

Submission of Paper for ESC 2006 to Conference Proceedings

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For German history and culture a retrospective analysis of the events surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall is both valuable and rewarding because the consequences of the *Wende*—the 1989-90 transformation of the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic into a re-unified Germany—continue to resonate today, particularly in the former East Germany.

No German author has more closely witnessed and more richly recorded his observation and experiences than the former East German writer Thomas Brussig, most notably in his first major work.<sup>1</sup> Published with considerable critical and popular acclaim in 1995, the mock-fictional autobiography *Helden wie wir* (*Heroes like us*) depicts in a manner both grotesque and satirical the

misadventures of one Klaus Uhlschzt, who comes of age precisely at that moment in history when the Berlin Wall and indeed his whole world, the socialist-communist state of East Germany, is collapsing.

The narrator-protagonist alludes at the very beginning to the godfather status of this socio-political world that witnesses his birth:

I can claim to have received help at birth from a whole tank regiment, a tank regiment that was rolling on the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, 1968 toward Czechoslovakia and past a small hotel in the village of Brunn, in which my mother, nine-months pregnant, was residing while on vacation. Motors droned, and tank tracks rattled on the pavement. In panic I kicked through the placenta, struggled through the birth canal and ended up atop a living room table. It was night, it was hell, tanks roared and I was there. The air stank and shook, and the world I had entered was a political world.<sup>2</sup> (5)

Klaus' identity and sense of self have three sources: his parents, his work as a *Stasi* (state security) officer and his physical obsessions and sexual perversions. Although this study will focus on the second point, it will also briefly touch upon the other two.

But before addressing more specifically the mock-autobiographical novel in question, a small number of issues surrounding German re-unification must briefly be emphasized, because they are issues without which a discussion of this novel would have little meaning.

The initial euphoria of German reunification in 1989-90 was driven by both political and economic forces, but the ensuing malaise in the East and the resentment in the West which soon replaced this euphoria were rooted largely in economic reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Despite a colossal injection of capital —\$ 625 billion financed by a 7.5 % unity tax surcharge; a 1: 1 exchange rate of DM for OM; 5,000 miles of new highways; the most advanced telephone network in the world (*Germany Today*, 210-211)—the unemployment rate in the East has remained around 20%. In the words of many, there have been too many stores but not enough jobs; too much to buy, but too little money.

This has led to the oft-cited "wall in the head" and to the new wall made of DM and, more recently, Euros. Consequently, extreme political reactions have come from the radical right (NPD) and its scapegoats, to the far-left (PDS) and its nostalgia for the socio-economic security of a centralized, state economy.

Clearly, the identity of both Easterners and Westerners has changed dramatically with the social, political and economic metamorphosis resulting from re-unification.

Aligning itself within the tradition of the German *Bildungsroman*, *Heroes like us* reveals itself to be a perverted *Bildungsroman*, in that all attempts at *Bildung* (growth, development, learning) end in disillusionment and failure.

Writing in the narrative tradition of the *picaro*, the author also

shows themes, motifs, and images strikingly influenced by Rabelais, Roth (*Portnoy's Complaint*), Heller (*Catch 22*), as well as by Franz Kafka and Günter Grass.

Klaus tells his story through the narrative frame of the confession and the celebrity interview, which he grants to a certain Mr. Kitzelstein, a correspondent of the *New York Times*:

Yes, it's true. It was me. I was the one who brought down the Wall. As if that were all that was to it. At least the historians and journalists thought so: "end of the German division", "end of the European World-War-II order", "end of the 20. century", "end of modernity", "end of the cold war", "end of ideology", "end of history". Just like the brave little tailor in the fairy tale: seven in one blow. I'll tell you how it all transpired. The world has a right to know. (7)

The narrative proceeds only broadly in a linear manner toward its *telos* of November 9, 1989 and the fall of the wall. In the main, it functions as a narrative Lego game and shuttles back and forth between a handful of events and Klaus' obsessive, compulsive and mono-maniacal perception of them. This perception is often expressed through a fantastic stream of consciousness that ties daydreams, imagined dialogues, letters, and media headlines and slogans into a web of paranoia and obsession. What is more, Klaus' paranoia and obsessions are often made emblematic through his misunderstanding and

misuse of language itself. Thus, for example, he consistently takes microfiche to refer to sperm.

