

The Past and the Present in the Early Novels of Hanns-Josef Ortheil

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Die Biographie meines eigenen Existierens,
und das meint: die Biographie eines
nachfaschistischen Erlebens, in dem der
Faschismus gleichwohl die prägende, domi-
nante, nie zu vergessende Rolle spielte.

The biography of my own existence, and that
means: the biography of a post-Fascist life in
which Fascism nevertheless plays the formative
and dominant role that must never be
forgotten (*Schauprozesse* 95).¹

Hanns-Josef Ortheil was born in Köln-Lindenthal in 1951 and belongs to that first generation of post-World War II German writers who are too young to have participated in the student movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Among this emerging group of *Nachgeborene* (the successor generation), Ortheil is without doubt one of the most prolific and versatile. He published his first novel in 1979 and has since produced novels, essays, and critical studies at an unremitting pace. His work deserves assessment both on its own merits and as an example of the continuing attempts by German writers to come to terms with the Hitler past.

As West German postwar literature amply demonstrates, each postwar generation has attempted in its own distinct way to come to terms with this legacy and each writer has had to pioneer his/her own methods and techniques in order to arrive at some understanding of this past. Ortheil's writings, too, attest to the undiminished need to come to some,

albeit ever changing, understanding of this past, and he exemplifies the position that these efforts are intimately connected to a definition of self in the present. The early novels *Fermer* (1979) and *Hecke* (1983) show in quasi-lyrical intensity their young protagonists' search for self-identity and for values as each of them tries to comprehend the impact of the Hitler past on his own life, "a post-fascist life in which fascism nevertheless plays the formative and dominant role."

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Fermer is part of the literature of the "New Subjectivism" of the 1970s, along with such novels as Peter Schneider's *Lenz* (1973), Nicolas Born's *Die erdabgewandte Seite der Geschichte* (1976), and Botho Strauß's *Die Widmung* (1977). These novels signaled a turn away from the activism of the student movement toward introspection and self-analysis, but without abandoning the social context. The choice of a small-scale *Bildungsroman* indicates Ortheil's intention that the protagonist be perceived in his interaction with the world as well as in his reflections on it. *Fermer* is the novel of the nineteen-year old recruit Fermer, who one evening, "suddenly and without intention," does not return to the barracks of the *Bundeswehr*.² This desertion is the beginning of an inner as well as an outer journey.³ In a carefully structured novel of six chapters with six subheadings each, Ortheil presents the sensitive, thoughtful sketch of a young man as he acquires the emotional and intellectual maturity to come to terms with his flight and to find the values by which he wants to guide his life. The narrative time of six months moves forward from Fermer's desertion in late winter to late summer when he illegally crosses the border to Denmark on his way to Italy. There are frequent flashbacks, often presented as conversations, into his childhood and upbringing, into the life of his parents, and into the histories of friends and their families whom he meets on the journey north. In the process, Ortheil depicts an uneasy consumer society. There are peripheral but sharp attacks on institutions, above all on the education system and the military—institutions designed to crush any sense of freedom, any play of the imagination and all resistance to conformity.

Ortheil tells Fermer's six-month journey under the guiding principle of two qualities that permeate German society: order/orderliness and *Geborgenheit*.⁴ These qualities may seem positive or, at least, innocuous; yet they always resonate with consequences that transcend personal predilections or needs and reach political dimensions. One of the merits of *Fermer* lies precisely in the demonstration that no quality or act is

merely private; qualities and acts carry social implications and political results that may, in the end, even be contrary to their initial purpose.

The need for order shows itself in many different situations, and practically all principal characters are identified in relation to it. Fermer's father is an engineer/land surveyor who explains his career choice in relation to order: "The techniques of land surveying then also interested me because through the drawing order was created in the landscape" (F 224).⁵ During the Hitler regime, the father worked as an engineer, planning roads, bridges, railways, always attentive to "what one can demand of a landscape" (F 224).⁶ The terrible irony here is the realization that limits to the burden technology can impose on nature are sympathetically observed, while the purposes of the transportation system, transport of war materiel and, above all, of people into certain death, were studiously ignored. Wives keep houses in immaculate order; even the photographs are "carefully labeled" (F 163), as are the small sentimental pictures of flowers, drawn by Fermer's father (F 225).⁷ Ortheil shows the continued impact of this love for order on the next generation when Fermer remembers that as a child he had been deeply impressed with "the delicate lines and the exactness" (F 224) of these drawings.⁸ Fermer's own emotional turmoil is clear in a situation where "he could no longer order his words" (F 72).⁹ While fleeing, he stops at his parents' house, and as the well-indoctrinated son he immediately puts his shoes in their assigned spot "under the small radiator" and carries his dirty laundry into the basement where he sorts it and "placed it in the basket" (F 211).¹⁰ This seemingly small gesture of sorting and placing the laundry in the basket (as opposed to opting for a "disorderly" alternative) shows how deeply internalized the parental patterns are. Compared to the "disorderly" behavior of the deserter, this orderly behavior also intimates the tremendous pressure to revert to habituated conduct.

