

Text as Locus, Inscription as Identity: On Barbara Honigmann's *Roman von einem Kinde*

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If the GDR's *neue Heimat* is the *Heimat*, what becomes of the old one?¹ Written under the sign of "new subjectivity," Barbara Honigmann's *Roman von einem Kinde* (The Novel of a Child, 1986),² like her older compatriot Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* (1976; *Patterns of Childhood*, 1980),³ implies this question as it records a Janus-faced longing, acknowledges *Sehnsucht* but resists Goethe's serene modifier, *selig*.⁴ Both works, however dissimilar their narrative strategies, are concerned with the subjective dilemma of retrieving the unity suggested by the concept of *Heimat* in a country that officially denies other and earlier meanings of that sign. Wolf's *Trauerarbeit* (labor of mourning) insistently recognizes that the postwar repression of the communal and nationalistic spirit engendered by Nazism is tantamount to a denial of self. A generation later, Honigmann discovers no significance in GDR society; when she seeks her identity via the text of Judaism, her alienation from that society is complete.

Located at a temporal divide most clearly denoted by her dual existence as mother and child, but poignantly implied as well by the historical particulars of her time and place, each author denies the transformative metaphor of Goethe's lines through an inscriptive act of re-collection. His positive symbol of metamorphosis—the moth destroyed by and reborn through the irresistible flame—cannot be sustained in the aftermath of fire-bombings and Auschwitz. Wolf's references to Pablo Neruda's *Buch der Fragen* (1974) undermine, in the pretext of her narrative, any notions of a *Nullpunkt* (point zero, i.e., Germany in 1945) or *der neue Mensch* (the "new man" of socialist Germany); the subtext of Honigmann's narrative resonates with the verses of her predecessor, Nelly Sachs. Goethe's moth is countered by these poets' butterflies, creatures that carry the cumulative weight of existence on their wings.

Both Wolf and Honigmann strive in their writing to decipher and reinscribe that burden. Although the agony of Wolf's *Trauerarbeit* is undeniable, the schizophrenic split between the "once was" and the "now" (encoded by the narrative voice as "she" and "you") irreparable even at the end of her work, there exist for her narrator nonetheless tangible points of reference, signs whose meaning may require reinterpretation, but which continue to signify: her language has an "undertone" ("Hintersinn"), even if it is "ghastly" ("schauerlich") (PC 48). Honigmann, in contrast, is cast onto a barren and illegible landscape; her search for *Heimat* cannot remain within the realm of personally lived experience, but must eventually locate itself with reference to the only text that permits identification in the diaspora—the Thora. While both works enact a backward grasp for the sake of the future, the historical frame of reference in each is remarkably different. Wolf's childhood is her own; Honigmann's is that of her destroyed people. In the following, I refer to Wolf by way of contrast in order to highlight the manner in which Honigmann inscribes the gradual recognition that her illegible environment does not serve her. She must acquire new language in order to reconstruct a significant past and gain access to a future.

I

"When does the butterfly in flight / read what's written on its wings?" (PC n.p.).⁵ This line from the Neruda poem with which Wolf prefaces her novel raises manifold questions: how did text come to be written on the butterfly's wings during flight? And what direction does this flight take? Is the text inscribed on the wings coincident with the essence of the butterfly, needing only a pause of cognition to be heeded as such by the text's carrier? Does the accumulation of text weigh down the wings and impede the butterfly's flight? Does the deciphered transmission of that text from wing to another medium—paper, for instance—remove that burden or impress it more deeply, does it realize the essence of butterfly more fully, or imprison it in reduction? When, how, and to what end, does the butterfly read its text?

Immediately striking in the juxtaposition of these two works by Honigmann and Wolf are the echoes in the titles. In narrative gestures that signal simultaneous allusions to the Old Testament and Lacanian theories, both authors equate *Heimat* with a condition of once-felt security, with a prelinguistic stage of ignorant innocence that

predates the perceived separation of the self into subject and object and the concomitant acquisition of guilt. The similar thrust of these titles suggests a remembering of things past and refers us to childhood, in the process deleting from their discourse the comfortable oxymoron of that adjective, *neu* (new). In these two cases we might assume butterflies at work, pausing in flight to read and reinscribe their texts. But the polyvalence of the inscriptive act denies a unidirectional perspective here.

"Journeys come in pairs" (PC 48), writes Christa Wolf; and, in other places: "The tourist business to hometowns was booming" (PC 4);⁶ "The tourist trade to half-buried childhoods is also booming" (PC 7).⁷ Wolf's journey "into the tertiary"—"man is still absent" (PC 151)⁸—of 1971 is repeated in 1981 by Gershom Scholem: ". . . he had," reports the narrator in Honigmann's piece, "Doppeltes Grab" (Dual Grave), "once again undertaken the journey of his life, once again travelled round trip: Berlin-Jerusalem . . ." (RK 96).