A hopeless failure at everything he does, Klaus lives in the fantasy world of fame and heroism. Inferiority and superiority are the complexes wrestling continuously for control of his psyche. From his earliest memories of his father—"a father who so little believed in me that he did not even make the effort to utter that proverbial put-down, "nothing will come of that boy" (10)—to the lucky coincidence that his picture, taken at a school function as he was being congratulated by a high party official, had made the front page of the popular magazine *Berliner Zeitung*:

The next day I was in the *Berliner Zeitung*. My mother bought 30 copies right away and sent me for another ten. Imagine me, the nine year old on the front page of the largest illustrated newspaper in the country and being congratulated by one of the most powerful men in the government! The telephone didn't stop ringing. It was Klaus this and Klaus that and "did you hear about Klaus" and "can you believe, our little Klaus" and "is it really true that Klaus ... ?" (13)

With his inner eye Klaus incessantly watches the film of his fantasies and his nightmares in which he casts himself as either the last bit of excrement or as master of the universe: "Why did I always feel so torn? Why did I always think that, if I did not become some sort of genius, then I would become a total failure!"(45)

The epitome of every Freudian complex, neurosis and psychosis, Klaus is, of course, the child of his parents: A Stasi father—"While my father beat me, he told me not only that it would hurt him more than me, but also that he in reality was beating *himself for me!*"(21)—and a fretting, fussing, over-protective mother, who works as sanitation inspector and who is ever ready with her platitudes ("It can't do any harm". (29) "A mother always knows." (33) Or, as the GDR is disintegrating around her in 1989: "I don't understand these people. We've sacrificed ourselves for them. That's why we're heroes, and heroes like us have nothing to regret" (299)

The complex, often bizarre contradictions between private and public life in the GDR are perhaps most evident when the nature and the function of the *Stasi* are examined. For Klaus, society, the state, and the role he plays as a public self all gravitate around the *Stasi*.

As the ultimate proverbial "big brother" the *Stasi*—short for *Staatsicherheit* (state security) officially the Ministry for Security (MfS)—was founded in 1950 as a cold-war espionage apparatus, but under the direction of Erich Mielke after 1953 it became first and foremost an institution of surveillance of its own citizens.<sup>4</sup> Charged by the SED with the "subversion of negative-enemy forces" envisioned lurking behind every criticism of the state and every expressed desire to visit the West—its 100,000-some members and circa 200,000 *IMs* ("informal co-workers") made free and frequent use of all the conventional "operative measures" necessary to implement its "operative procedures," e.g., surveillance of the telephone and mail, use of secret

microphones and cameras; confiscation of personal belongings, defamation, occupational prohibitions, incarceration and deportation.

One of the many ironies of living under the appearance of omniscient and omnipotent state control was the resulting split between the public and the private self, since socialist and communist practice had sought always to ban the private and personal under the slogan "the private is the public."

After the 8/90 elimination of the *Stasi*, this private-public schizophrenia of the self received a new twist, as the *Stasi*-Document -Law (1992) allowed all former East German citizens the right to examine the files and documents kept on them by the *Stasi*. Administered by the Gauk commission in Berlin, this final legacy of *Stasi* terrorism in turn led to provocative lively debate, i.e., was it a necessary reckoning with and exorcism of the past or was it a new inquisition of those who were or may have been in some way associated with the *Stasi*. Further, the files proved to be a Pandora's Box of identities, as the persons involved beheld their own files only to discover politically-constructed selves they hardly recognized.