Fermer's first major activity after sorting the laundry is to take a bath.¹¹ When he starts to sing in the bathtub, his parents knock on the door and ask him not to make so much noise (F 213-14). Instead of being happy to see their son after a long absence, they are upset by his disrupting their order of silence. But more important, they are afraid that someone might spy on this well-ordered center of *Geborgenheit* and discover their secret visitor, even though their house stands alone on a fairly large piece of property, surrounded by woods. Fermer is struck that the ritual of the meals follows old, established rules that completely ignore the altered circumstances under which the son sits at the table (F 216 ff.). Fermer is hurt when his mother is more ashamed of her son who broke the rules than she is interested in knowing why he deserted.

Yet Fermer is by no means the only exceptional member of the successor generation to bear the branding marks of the older generation. Among his friends, Lotta, a severely traumatized young woman, is frightened by the woods and a countryside without boundaries (F 127), and she, like Fermer's father, imposes order and limits through drawings (F 132-33).¹² Lotta's brother Ferdinand collects minerals as a way of organizing and sorting his environment; he works out elaborate schedules concerning when and by whom the pathways through the forests are used, as his way of ordering and asserting control.

As Fermer comes up against the defining limits of his own personality, he learns to understand his own fears, including the fear associated with breaking the confines of socially imposed restrictions. He realizes that compliance with sanctioned rules and order provides a sense of satisfaction and security, a *Geborgenheit*, which he must learn to sacrifice. For example, when he stays for a while with Lotta and Ferdinand's parents (who do not know Fermer's "secret," that he went AWOL), he shows his appreciation for their hospitality by giving their garden an extensive spring cleaning. There is pleasure in this quasi-therapeutic activity, and Fermer is honest enough to know that he must not admit to himself the source of this pleasure, i.e. creating and then fitting into approved patterns:

He did not say why he liked the work; he viewed it as a continuous cleaning-up. Gradually the garden that had collapsed in the winter, as by an earthquake, took on order . . . sometimes the small, clearly delimited area appeared to Fermer as a valid order of things in which he was allowed to participate. (F 140)¹³

The temptation to find comfort in an established order is similarly evident when he feels:

The old doubts and questions became weaker; in working, he believed he perceived a connectedness in the garden in which he participated and which calmed him the more patiently he dedicated himself. (F 140)¹⁴

Finding solace by doing work that creates order means, of course, following the older generation's principles. Therefore, learning implies learning to execute a precarious balancing act. There is, on the one hand, the conviction that some kind of order is essential. This conviction is epitomized in the interchange between father and son, when Fermer's father says: "You will find out that life without order and rules is not

possible, that there must be safeguards,” to which Fermer replies: “I don’t want to rely on someone else’s pre-fabricated rules” (F 219-20).¹⁵ When Fermer opts for creating his own world, he does not opt for what the older generation may fear to be chaos simply because it is not their order, but instead for an open, ever-changing society. On the other hand, the conviction that order is necessary and that compliance with established order promises comfort must be recognized as a temptation and therefore must be rejected. This rejection, whether unconscious or conscious, spontaneous or deliberate, is inevitably accompanied by fear: the fear of having broken established rules; the fear of failure, always a possibility in the exploration of new territories; above all, the fear of succumbing to the temptation to opt for personal comfort, attained as psychological and social reward for joining the established order at the expense of individual growth.

Abdication of personal responsibility may stultify a person individually and homogenize him/her socially, but its most horrendous implications are played out politically. The individual’s creation and perpetuation of order and the social reward of approval and a sense of *Geborgenheit* are directly linked to an obverse side, a many-faceted fear that militates in its political consequences against expressions and acts of disapproval or opposition. This intimate connection between order/*Geborgenheit* and the conflicting currents of fear represents a significant insight into the many and seemingly contradictory reasons for an individual to succumb to a group—or mass identity. Ortheil shows in his protagonist’s irresolutions the existence of these driving mechanisms and the need to recognize and exorcise them:

And the more he searched for the most deeply hidden causes of his pleasant feelings, the more he had to admit, finally, that even if one summed up all the reasons he had enumerated to himself, none seemed sufficient. He admitted to himself that all these guesses bore the mark of a fear that he might discover something of which he was afraid. (F 141)¹⁶

A sense of comfort and *Geborgenheit* is the ultimate reward for having internalized established rules and limitations. Translated into psychological terms, it demands submission to a group identity that operates on many social and ultimately political levels. As an outward manifestation, this sense of *Geborgenheit* is translated into the spatial terms of a house or a garden. Yet the ambivalence of this *Geborgenheit* surfaces immediately, since the spatial arrangement is not one of open trust and communal sharing, but of a fearful seclusion clearly indicated

by fences, gates, shutters as demarcations separating a personal cosmos from surrounding chaos. Like the panicked activities of the animal in Kafka's *Der Bau*, the efforts at instituting spatial safeguards cannot ultimately provide a sense of security and *Geborgenheit*.

Buried in the cluster of order/*Geborgenheit* and the many crosscurrents of fear there lies a core of secrets and secretiveness. While young Fermer is afraid of discovering something of which he is afraid, an old recluse states a counterposition. He is the only adult who seems to understand Fermer and offers him temporary refuge. This recluse, too, needs order, but his order-creating activities are directed at exposing the hidden core. He orders time into a history of the region, since he "wanted to know where the memories lay hidden and concealed" (F 197).¹⁷

Ortheil is keenly aware of, and plays on, the common stem of the words *geborgen* (protected) and *verborgen* (hidden). In his fictional universe, *Geborgenheit* always contains something *verborgen* (hidden).¹⁸ This realization appears in many variations throughout the novel. Its most poignant version is strategically placed in the very center of the novel. Here, Fermer has found a temporary refuge in the country house of Lotta and Ferdinand's parents. During the ritual act of spring cleaning, Ferdinand and Fermer find in the basement, in the deepest and darkest recess of the house, several cartons. The two young men, in turn *geborgen* in a comfortable room, sort the content of the cartons as they enjoy some alcohol that Ferdinand, who learned in a secretive society to keep his own secrets, had carefully hidden away.