Honigmann's *Roman von einem Kinde* is actually a collection of six short stories, of which this central one most effectively conveys the problematic I want to pursue here. It describes the narrator's meeting with Scholem during his last trip to Germany, their journey together to the Scholem family grave in the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Weißensee, and the conversations that, it is implied, will precipitate the narrator's own departure from Berlin, "into the Judaism of the Thora," some two years later. While the narrator's encounter with Scholem transforms him from "text" (*Schrift*) into "human being" (*Mensch*) on this occasion, this text of the "true reality" (*wahre Wirklichkeit*) is not sustainable: Scholem returns to Jerusalem, where he dies a few months after his visit to Berlin. On her return to the Scholem family grave, the narrator discovers his name inscribed on the tombstone: "Most people have only one grave. Gershom Scholem has two. One in Jerusalem and one in Berlin. And I imagine he lived in both cities all his life. That is why he has a dual grave" (RK 97).

These lines record the narrator's recognition of Scholem's dual citizenship, a citizenship to be recorded only on tombstones. This man has two tombstones: one, in Jerusalem, where he is buried, and this other, in Berlin, where he could not have remained, where his connection to the Jewish community, and simultaneously, to the German community, could (and can) only be documented textually: through his writings about why he became a Zionist, through his Cabalistic mysticism, and finally, through the logic that determines that he can

be named on, although not buried under, a tombstone in the Eastern sector of a city divided, a country divided because of the horrors committed in the name of the extermination of people like Gershom Scholem. Which should remind us of another evocation of butterflies. In one of her many hymns to her destroyed people, Nelly Sachs also retracts the positive power of Goethe's self-renewing creature. Her butterfly, not free to choose between resistance or submission to the flame's attraction, was "led through the flaming core of earth":

Butterfly
blessed night of all beings!
The weights of life and death
sink down with your wings
on the rose
which withers with the light ripening homewards.⁹

The caesuras described by night, life, death, and withering rose convey a finality and a rupture mitigated only by a faint ray of the "light ripening homewards." As we shall see, Honigmann also occupies this discontinuous terrain, this bleak territory of unconscious transitional moments.

II

The placement of the Scholem narrative at the center of a collection of far more personal vignettes points to the challenge of Honigmann's project as a writer. She suggests, without excessive complaint, that one source of her need to write *Roman von einem Kinde* is her ultimate lack of community; the project of being a Jew in East Berlin is finally overwhelming; she gives up her *Heimat* (and her language) in order to live in a *Heimat* (and probe the "Hintersinn" of the Thora and the *Cabala*) when she leaves the GDR for the FRG and, ultimately, for an orthodox Jewish community in Strasbourg.

Honigmann's volume appeared at Luchterhand Verlag in 1986. She had wanted to call it "Verzeichnete Selbstbildnisse und Landschaften" (sketches for self-portraits and landscapes).¹⁰ The title preferred by the publisher is taken from the first of the book's narratives. But how subtly the title change shifts the point of reference: away from self, into that ambiguously associative realm of *The Child*. The ambiguity begins at the primary level of the work itself, the "von"

marking the motif of the narrator's ambivalent threshold position (she writes here as a child about a child) that dominates the entire work. With the alteration of Honigmann's title, the publishers hint at a larger agenda: they rely on every (potential) reader's uncountable associations at the mention of *Kind(e)*, and on the intertextual echoes consciously or subconsciously audible to any educated (German) reader—from the Bible to Bettina (*Goethes Briefwechsel mit einem Kinde*), from Bloch (whose famous passage from *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*: “. . . something which appears to everyone during childhood and where no one has yet been: *Heimat*” is quoted by one of the reviewers), to Wolf (*Kindheitsmuster*).¹¹ Whether or not it is coincidental that the same season saw Suhrkamp's publication of *Bronsteins Kinder* (*Bronstein's Children*, by Jurek Becker) and Kiepenheuer and Witsch's of *Schuldig geboren: Kinder aus Nazifamilien* (*Born Guilty: Children of Nazi Families*, by Peter Sichrovsky) may be moot—although it would be profitable to consider these in another context.

