst.'⁷ After an excellent performance in the *Abitur*, Maron promptly left home and spent a year working in an aeroplane factory in Dresden. Upon her return to Berlin, she worked as an assistant producer with GDR television. From 1962 to 1966 she studied theatre and art history at the Humboldt University. She was also a research assistant at the *Schauspielschule*, the renowned drama academy in Berlin. Her only child – a son Jonas – was born in 1969.

In the early 1970s Maron embarked upon a career as a journalist. She wrote for the women's magazine *Für Dich* before moving to the *Wochenpost*. From 1974 to 1976 she contributed articles to this weekly newspaper, one of the most influential in the GDR. While recognising the relatively progressive intellectual climate of the *Wochenpost* newspaper offices, she was also frustrated by the confines of the official discourse system: 'Als ich Journalistin war, blieb bei allem, was ich schrieb, sehr viel übrig,' she revealed in an interview. 'Was meine Aufregung ausgemacht hat, war nur indirekt benennbar – sehr

6 Monika Maron, *Stille Zeile Sechs: Roman* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1996), p. 135. The novel was first published by S. Fischer in 1991. I will be referring to the paperback edition. Quotations from the text will be followed in parentheses by the abbreviation SZS and the relevant page number.

7 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, 'Keine Frucht ohne Schale: Rede bei der Verleihung des Kleist-Preises 1992 an Monika Maron,' in *Kleist Jahrbuch 1993*, ed. by Hans Joachim Kreutzer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), pp. 8–20 (p. 12).

gedämpft. Das alles sammelte sich über Jahre hinweg an.⁸ The inheritance bequeathed to Maron upon the death of her stepfather meant that she was able to resign from the *Wochenpost* and pursue her career as a freelance writer. In *Pawels Briefe* she recalls her sense of liberation following the death of Karl Maron: 'An die ersten Jahre nach Karls Tod erinnere ich mich wie an einen Rausch. Alles schien möglich' (PB, pp. 193–94). It was during this period that she wrote her debut novel *Flugasche*, which was published in West Germany by the Fischer publishing house in 1981. It was also in the late 1970s that she withdrew from the SED, having been a member of the party for twelve years. In retrospect she described her SED membership, propelled by what she called youthful activism, in unequivocal terms as 'de[n] größte[n] Fehler meines Lebens.'⁹

Das Mißverständnis, a collection of four short stories and a play, was published in 1982. A second novel, *Die Überläuferin*, followed in 1986. Between July 1987 and March 1988 the *Zeit Magazin* provided the forum for regular correspondence between Maron and the West German journalist Joseph von Westphalen. The letters were subsequently published by Fischer as *Trotzdem herzliche Grüße: Ein deutsch-deutscher Briefwechsel*. Their correspondence addressed such issues as the divergent political and economic systems in East and West Germany and the role of the writer.

In June 1988 Maron obtained a visa and moved, together with her husband and son, from East Berlin to Hamburg, remaining there until 1992. The author identified the apathy of life in the GDR as catalyst for the move: 'Man kam sich uralt vor', she explained in an interview, 'das war ja ein allgemeines Lebensgefühl, die permanente Abwesenheit von Lebensgenuß, wie ein langsames Einschlafen.'¹⁰ It was in Hamburg that her third novel was composed; set in Pankow in the mid-1980s and portraying just such an environment of stagnation and decay, *Stille Zeile Sechs* was published in 1991 to widespread critical acclaim.

8 Wilfried F. Schoeller, 'Literatur, das nicht gelebte Leben: Gespräch mit der Ostberliner Schriftstellerin Monika Maron', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 March 1987, p. 47.