Ferdinand recognizes letters, diaries, photographs, and drawings from his grandfather, a restless man who created apocalyptic drawings and poetry.¹⁹ He also finds negatives of photographs which his parents have obviously hidden, and discovers, after he develops them, that they have been retouched so as to eliminate from them an apparently tall figure. The secret of this person's identity is not resolved until much later in the novel, but leaves a core of darkness and absence at the very center of the narrative. Later during his flight, Fermer learns from Lotta that the erased figure was that of a brother who drowned after confronting his parents with the father's Nazi past. The brother had been outraged that his Nazi father, who had attained "not unimportant positions" (F 233) in the Hitler regime, could, in the postwar years, again run a small publishing house and continue living as if all was well.²⁰ In order not to be reminded of this past and of the son's tragic death associated with discovering this past, the parents removed all traces of his existence. Lotta's retrospective description is of a brother who was born during World War II and to whom she had felt extremely close. The descriptions of the brother's rage and destructiveness (F 233-35) echo the behavior of

many of the students of the late 1960s, a generation to which the brother clearly belonged.

Ferdinand's discovery of the "elimination" of the brother goes right to the core of the German postwar malaise: no amount of order and cleaning up can eliminate the marks of erasures which even as negatives are positive indicators and which even as absences are powerful presences. The death of the older brother seems to suggest that enraged confrontations (politically epitomized in the terrorists of the 1970s) do not offer solutions. Perhaps the past can only be laid to rest with a still younger generation, whose very identity and self-conceptualization depend on bringing this past to light, and when this past is openly discussed, openly viewed, openly acknowledged, openly worked through. (It is of course ironic that Fermer and Ferdinand find the boxes during spring cleaning, when they want to set the older generation's house in order.)

As the parents hope to erase the memory of their son and the cause of his death by erasing his presence in the photo negatives, they think they can also distance themselves from their complicity in the Nazi party. Even though the father had held "not unimportant positions," he now wants to dissociate himself from people "on whom the traces of brown politics are still noticeable" (F 127).²¹ The opportunistic self-righteousness of this remark is a blatant denial of his own past; it is also a remarkable statement of complicity, for he does not object to the other person's Nazi past, only to the traces that can still be discerned.

One of Ortheil's significant insights in this novel bears on his realization that even those who break out of the order and *Geborgenheit* to which they have been socialized cannot accomplish a clean and total break. Unlike the rebellious generation of the late 1960s and early 1970s, this younger generation is no longer intent on trying to excise a reprehensible past, but wants to come to terms with it by airing its secrets in the present. As Fermer and his friends make their way to Italy, they carry with them their youth, conditioned, even traumatized by their parents' past. At this point, recognition of this burden, of the desire for *Geborgenheit* and the resolution not to be tempted by its promises, is the key to a more open and mature future.

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There are many continuities from *Fermer* to Ortheil's next novel. Its very title suggests a continued exploration of the ambivalences inherent in *Geborgenheit*. *Hecke* is part of the *Väter*—and/or *Mütter*—literature that reached a highpoint around the turn of the decade from the 1970s into

the 1980s. These novels build on the critical introspections of the literature of the "New Subjectivism," but are more narrowly focused. Their protagonists search for personal identity by exploring their parents' past during the Hitler years. Ortheil's *Hecke* shares common assumptions with most of these novels: the search for the protagonist's self-identity, as it intermeshes with the dominant parent's role in the past, can only occur with that parent absent. This absence then enables the protagonist to assemble information about the parent from many different sources: from news clippings, diaries, letters, photographs; from conflicting accounts of specific incidents; from unreliable witnesses who have their own agendas or who illustrate how fallible, deceptive, and elastic memory can be. These fragmentary and relativizing bits of information are usually held together by a tight time frame.²²

In *Hecke*, the mother is the principal focus of investigation.²³ She is on vacation with her husband, the narrator's father, as the son tries to immerse himself in her life during the Hitler years. The novel is structured on a seven-day inquiry, i.e. the seven days of the mother's absence, while the narrator/son is house-sitting. Each day is filled with particular inquiries and quests; at night, he writes. The house is located and described in terms very similar to those of the parents' house in *Fermer*; the time of the year is again spring and again demands a lot of spring gardening.