The Honigmann publication associates a pregnant title with the image of the naked, pregnant woman that adorns the dust jacket: both promise delivery (deliverance?—the narrator speaks often of *Erlösung*); both are reproductions. The juxtaposition of title and portrait is compelling. Particularly the pregnant figure, undeniably Honigmann's own, demands our attention in several ways. As the self-perception of a self that harbors a not-self—or an as yet unarticulated (or inarticulate) extension of self—it refers at once to self and other. Honigmann will address (with far less eloquence than that governing this suggestive portrait) the symbiosis of mother and preverbal child in her title story, constructed as a letter to “Dear Josef,” her former lover and presumably the child's father, from whom she has become estranged.¹²

The position of the fecund figure of the portrait, supported against a barren tree trunk at the foreground of an empty landscape, re-isolates the woman with respect to self and that other she carries. The isolation of the figure, and the painting's lack of depth, both prefigure the volume's text—no *Roman*, but rather indeed a series of rather flatly sketched self-portraits that circle obsessively around an indefinite self that lacks contour and substance precisely because of its hermetic self-reference. In the title story, the narrator gazes into a mirror (*RK* 18); on the dust jacket, the author pictures herself; the narrative is void of dialogue, there is no direct intrusion of another voice.

The scant space between the self that writes and the self that is written, between the newborn infant and the narcissistic mother, leaves little room for the reader's participation. Such an exclusionary narrative tactic is revised, however, in the Scholem story, to which I shall return at the end.

This isolated and isolating self-referential stance is a bleak image: the narrator pressed against her mirror, the painter merging with her canvas, undercut the potential for self-reflection, for the self-partition so rigorously narrated by Wolf. Honigmann's self-confrontation and self-contemplation are not critically and discursively narrated; rather, they constitute the narrative itself. Non-self-conscious narration, then? In respect to this, Honigmann's presentation is deceptive; here is a narrative that is conscious of nothing *but* self because there is no point of reference beyond it, a narrator striving to articulate self in a world that provides no comparative or reactive means of achieving the distance from self that would enable critical reflection. One poignant instance of other-directed self-identification serves only to underscore this narrator's agony of isolation: because "I wanted to spare her or because looking at it together would have made us helpless," she hides from a friend the magazine photo ("a war photo") that depicts "a German soldier who was aiming his rifle at a woman. The woman had her child in her arms. . . . The soldier was shooting, and the woman was running" (RK 21). We may, recalling Christa Wolf and what we know about her active participation in the socialist project, question to what extent the three-fold marginalization of a woman like Honigmann explains the prison of invisible walls in which, with her monologic narrative, she encloses herself.

III

Barbara Honigmann is the daughter of atheistic Jewish communists who spent the Third Reich in exile in England and resettled in East Berlin after the War. Born there in 1949, Honigmann studied *Theaterwissenschaft* (theater arts) at the Humboldt-Universität, worked for three years in theater production (in Brandenburg and at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin), and became a free-lance artist and writer in 1975.

Honigmann's writing career began with plays, some revised as radio plays. *Der Schneider von Ulm*—Harald Wieser calls it "the Jewish woman's soft declaration of love for the Titan, A. Ludwig

Berblinger"—was named "radio play of the month" by the South German Radio Station. Themes and motifs of these plays/radio plays are drawn from fairy tales or historical lives.¹³ Honigmann's turn to prose with the *Roman von einem Kinde* suggests, by the very nature of this prose, a turn inward, away from the allegories of self sustained in third persons, toward the direct confrontation referred to above. Jürgen Wallmann comments that her plays are "hardly fit for the stage," and cites the author herself: "despite her love for the theater, she will probably refrain from writing plays in the future; the stage does not seem to be her element."

Whether prose is "her element" remains to be seen. We have, after all, only this slim volume on which to judge; and the author's biography as well as the volume's contents erect barriers to that judgment, so that any negative critical statements about this book—by a Jewish woman from the GDR—are easily taken as *ad feminam* attacks. The biographical details will not let us go; they are constituent elements of the narrative itself, aspects of the narrator's self-definition with which, in seeking to define (or to protect?) that self, she hinders fair access to her work. Honigmann bore her first child as a single woman, was subsequently married (1981) in "the third orthodox Jewish wedding in East Berlin since 1945," and, in 1984 (the year of her father's death), emigrated with husband and two children to Strasbourg, "the Jerusalem of the West." She records this move in the last of her stories, "Bonsoir, Madame Benhamou," in a sentence tellingly quoted in almost every review her *Roman von einem Kinde*: "I have landed here after a three-fold *salto mortale* without a net: from the East to the West, from Germany to France, and out of assimilation into the midst of Thora-Judaism" (RK 111).¹⁴

But: what do we mean by "fair access"? Do we, in fact, have the categories and/or critical discourse necessary to the reading of a work like this? Do we need (or want) them at all? Honigmann's texts span themselves between a series of all-too-available (and therefore empty) markers—words like *Kind*, *Auschwitz*, *Heimat*, etc.—and a set of terms so obscure that they need footnoted definitions in the text (and, in at least one case, a didactic explication in reviews).¹⁵ These latter terms belong to the world of orthodox Judaism, that world for which the narrator ultimately opts in her search for community and *Heimat*—a world, however, of exclusion and self-imposed otherness.