9 Hametner, 'Von Opfern, die Tater wurden', p. 43.

10 Gerhard Richter, 'Verschüttete Kultur – Ein Gespräch mit Monika Maron', *GDR Bulletin*, 18 (1992), 2–7 (p. 6).

Maron's status as social and political commentator was firmly established with the publication in 1993 of the essay collection *Nach Maßgabe meiner Begreifungskraft*. As a result of their controversial content and critical tone, her novels were denied publication in the East; as an essayist, too, Maron was unrelenting in her criticism of the GDR. In 'Ich war ein antifaschistisches Kind', for example, she reflects upon the devastating effect of political ideology:

Es bleibt die Frage, wie eine Idee, die zum Glück aller erdacht war, sich in das Unglück aller, selbst ihrer treuesten Anhänger verkehren konnte.

Es bleibt die Frage, warum Menschen, die in ihrer Jugend gegen Ungerechtigkeit und Unterdrückung gekämpft und ihr Leben dafür eingesetzt haben, in Jahrzehnten unangefochtener Macht ihr eigenes Volk mit den Mitteln von Gangstern betrogen und beherrschten. Und andere es duldeten. (*Begreifungskraft*, p. 28)

Unsurprisingly, Maron was an advocate of unification. However, in the final essay of the volume, the explosive 'Zonophobie', she castigates her fellow-East Germans for their passivity, their servile nature, and especially for their incessant feeling of victimisation as they constantly attribute blame to the West: 'ein neues Wir ist geboren', she comments sarcastically, "'wir aus dem Osten"; endlich dürfen alle Opfer sein, Opfer des Westens' (*Begreifungskraft*, p. 118).

An explosive *Spiegel* article 'Stasi-Deckname "Mitsu"', published in August 1995, sensationally revealed that Maron had worked as a contact for the *Hauptverwaltung Aufklärung*, the foreign intelligence branch of the Stasi between 1976 and 1978.¹¹ She was recruited in October 1976 and agreed to provide information on West German citizens, but with the stipulation that she would not be required to inform upon her friends and colleagues in the East. In return, she was granted travel visas to West Berlin where she could fulfil her wish to revisit 'Stätten ihrer Kindheit' and conduct 'Milieu-Studien für einen autobiographischen Roman'.¹² In *Pawels Briefe* she cites curiosity, an adventurous spirit and a desire for action as reasons for her Stasi-involvement (PB, p. 196), insisting that it was nothing more than 'eine kuriose und komische

11 'Stasi-Deckname "Mitsu"', *Der Spiegel*, 7 August 1995, pp. 146–49 (author unknown). In his article 'Escaping the Autobiographical Trap?: Monika Maron, the Stasi and *Pawels Briefe*', Andrew Plowman provides a detailed account of Maron's Stasi-involvement. *German Writers and the Politics of Culture: Dealing with the Stasi*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Andrew Plowman (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 227–42.

12 'Stasi-Deckname "Mitsu"', p. 147.

Episode [...] auf die ich nicht sonderlich stolz war, für die ich mich aber auch nicht schämte, weil sie eben keine Spitzelaffäre war' (PB, p. 199). Her two reports for the Stasi are included in the collection of essays *Quer über die Gleise*, published in 2000. In the first report, written following her trip to West Berlin, Maron furnishes a glowing description of life in the West, contrasting this with the lack of freedom in the GDR and daring even to condemn the constant presence of the Stasi: 'Die Leute haben einen Stasikoller, fühlen sich beobachtet, abgehört und denunziert' (*Quer über die Gleise*, p. 31). West Berlin is described as a pulsating city – 'unvorstellbaren Ausbund an Vielfalt und Vitalität' – which merely serves to reinforce the lethargy of its East German counterpart: 'die Starre und Unbewohnbarkeit unserer Stadt' (*Quer über die Gleise*, p. 26). A second, shorter report concerns a reception at the West German diplomatic office in East Berlin in December 1976. Although she does provide the names of West German journalists present, Maron devotes much of this report to explaining why she is unwilling to inform upon her fellow GDR citizens. Having requested release from Stasi-activity in May 1978, she subsequently became an object of long-term surveillance over a ten-year period; eight volumes of files, code name 'Wildsau', was the result.