The remarks of one writer must suffice here to give an impression of the significance of holding in one's hands the files—often stacks and stacks of them

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compiled with secrecy, deceit, and deception. In 1982 and in 1985 the East German and East Berliner Barbara Bohly founded the organizations "Women for Peace" and the "Initiative for Peace and Human Rights." She was hounded incessantly by the *Stasi*, surveilled, defamed and finally deported to England. Upon opening her files, she wrote:

Most shocking is the destruction and erosion of human feelings. Here, betrayal, lies, secrecy vanity, arrogance, megalomania, and cowardice are rewarded. For a long time I believed that the GDR could be reformed. But reading my own files finally cured me of that dream. A state which requires the worst qualities of its people in ever greater quantities for the basis of its existence can not renew itself. That holds true for every state. It is sentenced by history to its own demise. (45)

This background information is the foundation of the satire of the *Stasi* in *Heroes like us*, a satire which plays the central role in Klaus' development. It just so happens that Klaus lives with his parents in the Frankfurter Avenue, directly across from the massive building housing the Ministry for Security, and his earliest thoughts express his innocence and naiveté on the subject.

If you can't live securely directly across from the Ministry for Security, where can you live? I was a little kid and afraid of pretty much everything, but at least I lived within a stone's throw of the Ministry, which was dedicated to my security. In an emergency I'll just yell for help and the Ministry will hear me and

help me. It was years before I thought otherwise, but at first I actually did glorify the *Stasi* as great, anonymous protector. (36)

It seems to Klaus that the fathers of all his friends work for the *Stasi*, but when he asks his own father at home he is told that he works in the “foreign export business,” until one day his father, putting down his newspaper asks him, “Say, you'll be starting with us soon, won't you?” (92)

As Klaus begins his apprenticeship with the *Stasi* to fulfill what he tells himself is his “historical mission,” it soon becomes clear that the dominant activity of the *Stasi* is the perfect preservation of its own denial, deceit and secrecy. Indeed, Klaus is never quite certain whether he is with the real *Stasi* or just with a camouflage organization.

Not only do all the informants and the surveillance subjects have code names, but when Klaus asks where he is or what he is to do, he is typically rebuffed with the response: “After all, don't forget where you are!” (111)

As Klaus begins his first “conspirative assignment,” he enters upon a Kafkaesque labyrinth of truth and appearance, of terror and absurdity. He is assigned to three officers based in a postal newspaper distribution office. Of these three—a cross between the three stooges and the quintessential bureaucrat—one Harald Wunderlich can only express himself through the pedantry of listing what

he has to say and preceding each item with a letter. Another fancies himself to be a philosopher as he, for example, explains post-structuralism as the investigation of the structure of the post office in which they are stationed.

All this only leads Klaus to ask himself:

“Was I now really with the *Stasi*, with the real, authentic, legendary *Stasi*? Or was I in an organization that just called itself the *Stasi*—so that the real *Stasi*, which one day will call me, can remain all the more effectively hidden? (153)

Nevertheless, he joins his cohorts in surveillance action, searches through apartments of possible "enemies of the state", and spends most of his time in endless debate over the significance of items found and confiscated in searches, for example a book in English entitled *The World According to Garp*.

Klaus' crowning achievement as *Stasi* member comes as he is called to give blood for the ailing Erich Honnecker, SED Secretary-General. In accordance to proper bureaucratic efficiency, his own death certificate is filled out in advance, as he is told, "just in case."

As the events in the GDR swiftly tilt and tumble toward the fateful fall of 1989, Klaus' activities in the Ministry become equally as chaotic, incomprehensible and absurd. However before Klaus' story brings him to that historical Wall and its fall, another important element in his identity must be briefly sketched—his body and his sexuality.

The fifty years of political repression symbolized by the *Stasi* are paralleled by the sexual repression against which Klaus makes it his foremost

duty to rebel. In a society defined by the motto "If it feels good, it's illegal."