The seven-day journey through his mother's life is for the 30-year old son/narrator, who is never identified or dignified with a name, a journey of liberation. He is by profession an architect, continuing the efforts of characters in *Fermer* to create order by drawing up plans and maps, with the caveat "but I don't particularly like my profession."²⁴

As is the case with so many of Ortheil's key concepts, the word "Hecke" is fraught with ambiguity. "Hecke" (hedge) suggests a "Gehege" (enclosure), a protective wall of "dark bushes that fenced in our property" (H 294); it indicates a magic circle enclosing a place of refuge (H 94), but also a hiding place (H 12).²⁵ As a proper noun, "Hecke" is the name of a farm where members of the family took refuge during the last days of World War II. Yet rather than indicating safety, "Hecke" became for the narrator-as-child "a word of absolute terror" (H 293) since it was here, long before the birth of the narrator, that the mother's small, then only son, had been killed by one of the last hand-grenades of the war.²⁶

Driven by the question "but how can we put into words what we don't comprehend?" (H 34), the narrator places the primary emphasis of his quest on an exploration of the means by which his exploration is to be conducted, namely language.²⁷ Like the photograph in *Fermer*, in which absence proved presence, language in *Hecke* is a means of erasing and of

storing information. One of the narrator's first realizations as he begins to assemble his mother's story/history ("die Geschichte meiner Mutter" [H 173]) bears on the role and function of forgetting. "My mother forgets by telling a story" (H 23).²⁸ In this context, the image of the hedge intensifies into that of a prison or a cage, and the emphasis can shift from the mother to the many. They all share common traits:

The narrators sit in the cages of their own words, they cover themselves almost lovingly with them, they burrow like fieldmice ever deeper into darkness. / Only late did I realize that one can forget only in this manner. (H 23)²⁹

Language becomes the disguise for events that must not be remembered. Not unlike the heroes of mythical journeys who have to break through formidable barriers to expose secrets and in so doing redeem themselves and their people, the narrator must literally de-construct the hedges of his mother's stories, penetrate to the erased core of her forgetting, and uncover the sources of her distraught personality in order to find out who he is.

Images of hedges pervade the entire story and acquire new meanings with each new context. "Hecke" (hedges) and "Gehege" (enclosures) can metamorphose into "Gespinst" 'web, cocoon' (H 168), "Gestrüpp" 'thicket' (H 173), "Käfig" 'cage' (H 23), "Umschnürungen" 'ropings' (H 169). During the early years of the Nazi regime, hedges constitute protective walls against realizing what is happening outside them:

Whatever happened all around, lost in significance. . . . Instead, one acquired a kind of inner protection, a delicately woven enclosure made up of reading, cultured education and lifestyle. (H 174-75)³⁰

Guided by his mother's distress, the son eventually recognizes that the same hedges that protected against contamination by the Nazi regime also prevented from active protest. As the Nazi regime stepped up its intimidations and brutalizations, withdrawal behind hedges changed meaning: from passive resistance and a turning away (a position that would eventually, for many Germans, crystallize into a plea for not having known about the Nazi crimes), it became a self-defense mechanism. As the narrator surmises about his mother:

She was careful, she covered herself, she protected herself, she did not dare attack. The *cocoon* in which she lived became ever denser,

since she could no longer tear it with words, gestures, or actions. (H 168; emphasis added)³¹

The narrator's reconstructions of his mother's behavior do not plead her ignorance. On the contrary, withdrawal behind the hedges and into an ever more impenetrable cocoon indicates a rejection of the world outside, and ultimately, resignation. As the narrator discovers, this resignation is inseparable from shame: shame at the resignation *and* at the cause for the resignation, namely the Nazi brutalities, *and* at the incapacity to fight these brutalities outside the hedges. Long before the concentration camp atrocities were committed, there existed reason for wanting to forget.

It may at first glance be considered evidence of repression that Ortheil does not broach the most heinous of all Nazi crimes, the genocide of the Jews. Yet it seems that the concentration camp atrocities function in this narrative much like a black hole that draws all matter and light into itself, that gives evidence of its powerful presence through absence and silence. The narrator's initial question "but how do we put into words what we do not comprehend?" is answered here by concluding that he can only relate what he *does* come to understand, and that is not the abstract enormity of truly incomprehensible crimes but the concrete life of his mother: a life in its diverse needs of hedges, in its efforts to forget, in its extreme distress and ultimate sense of shame, foregrounded against the ever-present silence about the concentration camps.

Forgetting through *erzählen* (putting into words/ narrating) is only one use into which language can be pressed. Another one is asserting control. As the son notes, ". . . by telling her stories she controls her forgetting" (H 23) and, one might add, she controls those to whom the narrative is addressed.³² Yet this practice of using language to exert control is precisely what the mother has in common with the Nazis. As a young woman in Berlin, she observes Nazi-informants exerting political control through their control of language and she is appalled: "... even the slightest deviation from the regimented use of language does not escape their attention" (H 251).³³ It is exactly this "regimented use of language" between mother and son (e.g. H 13-14), her means of bonding and exerting control over him, that he must break.³⁴

In a less harsh function, language is an instrument of seduction. The narrator comes to realize, as the account of his mother's life forces him to account for his own life, that he has been seduced by his mother and by her particular use of language since early childhood. The ambivalence that informs so many of Ortheil's characters and basic attitudes is presented here in clear, unambiguous terms. On the one hand, seduction through *erzählen* (telling stories) gives the child a sense of security

(language as hedge), as when the narrator-as-child admits: "She can seduce with her stories, one feels protected, even when she talks about the most horrible things" (H 24).³⁵ On the other hand, this sense of security proves false, because these "most horrible things" are manipulative, controlling designs of her own efforts to forget *and* of seducing others into her forgetting. This verbal seduction also radiates into the emotional and indeed sexual sphere and ties the young boy helplessly to his mother:

I lost all doubt when through her stories she converted me to a different perspective. . . . My father gave the keywords, my mother made stories out of them, and I dreamed with her words, succumbed to her tone of voice, sighed when she paused, asked for more when she was done. (H 24)³⁶

The ambiguities in the mother's position are crystallized in her suggestions to her friend, the church painter Peter Hacker, that he paint an apocalyptic Temptation of St. Anthony on the ceiling of the local church. While she seduces with her stories, she urges and inspires Hacker to paint the rejection of temptation. The description of the progress of these frescoes becomes a mega-code for the narrator's resistance to the temptations of *erzählen* as exemplified in his mother; on a wider, political plane it relates to the challenge to reject the "magic" promises of the Nazis.³⁷ The political dimension of this resistance is clearly apparent when the narrator describes the seductive practices of his mother with the same word that he uses for a speech of Hitler's. In relation to his mother, he understands, almost resentfully: "How in my childhood she had made me addicted with her stories . . . I was supposed to listen, to succumb to this *singsong*" (H 42; emphasis added), while the mother, as a young wife in Berlin, heard Hitler and ". . . did not understand what was said; she listened carefully to the *singsong*, to the crackling and the spitting" (H 214; emphasis added).³⁸ The mother, opposed to the Hitler regime, driven into a fear and mental distress that will be the determining factors of her life, is nevertheless seen as an accomplice in seductive practices. Here we encounter the political insights of Ortheil's novel: even those opposed to the Hitler regime shared, on some unacknowledged level, characteristics with Hitler.

Language not only seduces the listener, it also entraps the speaker. Only when the son realizes the power of the word over the person who uses it can he begin the process of liberation. What he understood in relation to the villagers as "the cage of their own words," he sees in relation to himself-as-child more clearly as lies:

I realized over time that I had started to lie. I pretended to a knowledge I did not have, I described situations that I could not even clearly imagine. . . . I did not completely understand what was happening to me since, while I wrote, I entered into a state of paroxysm such as someone else might hardly be able to imagine. (H 25)³⁹

As a stepping stone on the path to self-liberation, the narrator realizes that this paroxysm lies at the intersection of the magic of the word, the magic of music, and of sexual seduction: "What I experienced as I wrote was music, the urgently pushing cadences of my mother's voice, who did not allow the words to rest or the sentences to pause" (H 26).⁴⁰ When a young male teacher begins to correct the boy's stories, which are induced by his mother's "magic," thus in effect trying to shift the boy's identification with a role model to one more appropriate to his age, the boy reverts to an earlier phase of stuttering and, like the stutterer Kretschmar in Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, finds in music a temporary escape.

The deeply rooted ambiguity in the mother's seductive practices, perceived by the son as paralleling Nazi practices and not, as the mother intended, as evading or resisting them, becomes more shrill as her distress increases. Just as the Nazis invent their own language and *Schlagworte* (slogans), so the mother's resistance to the regime also searches for an appropriate language. After the trauma of a stillbirth in Berlin during the war, she returns to her parents' village and there raises her second son, born in 1943. She creates a language incomprehensible to all but him, since "the language that all of them used has become forever maimed, like that of evil ghosts, and behind each sound hunkered the bleating noise of the dead" (H 259).⁴¹ Indeed, the greater her distress and disorientation become, the more she hopes to resist through extreme acts of magic. Thus she insists that "certain words had to be completely exterminated and sorted out in time before the arrival of the victors, so that nobody would still use them inadvertently" (H 287), and she produced, to the dismay of her family who feared to be detected behind their hedge, "slips of paper with the torn or crossed out names of the party members of the Security Service or the Storm troopers" (H 287).⁴² This "magical" thinking, perhaps uncommon in its traumatized intensity, portrays commonly held convictions: the hope that, when the word is destroyed, the thing it denotes will also be exterminated. Hence, silence will extinguish the Nazis and the Nazi horrors.⁴³ New, freshly invented stories will cover the silence so that this silence, as deliberate erasure, may be buried under words. Yet the dangerous, indeed subversive power of words can never be contained, just as the erased figure in the photo negative signaled a

hidden presence. A case in point is the use of the word *vernichtet* (exterminated), as when the mother feels that certain names must be “exterminated” before the arrival of the victors so that with their extermination the bearers of these names might also be exterminated. Yet the crimes committed by the bearers of these names culminated precisely in the acts of *Vernichtungen* committed in the *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camps) of the Holocaust. She is also beside herself when her husband, in his letters from the war front, uses words such as “extinguish, exterminate, cut down, stigmatize, to wipe out,” and she responds to these descriptions of destruction by destroying the letters (H 260).⁴⁴ Yet when she tries to exterminate the Nazis, their names and their crimes, or when she destroys the letter containing words of annihilation and destruction, she has no other resources but to repeat “magically” what the Nazis had practiced factually. Her very use of the word *vernichten*, meant to destroy and obliterate, preserves the memory of all the *Vernichtungs-* associations and demonstrates the mother’s historical, if not personal complicity in the Nazi years.⁴⁵

In the son’s reconstruction of his mother’s life, the episode crucial to, formative of her disturbed personality occurs at the beginning of the Hitler regime and finds subtle, almost inadvertent reinforcements throughout the Hitler years. One day in February of 1933, when she, Katharina, is 20 years old, she is detained and interrogated for a few hours. In a narrative in which words are the principal actors and the driving force, it should not surprise us that she is detained for having used a word insulting to the Nazis.⁴⁶ The narrator surmises that the detention did not really target her, but was meant as a warning to her father, who was part of the Catholic, strongly anti-Nazi population. In the son’s eyes, this day was “the beginning of a fear that lasted for decades” (H 36), even though the mother was not clearly aware that she lived increasingly in fear.⁴⁷ In the mother, the narrator examines the psychological breaking point or rather breakdown of those socialized into obedience. While this obedience may be rewarded with a sense of *Geborgenheit* if one agrees with the social expectations (a theme explored in *Fermer*), it creates severe trauma when the social expectations are at odds with the individual’s values.