In a newspaper article 'Heuchelei und Niedertracht', published two months after the *Spiegel* revelations, Maron expressed her fury at a post-*Wende* society that had forced a very public confrontation with her past.¹³ On the final pages of *Pawels Briefe* she continues in similar fashion: 'das öffentliche Gedächtnis [...] stellte meine Biographie ab 1976 auf den Kopf, damit sie in eine allgemeine Biographie paßte. Die Bedeutung des Vorfalles wurde nicht aus ihm selbst geleitet, sondern aus dem Bedürfnis nach Umdeutung' (PB, p. 199).

Despite such upheaval, Maron's literary production continued unabated throughout the 1990s. The novel *Animal triste* was published in 1996, followed by the autobiographical *Pawels Briefe* in 1999. Her essay-writing continued apace with the publication in 2000 of the thematically diverse volume *Quer über die Gleise: Artikel, Essays, Zwischenrufe*. The essay collection *Geburtsort Berlin*, Maron's homage to the city in which she has spent almost all of her life, followed in 2003.

13 Monika Maron, 'Heuchelei und Niedertracht', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 October 1995, *Bilder und Zeiten*, p. B1. The article was later published in the anthology *Quer über die Gleise* (pp. 34–43).

Whether in newspaper reports, incisive essays, or in the guise of fiction, Maron's oeuvre offers a damning commentary on the GDR. It is all the more significant, then, that her novel *Endmoränen*, published in 2002, offers a melancholic meditation on the sobering reality of life after socialism. In 2005 she was a guest lecturer at the Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main; the series of lectures in which she described her difficulties in writing a new novel were subsequently published as *Wie ich ein Buch nicht schreiben kann und es trotzdem versuche. Ach Glück*, the sequel to *Endmoränen*, appeared in 2007. In *Bitterfelder Bogen*, published in 2009, Maron revisits the East German town that played such a significant role in her contributions to the *Wochenpost* more than three decades previously.

Maron's biography is inextricably bound to the state. Her childhood and early youth followed a model communist trajectory. However, she soon began to challenge the unwavering identification with the GDR that was exhibited by her mother and, more obviously still, by her stepfather. Although she remained a member of the SED until the late-1970s as she still harboured hopes of changing the system from within, Maron became increasingly disillusioned with socialist practice in the GDR. Her move to Hamburg in 1988 marked an irrevocable break and she returned only after unification. The revelation about her Stasi-involvement was all the more surprising in light of the unrelenting criticism of the GDR present throughout her writing.

Beyond Unification: The Challenge to Reread

The collapse of an entire political and literary system in late 1989 necessitated a review of critical practice. The literary historian Wolfgang Emmerich called for a rereading of traditional approaches to those texts emerging from a suddenly defunct state. The third edition of his seminal text *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, published in 1996, opens with a chapter provocatively entitled 'Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man die Geschichte der DDR-Literatur?' The rereading that he advances has paradigmatic significance for the present study, which situates its reflections on Monika Maron's writing against the backdrop of a changing critical landscape.

In order to understand the difficulties facing writers and critics alike following the tumultuous and far-reaching events of late 1989, we should first recall the very specific function ascribed to literature in the GDR and the clearly defined position of the writer within the socialist state. From its very inception, the GDR as an antifascist state had a pronounced sense of its own cultural and literary identity. As early as 1956 the Minister for Culture Johannes R. Becher delivered an impassioned speech ‘Von der Größe unserer Literatur’ at the Fourth Writers’ Conference, a landmark event in GDR literary history. Becher advocated the formation of a *Literaturgesellschaft*, a literary community of writers and their readers, an egalitarian society in which literature would be accessible to all.