The first and last stories in the collection bracket the whole, which has been variously described as a "search for origin," for

Heimat and *Geborgenheit* (security), a process of “Jewish self-discovery,” a search for community.¹⁶ Some reviewers have regarded the text as a series of loosely-connected vignettes, others recognize a red thread that holds them more firmly together. In my view, the six stories represent a clear continuum, repeatedly ruptured by an insistent pattern metaphorically introduced in the first story by the narrator’s description of her child’s birth. The repetition of the birth motif (also to be understood as a motif of expulsion) redefines the ambiguity of the book’s title, for it causes a superimposition or merging of mother and child, suggested already by the narrator in lines like these: “. . . a twilight zone in which the boundary between my body and that of my child dissolved, and I often felt as though I were lying in the crib myself and I no longer knew whether I was the mother or the infant. . . . When my son got his first tooth, I once found myself standing open-mouthed in front of the mirror, searching in my mouth for his tooth” (RK 18). Indeed, the actual birth, which propels both Honigsmann’s move to writing and the narrator’s evident quest for community, embodies and animates the mother, not the child. This son is absent from the succeeding text (save for a brief reference in the final story): what we read are narratives of the repeated “birth” of the narrator into landscapes made hostile by the foreignness of their language.

Each configures the narrator’s desire: “I would like at least to be able to recognize the place of transition, the boundary at which conditions change. At the beginning, when one comes into the world—that is such a definitive transition, but then, after that, later one thing just flows into the next” (RK 13).¹⁷ This child, the narrator, whose leap from East Berlin to Strasbourg is merely a more drastic (because also politically charged) attempt to locate a language of community, repeatedly confronts the tension between the insufficient and confining language of her immediate surroundings (so debilitating that her existence within it is analogous to that of the preverbal infant), and the potential of new language to offer the redefinition of self (and the emergence into adulthood) she so desperately needs and seeks. Indeed, it may be as much her yearning to reenact or emulate the process of growing awareness and acquisition of language—to be “reborn”—as it is Gershom Scholem’s later influence that prompts her ultimate self-expulsion into a foreign place and a foreign language. We can perhaps read a melancholy desire for such “rebirth” in sentences such as the following: “It’s nice, the way you coexist for a

long time without speech and then, slowly, you discover together one word after another and learn to spell all of life" (*RK* 19).

Each of the several stories consequently narrates a "place of transition"; each attempts to delineate a "boundary at which conditions change." Of the six stories, four locate the action at a geographical remove from Berlin and document the recognition of alienation in various ways. Lack of communication, the essential gesture of the narrative itself, is encoded repeatedly by references to illegible (or meaningless) signs, to incomprehensible language. The third story, for instance, resonantly entitled "Wanderung," is counterpoised with the fourth, "Doppeltes Grab," to mark the volume's suggestive fulcrum.¹⁸ "Wanderung" narrates the events of one in a series of annual hikes: ". . . always in the same month, always in the same country, always with the same friends. . . long, very long conversations and discussions and arguments. Always arguing, always about the same things: about Hitler about Stalin about the Germans about the Russians about the Jews about the war about the East about the West and about our parents, especially about our parents" (*RK* 54–55). The intensity of the argument among these wandering friends is astonishing and revealing: "We discussed, argued, fought, and screamed at each other until it was no fun anymore, and sometimes we were so angry we threw our pocket-knives at each other" (*RK* 55). In search of legible signs, they encounter insignificance: "we examined the cave for signs and traces of the partisans. But the only thing we found engraved in stone was the information that Slavomir loves Hanka" (*RK* 64). Elsewhere, stone is equally "without traces": "They may once have been manor houses, for they were constructed out of stone, but now they were simply ridden with gaping holes, tall weeds and nettles grew into the rooms, inside was outside and outside was not there at all. We looked for a trace of the people who had lived there, but found nothing, nothing. We did not dare to ask anyone—what language would we use, anyway? There was a veritable Babel there, everyone spoke a different language, even an incomprehensible German dialect . . ." (*RK* 71–72).¹⁹

IV

While *Roman von einem Kinde* was received positively by the West German critical establishment as a step toward greater understanding, German Jewish critics were more equivocal in their admira-

tion, seeing Honigmann as a symptom of the way German society, east and west, continues to marginalize Jews, to reduce them to positions where the stories they have to tell sentimentalize places where they have never belonged, which have never belonged to them. In the works of Wolf and Honigmann, *Heimat* is ultimately sought in the narrative process, in terms of linguistic inscription, in the tenuous community of language.