The mother’s sudden and surprising decision to marry Henner, the narrator’s father and an early member of the Nazi party, seems rooted in the fact that he protects the church services from interruption by the Nazis when her brother is ordained into the priesthood. Here, Henner is the “hedge” to ward off the evil powers of the regime. Henner is a farm boy who finds the *völkische* (nationalistic) farm ideology of the Nazis congenial; he is a childhood friend of Katharina’s, who has made good

as an engineer. In protecting her brother and standing up against the very Nazis of whom he is a member, Henner appears, in Katharina's eyes, as someone in control and on her side. He is the "hedge" to ward off the evil powers of a regime she does not understand, but is afraid of. In marrying him, she thinks she can pit herself against the party by challenging Henner's beliefs with the full weight of her youthful confidence, the convictions of her astute and sensitive observations, and her "magical" seductiveness. Again, the ambivalence of an existence enclosed within a protective "hedge" is all too clear. While she thinks she finds protection through her husband, she cannot understand how he can accept and be part of a regime she abhors. Their relationship becomes a duel, fought on the battlefield of words.⁴⁸ Eventually, the son comes to realize that his mother's most personal battle was simultaneously her most political act: ". . . they had aligned themselves against each other; each of them tried to pull the other over, to take possession of him/her, in order to belong to him/her" (H 157).⁴⁹

Ultimately, the mother serves as an example of the many Germans who did not speak out against the Hitler regime and who kept their silence in the postwar era. She embodies the efforts and the personal cost of attempting to question and, however timidly, to defy the Nazi rule, even as she needed to stay behind the hedges of a *Geborgenheit* in a regime that she found loathsome. As the son explores his mother's life and in the process confronts himself, he is on his way to accomplishing what lay beyond his mother's capacity, even beyond her imagination: breaking the bonds of personal dependence allows maturing into individual and political adulthood.⁵⁰

In the end, there is a clear dividing line between the generations: the older generation, for many different reasons, is anchored in attitudes and values that are seemingly innocuous, but can, even if at great cost, result in ignoring, tolerating, and ultimately committing the most heinous crimes. Metaphorically speaking, mother and father, for all their divergent opinions and actions during the Hitler regime, share their need to be *geborgen-verborgen*. For the successor generation, exemplified in the narrator, coming to terms with the parents' lives during the Nazi period no longer takes the form of the rebellious attacks that served the generation of '68 as a violent means of distancing themselves. Ortheil's narrator inquires not into the political events, but into the intermeshing psychological and social structures that lent themselves to the nefarious Nazi programs. Thus, addressing the existence of these structures is not only a coming-to-terms with the past, but an admonition to a constant vigilance in the future.

As the son un-writes the story of his mother, he breaks the spell and penetrates the hedges of the stories she had constructed around herself and into which she had drawn him. Nevertheless, his newly found adulthood is still tenuous: he is not yet ready to confront his mother and her seductive, appropriating rituals. He departs from the house with the surrounding hedges one hour before she arrives back home, after he has set the house, the garden, the past, and his self-perceptions in order, but dedicating his notes to her.

After the personal and predominantly psychological explorations and their political implications in these first two novels, Ortheil turned in his next novel to a wider historical investigation of the "German character;" here he appropriated irony as a perfect vehicle to present his observations and reflections on a large social scale. *Die Schwerenöter* (1986) will in time be seen as a continuation and worthy successor to Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel*. But if they lack knowledge of the earlier novels, readers of Ortheil's subsequent work will miss an important dimension and an appreciation for the ongoing transformation of his early and continuing concerns.

Notes

1. All translations of Ortheil texts by E.S.
2. "Plötzlich und absichtslos" (*Fermer* 34); henceforth cited in the text as F.
3. In an autobiographical comment written ten years after the novel, Ortheil explains "desertion" in existential terms: "Der Begriff, den ich für diesen Zwiespalt erfand, war der der 'Desertion,' denn in meinen Augen lebte der Deserteur in einem Vakuum, zwischen den Lagern, ruhelos, in Bewegung, eine Art verzweifelte Einzelgängerrolle ohne die Gewähr, jemals eine Gemeinschaft zu erreichen" 'The term which I coined for this dichotomy was that of desertion, because in my opinion the deserter lived in a vacuum, in between camps, restless, in movement; a kind of desperate loner's role without the guarantee of ever reaching a community' (*Schauprozesse* 100).
4. The noun "Geborgenheit" and the adjective "geborgen" indicate a space of physical protection as well as an emotional resting place. Being "geborgen" means being calm, relaxed, and at ease because the sense of feeling protected and taken care of wards off any dangers coming from the outside. The surroundings within which one feels "geborgen" can vary: it can be God, the fatherland, an ideology, a person. Because of the complexity of the term, I will continue to use the German original in the text.
5. "Die Vermessungstechnik hat mich dann auch beschäftigt, weil durch die Zeichnung Ordnung in die Landschaft kam."