Cultural politics was dominated by socialist realism during the initial decades of the GDR’s existence. Developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, this doctrine saw the writer’s role as a pedagogical one. Andrei Zhdanov’s much-quoted definition illuminates this didactic element. The socialist realist writer was to furnish a ‘wahrheitsgetreue, historisch konkrete Darstellung der Wirklichkeit in ihrer revolutionären Entwicklung.’ Zhdanov continues: ‘Wahrheitstreue und historische Konkretheit der künstlerischen Darstellung müssen mit den Aufgaben der ideologischen Umgestaltung und Erziehung der Werktätigen im Geiste des Sozialismus verbunden werden.’¹⁴ Socialist realist texts were characterised by their consistently positive reflection of socialist reality, by an unwavering belief in a historical teleology, culminating in the triumph of the antifascist state, and by the presence of a positive hero who espoused the virtues of socialism.

Despite official cultural policy dictates that continued to champion the socialist realist doctrine, increasingly modernist tendencies began to emerge throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During his speech at the Fourth Plenum of the SED Central Committee in December 1971, the party’s General Secretary Erich Honecker famously advocated the lifting of all taboos in literature and art. Despite the much-trumpeted heralding of an emancipatory period in GDR cultural politics, this apparently liberal climate came to an abrupt end with the expatriation of the singer and songwriter Wolf Biermann in 1976, one of the canonical moments of GDR literary and, indeed, political history. The

14 Quoted in Manfred Jäger, *Kultur und Politik in der DDR: Ein historischer Abriss*, Edition Deutschland Archiv (Cologne: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1982), p. 37.

highly controversial decision provoked an immediate reaction in the form of a petition signed by many eminent GDR writers. The Biermann affair, seen by a generation of critics as marking a caesura in the development of cultural policy, ushered in a whole array of restrictive measures, such as house arrest, censorship and expulsion from the Party. Maron reads this rupture back into the writing of her first novel *Flugasche*: ‘Der Bruch im Buch, als ein formaler durchaus zu bemerken, ging auf die Ausweisung Biermanns zurück. In dieser Zeit habe ich es geschrieben. Ich dachte, so naiv und blöd kann die Heldin nicht bleiben, wie sie bis zur Mitte des Buches gediehen ist. Mit soviel Illusionen und Gutwilligkeit bin ich nicht mehr ausgestattet.’¹⁵ A veritable exodus of writers followed Biermann’s expatriation. Paradoxically, those who remained often contributed to the diversification of GDR literature. Plurality became the order of the day. In retrospect, this heterogeneity appeared to be a sign of the state’s inability to exercise its desired stringent control. The final decade of the socialist state was characterised by an increasing experimentation with form, making more difficult the kind of separation of East and West German literature that the heroic age of socialist realism had seemed to legitimate. This stylistic experimentation also characterised Maron’s writing from the period. Literary critics frequently pointed to the dichotomy between the stagnant political state and its diverse literary landscape, illustrated particularly in the counterculture of Prenzlauer Berg. However, the post-*Wende*¹⁶ revelation that influential Prenzlauer Berg figures such as Rainer Schedlinski and Sascha Anderson had worked for the Stasi destroyed the comforting illusion of autonomy in this alternative literary milieu.

Although socialist realism remained the official doctrine throughout the existence of the GDR, literature increasingly fulfilled a compensatory role, acting, to quote Wolfgang Emmerich, as an ‘Ersatzöffentlichkeit anstelle einer nicht zugelassenen Presse- und Medienöffentlichkeit’.¹⁷ Literature’s function

¹⁵ Schoeller, p. 47.

¹⁶ The term *Wende*, which literally means turning point, is used to describe the period of momentous change, encompassing the fall of the Berlin Wall, the months following the collapse of the German Democratic Republic, and the reunification of Germany in 1990. Subsequent use of this term will be in normal script.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, 3rd edn (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1996), p. 13. Quotations from the text will be followed in parentheses by the word *Literaturgeschichte* and the relevant page number.

was to articulate public opinion and, more importantly, the discontent that could not find expression in the official press and media. It was precisely the writer's oppositional role in the creation of a substitute public arena that Maron recalled in her 1990 essay 'Das neue Elend der Intellektuellen':