Klaus becomes the perfect criminal, a pervert. Whether it be the seduction of real women or the fantasies prompted by the western lingerie ads in the *Quelle* catalog that has blown over the wall during a storm, Klaus' obsessions grow apace:

I took myself at that time to be one of the most perverted men on the planet, and do you know why? Because at the age of nineteen I thought about sex continuously, because it was impossible for me *not* to think about sex. (59)

Indeed, his alleged claim to fame—being the first to break through the Wall and into the West—results from a grotesque-surrealist fantasy become nightmare. Having been sent to investigate the growing masses of protesters at the

*Alexanderplatz* on the fourth of November, Klaus is involved in a tussle, falls down the stairs onto a metal post and injures his genitals to the extent that—a miracle and a horror!—his penis swells to an immense size. In the hospital the swelling remains, and, as Klaus overhears his doctors debating the possibilities of experimenting upon such a "unique phenomenon", he see only one course of action: "I fled and took to the streets on the ninth of November. I had no intention of tearing down the Wall! I really just wanted to rescue my gigantic penis." (304)

Having arrived at the wall, he is stopped by the border patrol who are so stunned by the size of his member that they only watch as Klaus single-handedly

grabs the bars atop the gate of the Wall and forces it open, screaming for his countrymen and women to follow him.

Surprisingly, the novel's final chapter, entitled satirically and grotesquely “Der geheilte Pimmel”, in allusion to Wolf’s first successful novel *Der geteilte Himmel* (*Divided Heavens*) of 1963, contains a devastating critique of Christa Wolf, probably East-Germany’s best known writer, who, while defending socialism, has explored themes of identity, the past, memory, and childhood—themes which have made her a best-selling author in the West as well.<sup>5</sup>

On the fourth of November, as Klaus arrives at the *Alexanderplatz* " just in time to hear the famous “*Wir sind ein Volk*” speech, which is deconstructed by the author via the persona of Klaus as just so much verbiage, as he lampoons speakers such as Jutta Müller and Christa Wolf:

How is one to understand politically a writer, who has almost never expressed herself politically? Do you know what Christa Wolf wrote about Budapest in ‘56? She wrote that everyone was sitting with grave concern in front of the radios. What does that mean? Was there someone who sat contented in front of the radio? (309)

Indeed, the narrator-author demonstrates a surprising degree of pessimism, even contempt for the future of the former East Germans as well as that of the new, unified Germany: "Look at the East Germans before and after the fall of the Wall. Passive before, passive after. It’s a miracle the Wall fell at all." (319)

The final paragraph of the novel appears to be a serious and severe reflection of Germany and being German:

But why attempt any further to explain Germany to you. Look at the country yourself. Once you know that the unification came about as I have told it to you, you won't be surprised at how things continue. I, at least, have no illusions. (323)

In a nutshell, this final paragraph illustrates a major flaw throughout the novel. By wanting to be both farce and critique, the satirical moment is often undercut by the ridiculous. If farce leads to perfect suspension of belief, then all connections to history and reality are cut and the satire-critique loses its teeth.

In conclusion, *Heroes like us* is a very entertaining and very clever novel, but perhaps, at times, too clever. The *Stasi* satire is very successful, whereas the sexual themes are overplayed and derivative, and in the end defuse the satire. However, *in toto*, the novel is a noteworthy contribution to the literature of German identity and the self as it moves from the familiar failures of old repressions to the new and unfamiliar world of freedom and its new repressions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Recently, Brussig published the novel *Wie es leuchtet* (2006), which also deals with the topic of the fall of the Wall.

<sup>2</sup>All translations are mine.

<sup>3</sup>Excellent literary treatments of the fall of the Wall and life in East Germany before and after the *Wende* may be found in Erich Loest, *Nikolaikirche* (Leipzig: Linden, 1995), Hans Joachim Schädlich, *Ostwestberlin* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1997), and Daniela Dahn, *Westwärts und nicht vergessen* (Hamburg: Rowohl, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> For in-depth studies of the *Stasi*, see Jens Giesecke, *Der Mielke-Konzern. Die Geschichte der Stasi 1945-1990* (Berlin: Dva, 2006) and Mike Dennis, and Norman Laporte, *The Stasi: Myth and Reality. Trends in German History* (New York: Longman, 2003).

<sup>5</sup>Wolf's past as an *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiterin* (unofficial collaborator) has brought sharp criticism down upon her for her alleged subterfuge and wanting to "have her cake and eat it too."

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