6. "Was man einer Landschaft zumuten kann . . ." 'what one can demand of a landscape.'

7. "Sorgfältig beschriftet." Cf. Heinrich Böll, who indicts this orderliness in one of his early postwar stories, *Über die Brücke* (1950).

8. "Die feinen Striche und die Genauigkeit. . . ."

9. "Er konnte seine Worte nicht mehr ordnen. . . ."

10. "Unter die kleine Heizung" and "in den Korb legte. . . ."

11. Bathing and washing are, throughout the novel, frequently mentioned activities that could lend themselves to psychological as well as symbolic and thematic interpretations.

12. There are several, though peripheral, indications in the text that the older generation's need for order has its origins in the chaos of World War I and its aftermath. The successor generations are thus not only imprinted with the means of coping with chaos through rigid order, but also with the fear of chaos, and the desire for protection from it in an a-historical and a-political *Geborgenheit*, since for them this past is no longer a living experience.

13. "Er verschwieg, warum ihm die Arbeit gefiel; er betrachtete sie als ein dauerndes Aufräumen. Allmählich ordnete sich der im Winter wie durch einen Erdstoß zusammengefallene Garten wieder . . . manchmal erschien Fermer der kleine abgegrenzte Bezirk wie eine gültige Ordnung von Dingen, an der er sich beteiligen durfte."

14. "Die alten Zweifel und Fragen wurden schwächer; indem er arbeitete, glaubte er im Garten eine Verbindung wahrzunehmen, an der er Anteil hatte und die ihn, je mehr er sich geduldig vertiefte, beruhigte."

15. "Du wirst schon noch sehen, daß ein Leben ohne Ordnungen nicht möglich ist, daß es Sicherheiten geben muß. . . ." and: "Auf fremde, immer schon fertige Ordnungen will ich mich nicht verlassen. . . ."

16. "Und je mehr er nach den verborgensten Ursachen seines angenehmen Empfindens fragte, um so mehr mußte er sich schließlich eingestehen, daß, wenn man auch alle Gründe zusammenfaßte, die er sich genannt hatte, keiner ganz auszureichen schien. Er gestand sich, daß all diesen Vermutungen die Angst anzumerken war, etwas zu entdecken, vor dem er sich fürchtete."

17. "Ich wollte wissen, wo die Erinnerungen versteckt und verborgen waren. . . ." The recluse arrives at a theory not unlike the one expressed in Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*, i.e. that geography and climate influence the character of a region's people, and he draws some credible conclusions from these regionally determined characteristics of social behavior. In the end, however, regionalism does not offer a wide enough basis to explain the roots of Nazism as a nationwide political force.

18. *Geborgen/verborgen* not only suggest that the core of *Geborgenheit* is a sham, since it contains a hidden secret that undermines any sense of security, but the relation between the two words also suggests that one can feel safe and comfortable only when one is hidden away. In political terms, this is a variation on the “non-political German,” for whom to be *geborgen* means to be *verborgen*, i.e. invisible as an individual, concealed in the anonymity of the crowd or hidden in a well-guarded spatial territory.

19. It seems that Ortheil here refers to the work of Wilhelm Klemm. In his *Wilhelm Klemm* he describes Klemm’s drawings, e.g. 15 and 85, in terms very similar to those of the novel. Specific key concepts such as *Geborgenheit* (e.g. 13) and, relevant to Hecke, “das Böse, das Bedrohliche, das Häßliche,” (15) further testify to Ortheil’s over-arching problematics and to his view of World War I as the beginning of the characteristics he explores.

20. “Nicht unwichtige Stellen. . . .”

21. “Denen die Spuren der braunen Politik noch anzumerken seien. . . .”

22. I have analyzed some of these novels in the article “Coming to Terms with the Hitler-Past.”

23. Ortheil’s most recent novel, *Abschied von den Kriegsteilnehmern*, published in the fall of 1992, focuses on the father figure under structurally and thematically similar conditions.

24. “Aber ich liebe meinen Beruf nicht besonders” (*Hecke* 7). Henceforth cited in the text as H.

25. “[Die] dunklen Sträucher, die unser Grundstück umzäunten. . . .” The houses in *Fermer* and *Hecke*, and even the house of Lotta’s parents and of Fermer’s uncle, a priest, are similar in appearance and function. They have a respectable pantry (H 16), plenty of good wine and other alcoholic beverages, and they are kept in immaculate order. They are also well provided with locks, keys, window shutters, and “Hecken” to keep the dangerous world out.

26. “Ein Wort des unbedingten Erschreckens. . . .”

27. “Aber wie erzählen wir, was wir nicht begreifen?”

28. “Meine Mutter vergißt, indem sie erzählt.”

29. “Die Erzähler sitzen im Käfig ihrer eigenen Worte, sie decken sich beinahe liebevoll mit ihnen zu, sie wühlen sich wie Erdmäuse immer tiefer ins Dunkel. / Erst spät habe ich bemerkt, daß man nur auf diese Weise vergessen kann.”