Separated in age by the twenty historically most significant years of their century (Wolf was born in 1929, Honigmann in 1949), both authors are nonetheless engaged in projects whose matrices seem as similar as their realization is different. The supra-matrix, one of universal and timeless quality (the quest for self guided by *Sehnsucht*), contains a sub-matrix with more specific geographical and historical references. Wolf's longing for a time "when everything was undecided, the days before the beginning" (*PC* 108), for that palaeontological period in which "man is still absent," suggests a retrospective act of hopeful progression toward a reclamation of the word, *individuum* (which, as she notes in *Störfall*, means the same thing in Latin as *Atom* means in Greek: indivisible [*unspaltbar*] [35]). The admission of division acknowledges alienation (*Entfremdung*), the loneliness of which, according to Lukács, the novel is the transcendental form.²⁰ But—so asks the exiled Jew Jean Améry in describing his initial flight toward, then his emergence from, "*Waldesdunkel, Waldeinsamkeit*—the magic of the eternally single cipher, forest: . . . from whom was I actually alienated? . . . from the essence of the human being? What is that supposed to be? No one provides or has provided an answer" (16).²¹

"What is that supposed to be?" Whether we subscribe to Ernst Bloch's Marxist equation of childhood and *Heimat*, read *Heimat* theologically as a sign of paradisaical innocence and oneness with God or psychologically as self-knowledge and unity, we can suggest that the notion of *Heimat*, at least in the kinds of texts with which we deal here, has first and foremost to do with individual security, with identity defined by language (by the *Muttersprache*—mother tongue). The Romantic wanderer, who does not share Améry's skepticism, is able to posit a place (where he is not), the idea of which yet permits a dualistic play between the alienated being and potential community:

Where art thou, my beloved land?
 Sought, imagined, and never recognized!
 The land, the land so green with hope,
 The land in which my roses bloom,
 Where my friends amble to and fro,
 Where my deeds are resurrected,
 The land that speaks my language,
 O land, where art thou?²²

Nature, friends, ancestors, language form the protective community of reference for the self. But the place, "das Land," does not take place; or it takes place only in discourse, in the impression of form upon phenomena, in the transposition of text into book—in the creation of a "false place." The project of reading and inscribing the wilderness of text, means, then, the creation of a myth of total reading or inscription. The book constitutes itself as a totality that appeals to everything in us that desires a realm.²³

Accordingly, my title is self-contradictory. It suggests a permanence where there can be none, especially for those authors who write at the margin, or who displace the center of discourse by the use of the first person. Which is exactly where we encounter the problem of concern here: for we confront the discrepancy between the third person (by syntactic definition a part of a larger whole—a community) and the first, whose definition as entity is self-referential. Striking, especially in this context, which compares the alienation of Jew and of socialist in the GDR, is the anticipation of this problematic in the Mishnah, some 2000 years ago: "If I am not myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" This, incidentally, finds its echo in the refrain-like question of Wolf's *Quest for Christa T.*, posed by Christa T. and appropriated by her narrator: "When, if not now?" (passim).

The act of re-mem-bering that is the project of Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* involves primarily a reconstruction of self vis-à-vis self. In contrast, Honigmann bids farewell to Herr Altenkirch and "Bonsoir" to Madame Benhamou to signal her transition, her reenactment of the moment of birth (or of being cast out) in her "three-fold *salto mortale*." In both works, however, the authors are committed to a deciphering of text that struggles, in the process, against

taking shape as book. The rigidity of the book is highlighted by both authors in third-person narratives. Just as Wolf's narrator in *Christa T.* seeks her character (primarily in her writings) only to "lose her again"; or as the narrator in *Kindheitsmuster* can read the figure of her past only in the third person, so Honigmann's story about Scholem enacts the disparity of voices.

The striking ironies of this piece reiterate the narrator's problematic—the incessant and insistent theme of all six stories—regarding the inaccessibility of existing signs and codes, the barriers to self erected by a specific society's discourse. Scholem's Berlin visit is a tragicomedy of errors; under its surface lies a profound indictment of the German misapprehension of Judaism (which also determines the critical reception of Honigmann's work) and the continued non-communication between Germans and Jews. These are demonstrated in this story in a series of scenes about signs: first, there is Scholem's non-German wife, Fania, who (despite Scholem's warning: "Can't you see that the way is barred?" [RK 90]) refuses to be stopped by a sidewalk barrier at a construction site where there are neither workers nor visible danger: "I'm not going to be kept from going my way by a rope! Can't you see that there is nothing to be seen?" (RK 90). Fania simply removes the rope that blocks access and walks on, while Gershom Scholem, with his ready submission to the (here insignificant) message of the sign, unwittingly displays both his "German" adherence to the empty signifiers of authority and his scholar's devotion to text. Then there is the personnel in the leather shop, in which Scholem's "round trip: Berlin-Jerusalem" acquires material definition: here he seeks a suede briefcase "like the one he had always had earlier in Berlin. Such things aren't available in Jerusalem, and he had loved that briefcase so much back then and always wanted another one, but had never gotten it. Now he wanted to buy one in Berlin" (RK 91). But the path into half-buried childhood is barred (unlike the path to the cemetery): "Scholem and Fania, his wife, entered the shop through the wrong door and were sent back out so that they could come in again, this time through the right door, on which 'Entrance' was written. Then they neglected to pick up a shopping basket in this self-service establishment and were reproached once more. . . . Fania was infuriated by the unfriendliness and the constant reprimands, but Scholem begged her to contain herself" (RK 91). A bitterer irony of historical reversal and displacement is contained in the symbol (with its "ghastly undertone") of the