Und wie fast jede lebenserhaltende Symbiose in diesem Land durch den Mangel gestiftet war, so auch die zwischen Lesern und Schreibern. In einem Staat, der den Mangel an bürgerlichen Freiheiten zur Doktrin erhebt, sammelt sich die verbotene Öffentlichkeit in den verbleibenden Rinnsalen der Kommunikation: in privaten Zirkeln, in den Kirchen, in der Kunst. Der konspirative Diskurs wird zu einer Form des Widerstands. (*Begreifungskraft*, p. 85)

Maron described the privileged status of writers in the GDR: 'Diese leidvollen Bedingungen bescherten den Schriftstellern und Künstlern der DDR ihre exklusive Bedeutung. Wie selbstverständlich wuchs ihnen das Recht, sogar die Pflicht zu, im Namen der zum Schweigen gezwungenen Mehrheit zu sprechen' (*Begreifungskraft*, p. 85). In an interview published in February 1990, Maron once again foregrounded the very specific function accorded to writers in the GDR. In what she termed the symbiotic relationship between writers and their readers, the former quickly emerged as figureheads:

Sie waren mehr als nur Autoren, sie waren selbst für Leute, die mit Literatur noch nie viel anfangen konnten, Galionsfiguren. Das hatte etwas Rührendes. Es konnte vorkommen, dass die Briefträgerin oder der Wäschemann einem gratulierte – wozu eigentlich? Zum Mut, den es brauchte, Sätze zu sagen, die auch seine waren und die sonst nirgends zu hören waren.¹⁸

For many writers in the GDR, the political turmoil of late 1989 resulted in an abrupt and definitive loss of purpose. Authors were suddenly bereft of their privileged role. The disorientation experienced by these writers in the aftermath of political collapse was mirrored in the uncertainty of literary critics, confronted with the problematic task of analysing texts that emerged from a suddenly defunct state. Wolfgang Emmerich has charted the uncomfortable shifts in critical discourse since the *Wende*. In his 1992 essay 'Für eine andere

18 Sabine Sütterlin, "Soll ich Not beschwören, damit Leute nett sind?": Die im Westen lebende DDR-Autorin Monika Maron über deutsche Einheit und Irrtümer ihrer Schriftsteller-Kollegen', *Die Weltwoche*, 8 February 1990, p. 59.

Wahrnehmung der DDR-Literatur: Neue Kontexte, neue Paradigmen, ein neuer Kanon', he put forward an alternative literary historiography of the GDR, an analysis that would focus on the imaginative and aesthetic elements of the writing. He explained his understanding of literature's potential as follows:

Die bessere DDR-Literatur löst sich vom Offizialdiskurs und entwirft Literatur als 'Gegentext', als Subversion des Leitdiskurses. Damit meine ich gerade nicht das Aussprechen von tabuisierten Sachverhalten im Sinne einer Ersatzöffentlichkeit, sondern ich meine die Mobilisierung von Phantasie, verrückte Erzählhaltungen, fragmentierte, dezentrierte dramatische Fabeln, Intertextualität und Redevielfalt in der Lyrik.¹⁹

The rereading of Maron's texts that I will advance in the ensuing chapters explores at various points the imaginative dimensions of her writing. It identifies the protagonists' desire to transcend the stultifying conditions of life in the GDR and move into the imaginative realm; this desire is frequently expressed in the creation of potent counter-texts. However, her protagonists remain rooted in the reality of their GDR experience, even as they attempt to transcend it.