30. “Was in der Umgebung geschah, verlor an Bedeutung. . . . Statt dessen erwarb man sich eine Art inneren Schutz, ein feingesponnenes Gehege aus Lektüre, Bildung und Lebensart.”

31. “Sie sah sich vor, sie deckte sich ab, sie schützte sich, sie wagte es nicht anzugreifen. Das *Gespinst*, in dem sie sich aufhielt, wurde dichter, da sie es

mit Worten, Gesten und Handlungen nicht mehr zerreißen konnte” (emphasis added).

32. “Indem sie erzählt, beherrscht sie ihr Vergessen.”

33. “Noch die geringste Abweichung vom geregelten Sprachgebrauch entgeht ihnen nicht. . . .”

34. In the essay “Weiterschreiben” of 1989, Ortheil speaks of “jener tief deutschen Paradoxie, sich allem und jedem durch Konzentration auf Regeln zu entledigen” ‘that deeply German paradox to rid oneself of all and everything by concentrating on rules’ (*Schauprozesse* 98).

35. “Sie kann durch ihre Erzählungen verführen, man fühlt sich geborgen, mag sie von noch so entsetzlichen Dingen berichten.”

36. “Ich verlor alle Zweifel, wenn sie mich durch ihre Geschichten zu einer anderen Sicht bekehrte. . . . Mein Vater gab die Stichworte, meine Mutter setzte sie in Erzählungen um, ich aber träumte mit ihren Worten, erlag dem Ton ihrer Stimme, seufzte auf, wenn sie einhielt, begehrte nach mehr, wenn sie am Ende war.”

37. On this very topic, compare Klaus Vondung’s *Magie und Manipulation*.

38. “Wie sie mich in den Kindertagen mit ihren Erzählungen süchtig gemacht hatte. . . . Ich sollte zuhören, diesem *Singsang* verfallen. . . .” and “sie verstand . . . nicht, was gesagt wurde; sie lauschte dem *Singsang*, dem Krachen, dem Spucken . . .” (emphasis added).

39. “Ich selbst bemerkte mit der Zeit, daß ich ins Lügen geriet. Ich täuschte Kenntnisse vor, die ich nicht besaß, ich schilderte Situationen, die ich mir nicht einmal richtig vorstellen konnte. . . . Ich begriff nicht vollständig, was da mit mir geschah, denn ich geriet während der Niederschrift meiner Geschichten in einen Paroxysmus, wie ihn sich ein anderer vielleicht kaum vorstellen kann.”

40. “Was ich während der Niederschrift gehört hatte, war Musik, der vorwärtsdrängende Tonfall meiner Mutter, die den Worten keine Ruhe, den Sätzen keine Pausen schenkte.” This driving restlessness is a characteristic common to many of Ortheil’s protagonists and is frequently expressed in association with music or with music as one of several “languages.” Compare for example music and the role of Schumann in *Fermer* with Ortheil’s study of Mozart, *Mozart. Im Innern seiner Sprachen*.

41. “Die Sprache, derer sich alle bedienten, sei für immer häßlich geworden, lemurenähnlich, und hinter jedem Laut hockte das Sterbegemecker der Toten.” For examples of the mother’s invented language, see H 259 or 262 ff. Although the mother invents her own language, there are connections to the language of the Nazis that clearly suggest an underlying communality. The *Glockenschläge* (strokes of the clock) for example echo the *Schlag*-(strike) associations of *Schlagworte* (slogans, literally strike words) or *Schlagabtausch*

(exchange of blows); the mother's incomprehensible *Singsang* is related to the description of Hitler's speech.

42. "Bestimmte Worte mußten rechtzeitig vor dem Eintreffen der Sieger gänzlich vernichtet und aussortiert werden, damit niemand sie noch unbedacht im Munde führe" and "Zettel mit den zerrissenen oder durchgestrichenen Namen der Parteigenossen des Sicherheitsdienstes oder der Sturmabteilung."

43. The corruption of the German language under Nazi rule and the problem of silence (including an insufficient and undignified speaking out about the Nazi horrors) have been addressed by a wide spectrum of divergent opinions. Compare, for example, George Steiner, esp. 100 and 123; Ezrahi, 11; or Bosmajian, who speaks of silence as a "refusal to become aware," 17.

44. "Auslöschen, vernichten, niedermachen, brandmarken, ausrotten. . . ."

45. The use of the words "Sicherheitsdienst" (Security Service) and "Sturmabteilung" (Storm troopers), mentioned in note 41 above, reinforces these conclusions from yet a different angle. The words are correct, but not frequently used; they diffuse the power and the horror inherent in the commonly used abbreviation "SD" for "Sicherheitsdienst des Reichsführers SS" (i.e. Himmler) and "SA" for "Sturmabteilung." Use of the uncommon words distances the mother from complicity with the Nazi organizations, but at the same time shows her knowledge of them and her desire to obliterate them.

46. The word is "Mackeser," a Siegerland expression for those who don't belong, wandering peddlers (H 59, 60-61, 65).

47. "Der Anfang einer jahrzehntelangen Furcht. . . ."

48. E.g. H 131, 152, 153-57, 256-58, 260-62.

49. "Sie waren gegeneinander angetreten, und jeder versuchte, den anderen zu sich zu ziehen, ihn einzunehmen, um ihm dadurch zu gehören."

50. In a related subplot, the son's initially suggested disinterest in women gives way to greater readiness to engage in a relationship.

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