black Mercedes, complete with chauffeur, that is provided by the *Ständige Vertretung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in der DDR* (Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Germany in the GDR) for the Scholems' convenience and waits for them at the gate of Weißensee cemetery.

But most of all, there is Scholem himself—the man incarnated in text, who is “reborn” here, transformed for the narrator from third to first person, from inscribed entity to indecipherable individual:

He was 84 years old when he died. But for me he had just come into the world. For years and years, Gershom Scholem had been merely text [*Schrift*]. The text of his name on books and above newspaper articles, text in connection with asterisks in a book, in a note found at the back of the volume. Or sometimes, when he was mentioned by one person or another, the sound of his name, this unusual name.

This name had now appeared as a human being, as true reality, speaking loudly and with a Berlin dialect, an ungainly *Lulatsch* with big ears, the very incarnation of mysticism [*die ganze Mystik*] in our rocking chair. (RK 96)

The narrator's shap-shot perspective of this “ungainly *Lulatsch* with big ears” suspends him in the ambivalence of his “true reality”; the fixed and identifiable entity of text (*Schrift*) is destabilized by the ambiguous human being that hovers in the inarticulated space of unmarked boundary crossings. The brief but resonant reference to Walter Benjamin, for instance, causes that complex figure to loom metaphorically as the liminal and uncrossable boundary-line for Scholem. But it remains significantly ambiguous whether Benjamin serves as Scholem's own “angel of history” or as his “little hunchback”—or, perhaps, as the conflated figure implied by Benjamin when he writes: “anyone whom the little man looks at pays no attention, not to himself, not to the little man. In consternation he stands before a pile of debris.”²⁴ Any “place of transition” remains similarly blurred. Scholem's “true reality” destroys the limiting contours erected by his text, obliterates the borders between Berlin and Jerusalem, deposits him in a place that is neither, in a sphere of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) that is haunted by the little hunchback of German folk verse.

Telling, finally, is the discussion of the library of Berlin's Jewish

community and the fate it shared with its readers: "It was there that he borrowed the first books of Jewish knowledge, said Scholem, and we said: so did we. And that was actually the beginning of everything, and we said: it was the same for us" (RK 93). The book as catalyst, as the beginning of everything: what is this "alles"? It is a leap across borders (quite literally), from non-signifying book to the wilderness of text, from fixed *Schrift* to the "true reality," to "this foreign language with these foreign people" (RK 114).

V

As Wolf and Honigmann abundantly demonstrate, the rigidity of the *neue Heimat* produces an *Entfremdung* (alienation) that compels *Entfernung* (distantiation). Both narrators remove themselves from the GDR—Wolf to Poland, Honigmann to orthodox Judaism and the Thora in France—where they seek to read the text on their wings in this foreign language, among these foreign people.

The *Hintersinn* of the word *Heimat* evokes a tradition-bound conceptualization too strongly to permit the adjective, *neu*, to prevail without a radical discrediting of the personal and social past and a concomitant obliteration of the first term of the metaphor on which the imaginary (fictional) projection of *Heimat* depends. The dilemma is central to the life of Christa T., who wants to remake herself anew, to take nothing with her when she moves from apartment to newly-built house, but who is haunted by images from the past that cannot be left behind as easily as furniture and curtains. The security sought by Christa T. in the construction of a new house or in writing (*dichten* = *dichtmachen*) is imperfect, *winddurchpiffen*, full of empty spaces because, as a metaphorical construct, it refuses to acknowledge its referent, namely the site of a formerly known security.