In the 1996 edition of his literary history, Emmerich continued to argue for a new perception of the literature emerging from the GDR. His proposal can hardly be ignored by subsequent critics: 'Was zu tun war und noch ist, das ist ein skeptisches, kritisches *rereading* dieser Entwürfe und Konstrukte [der Geschichtsschreibung zur DDR-Literatur]. Im folgenden wird ein solcher (in vieler Hinsicht notwendig selbstbezüglicher) Versuch unternommen' (*Literaturgeschichte*, p. 17). Emmerich emphasised that the sociopolitical approach which had dominated literary criticism up to 1989 – whereby texts were viewed as mere reflection of or, more interestingly, as protest against societal conditions – had been at the expense of stylistic analysis. The third edition of his literary history sought the middle ground: analysis of the texts as aesthetic constructs was tempered by the realisation that it was impossible to extract them completely from their political context. In Emmerich we thus

19 Wolfgang Emmerich, 'Für eine andere Wahrnehmung der DDR-Literatur: Neue Kontexte, neue Paradigmen, ein neuer Kanon', in *Geist und Macht: Writers and the State in the GDR*, ed. by Axel Goodbody and Dennis Tate, German Monitor, 29 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1992), pp. 7–22 (p. 17). Quotations from this essay will be followed in parentheses by the words 'Für eine andere Wahrnehmung' and the relevant page number.

recognise both a model and a dilemma. This is the fundamental paradox of GDR literary analysis post-1989, a dilemma that I hope to acknowledge and explore in the ensuing reading of Maron's oeuvre: the problem of history in an age that, if not directly post-historical, is at least unsure of its historical foundations. The experience of socialism continues to exert an influence, even in those texts written after 1989.

The Writing of Monika Maron

In this study I will trace the development of Maron's writing from her journalistic beginnings to the publication of her most recent novel *Ach Glück*. Chapter One, 'Writing Herself out of the System: The Early Texts', illustrates the significance of a previously neglected aspect of Maron's oeuvre: her contributions to the *Wochenpost* in the mid-1970s. Through analysis of her articles, a combination of incisive reports on environmental and working conditions and of light-hearted observations on daily life in the socialist state, the chapter explores how she negotiated the compromise manoeuvres of reportage in the GDR. The first chapter also analyses her debut novel *Flugasche*, a text that chronicles the disillusioning experience of writing in a restrictive society. Its protagonist is a journalist in East Berlin who literally writes herself out of the official discourse system and withdraws into a turbulent inner landscape. The imaginative realm thus acts as a counter-text to the scripted existence of life in the socialist state.

Critics have posited a direct link between the privileging of fantasy in Maron's writing from the early- to mid-1980s and her increasing sense of confinement within the GDR. In his entry for the *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, Eckhard Franke notes that 'das (literarische) Traumspiel, das Hinübergleiten in Freiräume, die sich nur (noch) der Fantasie eröffnen, die expressiven Visionsbilder' are characteristic of Maron's pre-Wende writing.²⁰ Chapter Two, 'Transgressing in Style: *Das*

20 Eckhard Franke and Roman Luckscheiter, 'Monika Maron', in *Kritisches Lexikon zur deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur*, March 2005.

Mißverständnis and *Die Überläuferin* as Counter-Texts', explores the radical stylistic experimentation of these texts, published in 1982 and 1986 respectively. *Das Mißverständnis*, a collection of four short stories and a play, abounds in surreal sequences and is strewn with enigmatic images. In the Kafkaesque opening sequence of *Die Überläuferin*, the protagonist awakes one morning to find her body paralysed. Rosalind Polkowski is a GDR state historian who withdraws from society and retreats into the imaginative realm. Depicting the intellectual and emotional stultification of life in the socialist state and overtly flouting stylistic conventions, *Die Überläuferin* followed the fate of its predecessors and was published only in West Germany.

In the context of Maron's literary development, her third novel *Stille Zeile Sechs*, published in 1991, occupies an important position because it established a concern with the writing of history as a central theme in her oeuvre. Its protagonist Rosalind Polkowski, heroine of her previous novel *Die Überläuferin*, is a former GDR state historian who agrees to transcribe the memoirs of an ageing communist. More overtly than in any of Maron's previous texts, *Stille Zeile Sechs* charts the inexorable decline of a stagnant political order, which is embodied in the figure of the ailing, once powerful communist Herbert Beerenbaum. Chapter Three, 'Writing and Rewriting: The Problem of History in *Stille Zeile Sechs*', explores the bitter struggle to write and rewrite GDR history that is played out in the text. Through the juxtaposition of conflicting memories of life in the GDR, *Stille Zeile Sechs* considers the problems of historical representation.