What we read here are testimonies to alienation and homelessness. But both terms obviously beg questions concerning their referents: from what entity is one alienated, from what home has one been driven? This is where the conceptual metaphor of *Heimat* breaks down and forces text to become place, the locus for the inscription of a self that simultaneously denies that self reality. Only the reluctance to suggest discursive unity, only the presence of silence, of empty spaces in the text, preserves it from being entirely dishonest. These empty spaces are physically suggested by borders spatial and temporal that are occupied by the respective narrators. Although they move across

them in time and space, their narrative vantage point seems always to be located there, where they are dwellers in no time, occupiers of no place.

NOTES

My thanks to Susan Winnett for bringing Barbara Honigmann to my attention and helping to raise some of the questions discussed in this paper.

1. The term *Heimat*, generally rendered as homeland or home, nonetheless remains in the category of “untranslatable” German words whose meaning is embedded in and encoded by the historical traditions of its usage. In most recent memory, it belonged to those words appropriated to further the imperialistic and nationalistic goals of German fascism; thus debased, it has just now begun to make a hesitant reentry into common usage, most notably signalled by Edgar Reitz’s television film, *Heimat*, the chronicle of a rural German family/community during the first half of this century, which was released in West Germany in 1984 to enormous popular acclaim. Reitz himself saw this project as a response to the American appropriation of German history in the *Holocaust* television series—as an attempt, in fact, to reclaim that history for Germany. Regarding this film, see especially *New German Critique*’s special issue on *Heimat*, and Anton Kaes’s recently published *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film*. But the film is just one of many attempts in the past decade to revalidate the word. Thus, for instance, Horst Bienek hopes to rub some of the tarnish off this currency with a collection of scholarly pieces, and authors like Siegfried Lenz (and many others) confront the question of recuperating the *Heimat* head on (see his *Heimatmuseum* 1978). Because of its significant polyvalence, and for other reasons that will become clear in the course of the argument, I shall retain the German word throughout this discussion.

2. Henceforth cited in text as *RK*. All translations are mine.

3. Citations refer to translation, henceforth abbreviated in text as *PC*.

4. The reference is to Goethe’s familiar poem, “Selige Sehnsucht” (Blessed Yearning), in which the lyric voice praises the superior existence of a life that longs for a death in flames. The functional metaphor of glorious death and subsequent rebirth on a higher plane is contained in the final two stanzas: “Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig, / Kommst geflogen und gebannt, / Und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig, / Bist du, Schmetterling, verbrannt. // Und so lang du das nicht hast, / Dieses: Stirb und werde! / Bist du nur ein trüber Gast / Auf der dunklen Erde” (2: 18–19).

5. “Wann liest der Falter, was auf seinen / Flügeln im Flug geschrieben steht?” Quoted by Wolf from Neruda’s *Buch der Fragen*, *KM* n.p. I am indebted to Cedomil Goic for his assistance in locating the original source of this citation.

6. "Der Tourismus in alte Heimaten blühte" (KM 9).
7. "Auch der Tourismus in halbversunkene Kindheiten blüht . . ." (KM 13).
8. "Der Mensch ist noch abwesend" (KM 143).
9. "Schmetterling / aller Wesen gute Nacht! / Die Gewichte vom Leben und Tod / senken sich mit deinen Flügeln / auf die Rose nieder / die mit dem heimwärts reifenden Licht welkt." Michael Hamburger's trans. of middle stanza of "Butterfly" ("Schmetterling").
10. The verbal adjective *verzeichnete* harbors a powerful ambiguity that indeed characterizes the limitations of text that are our main consideration in this paper. In its first definition in *Cassell's German Dictionary*, *verzeichnen* means "write or note down, book, enter, record, register, mark, specify, make a list of, take an inventory of; draw badly"; in the second definition, however, the prefix *ver-* dominates: its addition to a verb often suggests that the action of the verb is erroneously (not just "badly") performed, thus the second definition reads "make a mistake in drawing." Honigmann's preferred title admits her recognition of this "mistake"—not *in* drawing, but *of* drawing, that is, of attempting to fix legible meaning in text.
11. ". . . etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat" (3: 1628). My translation.
12. The name Josef for the absent father is certainly suggestive, as is Johannes for the son. Although it cannot be pursued here, the confusion of Christian and Jewish allusions in this book is intriguing: the Christian references, whose usage appears almost inadvertent, seem to belong to the unmediated realm of appropriated cultural codes (even in the GDR), while the Jewish ones encode the narrator's very personal process of self-redefinition, signalling the acquisition of her own Jewish consciousness. The two modes of discourse are not consciously juxtaposed or opposed by the narrator; indeed, the pervasive discourse of Christian thought and symbolism provides a point of orientation for the reader who may well be excluded by the increasingly frequent references to the mysterious world of Chasidism. Thus there appear, on the one hand, sentences such as this: "Sometimes I have this daydream: that a path comes to me and says: come, just follow me, I shall lead thee" (RK 31), which is surely reminiscent of the words of Christ. The narrator speaks of redemption and later explains that she rejects assimilation in favor of "das Thora-Judentum" "because of the resurrection of the dead" (RK 111). In a juxtaposition that will (and has) alienate(d) some readers, on the other hand, we are confronted in the story "Marina Roža" with a description of the ritual observance of the sabbath in a ramshackle wooden synagogue on the outskirts of Moscow; five footnotes are needed in the first five pages to explain the language of this synagogue/"robbers' den" ("When Peter walked into the MARINA ROŽA, he had the feeling of having walked into a robbers' den" [RK 101].) We read the following definitions in the footnotes: "Rebjata. russ.: eigentl. Kinder, hier: Kumpel" (actually

children, here: buddy); "Gemore. Teil des Talmud, in Aramäisch geschrieben" (a part of the Talmud written in Aramaic); "Moschiach. hebr.: Messias" (hebr.: Messiah); "Mikwe. von den Chassidim oft benutztes rituelles Tauchbad" (a ritual bath often used by the Chasidim); "Minjan. Gruppe von mindestens zehn Männern für Gebet und Thoraesung" (a group of at least ten men for prayer and the reading of the Thora) (*RK* 101–105).

13. Others are: *Die Schöpfung* (a sequel to *Der Schneider*), *Das singende, springende Löweneckerchen*, and *Don Juan*.

14. "Hier bin ich gelandet vom dreifachen Todessprung ohne Netz: vom Osten in den Westen, von Deutschland nach Frankreich und aus der Assimilation mitten in das Thora-Judentum hinein."

15. See Marcel Reich-Ranicki. This reviewer's polemical illumination (for his supposedly uninitiated readers) of the (for him) suspicious mysticism of the Chasidim deserves a full-fledged analysis of its own. His arrogant and didactic bridge-building gesture (from the inside outsider—his "assimilation," by way of becoming "*der Literaturpapsi*" [the pope of literary criticism], into the scene of the contemporary West German culture industry is evidently complete, but his Jewish heritage invests him with the right to function as "interpreter" for the ignorant) says, of course, much more about its author than about the subject(s) of discussion promised in his title. Some of the responses to Reich-Ranicki's review contain, in their implicit recognition of his evident self-hatred, the germ of a discussion that has yet to take place before the German public of the postwar era.

16. See, for instance, Alice Villon-Lechner, Klara Obermüller, Norbert Schachtsiek-Freitag, Heide Soltau, Agnes Hüfner, and Yizhak Ahren (especially in response to Reich-Ranicki and Schachtsiek-Freitag).

17. "Ich möchte wenigstens die Stelle des Übergangs, die Grenze, an der die Zustände wechseln, erkennen können. Zuerst, wenn man auf die Welt kommt, da ist es so ein deutlicher Übergang, aber dann, nachher, später fließt immer eins in das andere."

18. *Wanderung* echoes, of course, the notion of the wandering Jew while it denotes a vacation past-time that for many is quintessentially German and inexorably bound not only to the eternally restless legendary Ahasuerus but to German Romanticism as well as its neo-romantic and proto-Germanic forms (the *Wandervogel* groups of the early twentieth century, for instance).

19. The pointed reference to Babel serves as the symbolic culmination of the narrator's increasingly hopeless search for an essential language of communication that permits co-responsence, as opposed to that which creates barriers. The hapless companions of her "*Wanderung*," who subsequently exchange partners as indiscriminately as they exchange words, cannot provide the *Ursprache*, the pre-Babel unity she seeks. The narrator's move to orthodox Judaism is motivated here; the Scholem story that follows functions in part as an exposition of this motivation.

20. "... die Form des Romans ist, wie keine andere, ein Ausdruck der transzendentalen Obdachlosigkeit" (35).
21. "Waldesdunkel, Waldeinsamkeit—Magie der ewig einen Chiffre Wald": "wem war ich eigentlich entfremdet? ... dem Eigentlichen des Menschen? Was soll das sein? Man bleibt und blieb die Antwort schuldig."
22. "Wo bist du, mein geliebtes Land? / Gesucht, geahnt, und nie gekannt! / Das Land, das Land so hoffnungsgrün, / Das Land, wo meine Rosen blühen, / Wo meine Freunde wandelnd gehen, / Wo meine Toten auferstehen, / Das Land, das meine Sprache spricht, / O Land, wo bist du?" Georg Philipp Schmidt von Lübeck, "Der Wanderer." I am indebted to Ute Brandes for bringing this poem to my attention.
23. Here I acknowledge the influence of Jacques Derrida as filtered through Frank Kermode's interpretation in a lecture given at the University of Michigan in 1987.
24. Qtd. by Arendt in her edition of Benjamin, 6–7.

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