Maron's literary output continued throughout the 1990s but with a significant shift in thematic focus. Post-Wende sexual politics are explored in the 1996 novel *Animal triste*, which forms the focus of Chapter Four, 'Love and Loss after the Wall: *Animal triste*'. The novel is an exploration of all-consuming passion and loss; it is also a text about the body and the passage of time, about writing history, about memory and its repression. Its anonymous first-person narrator, an East German palaeontologist, has retreated from her contemporary society to recall memories of a passionate, clandestine and ultimately fatal love affair with a West German natural scientist, which was played out against the tumultuous backdrop of Berlin in the immediate post-Wende period. Repression is at work on a grand scale in *Animal triste*; the full extent of the trauma at its source is revealed only on the final pages of the text. *Animal triste* anticipated a central concern of *Pawels Briefe*, published in 1999: the interplay of forgetting and remembering. Maron's family story,

which the author describes as her most personal text,²¹ unfolds against the turbulent backdrop of twentieth-century German history, extending from 1930s Berlin to her grandfather Pawel's execution at Nazi hands, from childhood and youth in the GDR to the post-unification period. Chapter Five, 'Exposing the Gaps in Memory: Forgetting and Remembering in *Pawels Briefe*', examines the generational memory gaps that inform Maron's family story. Her attempts to access the final years of her grandparents' life are themselves refracted through conflicting memories of life in the GDR. In a theoretical landscape concerned with individual, collective and cultural memory discourses, *Pawels Briefe* is an important East German contribution to current debates on memory and its repression. Chapter Five also explores the use of montage, in particular the interplay of image and text, in Maron's attempts to recover the past. With the aid of rediscovered photographs and letters, she effects an imaginary reconstruction of her family biography, which historical forces had so brutally ruptured.

The rupture of individual biographies also emerges as a seminal theme in Maron's most recent novels, which form the focal point of Chapter Six, 'Lebensentwürfe, Zeitenbrüche: Biographers and Biographies in *Endmoränen* and *Ach Glück*'. Significantly, the scathing criticism of the GDR, prevalent throughout her writing, is no longer evident. Instead, the heady optimism of unification has ceded to a sobering portrayal of post-unification reality. The protagonist Johanna is a historical biographer who struggles with the insignificance of her professional and private biography in a post-GDR age.

In his essay 'Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur', the historian Reinhart Koselleck raised awareness of deeper structures inherent in the historical process.²² His understanding of history as a complex interplay of event and overarching, diachronic structures offers a useful paradigm with which to read and reread Maron's texts. The dialectic of event and structure lies at the very heart of her writing as she unifies in her texts the disparate experience of the socialist structure within a personally narrated life. Her oeuvre thus testifies to the difficulties facing writers from the GDR, emerging from a system whose deeper structures continue to shape their identity and their writing.

21 Deirdre Byrnes, Interview with Monika Maron, Berlin-Schöneberg, 29 June 1999.

22 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur', in *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, 3rd edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 144–57. The volume was first published in 1979.

In an interview conducted five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Maron expressed a desire to break away from the GDR in her writing: 'Loslösung von der Fixierung auf dieses Staatsgebilde DDR.'²³ In this study I will show that, despite such assertions and despite the re-contextualisation necessitated by the collapse of the GDR, it seems impossible to prize apart her texts from the highly politicised context in which they were composed. It is precisely this inextricable bind which makes her work so interesting for contemporary readers. Rereading her texts in a post-Wende light, I will explore the complexity of Maron's relationship with the state from which she emerged and consider how this complexity manifests itself in her writing before and after 1989.

23 Martin Doerry and Volker Hage, 'Ich hab' ein freies Herz: Monika Maron über Autoren in der Politik und die Zukunft des VS', *Der Spiegel*, 25 April 1994, pp. 185–92 (p. 192).