

Margrit Frölich
Universität Leipzig

Thomas Brussig's Satire of Contemporary History

Laughter is an affliction arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing.
Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*

Had its aftereffects not been so serious for many of the individuals directly affected by it, the suddenness of the GDR's unexpected demise would have been a case for laughter in the Kantian sense. The turbulent events surrounding the opening of the Berlin frontier on the eve of November 9, 1989 seem like a fantastic joke. This is the case if we consider the two successive phases of the event: the regime's fierceness and merciless attempts at suppressing its citizens' protests in the preceding weeks and months, which kept alive the fear of a violent clash, and the astonishing dénouement of cheering East Berliners crossing the borders to West Berlin and dancing together with West Berliners on the wall in view of its crumbling the very same night as Günter Schabowski's confusing announcement.¹ Culminating in an even more hilariously fantastic account of these eventful November days leading to the fall of the Berlin wall, Thomas Brussig's novel *Helden wie wir* [*Heroes Like Us*]² represents a pungent and disrespectful satire of East German everyday life during the final two decades before its collapse.

Upon its appearance in September 1995, Brussig's provocative historical narrative earned the unanimous applause of the media, including the praise of such established figures of German cultural life as Günter Grass and Wolf Biermann, which instantaneously made the hitherto unknown young author famous.³ Subsequently, Brussig's mocking depiction of an East German youth's upbringing in a stalwart philistine family quickly became a cult novel especially for young readers. In the meantime, the novel has been adapted for the stage and was performed in Berlin and Leipzig. In addition, Edgar Reitz is presently completing a film version for which Brussig himself, who studied dramaturgy at the film academy in Potsdam-Babelsberg, wrote the screenplay.⁴ The recent publication of an English translation both in the United States and in Britain is an additional step contributing to the enhancement of the author's popularity on an international scale.

Thomas Brussig belongs to a younger generation of East Germans who came of age during the final years of the GDR's existence. Born in 1965 in East Berlin, he is part of the last generation of writers for whom the GDR still represents an important reference point.⁵ Confronted only with an agonizing socialism that had lost its credibility, this age-group of East Germans neither shared the conflict-ridden identification of previous generations with the antifascist

state and the idea of a socialist utopia, nor did it invest its stagnation and decline with a similar resignation and disillusionment.⁶ Although over-represented among the protesters who took to the streets in the fall of 1989, this younger generation did not have much of a public voice in conceptualizing a potential future transformation of the East German state while it still existed. Also, it has remained largely absent in retrospective assessments of the defunct state.

Brussig's impudent novel of a young East German from an apparatchik family, born into the consolidated socialist state of the Ulbricht era and coming of age just as the once "really-existing socialism" is gradually eroding, stands out among the recent works of fiction about the GDR and its demise. No doubt, Brussig's writing is a far cry from the familiar traditions of East German literature, be it the model of socialist realism, or Christa Wolf's poetics of "subjective authenticity," or the critical depictions of East German everyday reality by authors like Christoph Hein, or the 1970s "jeans-prose" of Ulrich Plenzdorf's landmark popular novel about socialist working-class youth, *Die neuen Leiden des Jungen W.* (*The New Sufferings of Young W.*), or even the post-structuralist language experiments of the Prenzlauer Berg circle. Instead, his writing shows the influence of popular authors from outside the East German tradition, such as J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth, Charles Bukowski, and John Irving. Their saucy narrative styles abounding in comedy, irony, and sexual exuberance irrevocably dissolve the split between highbrow and lowbrow literature. *Helden wie wir* is a unique blend of foolish hyperbole and sharp portrayals of scenes from East German life that clearly goes beyond the conciliatory attitude of humorist writing. In its depiction of a misguided East German youth struggling to make sense of the conflicting socio-cultural values of his environment, *Helden wie wir* reverberates with Brussig's earlier novel about an East Berlin high school student searching for orientation and identity, *Wasserfarben* [*Watercolors*], which originally was published under a pseudonym in 1991.⁸ But whereas the narrative perspective of this earlier novel recalls the confused sincerity of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, the biting satire of *Helden wie wir* treats its subject with increasingly more burlesque folly. It brings into view a purposely distorted vision of the experience of a younger generation of East Germans while provocatively undermining any reconciliatory view of the GDR.

Helden wie wir chronicles the last two decades of life in the GDR and the eventful political upheaval in the fall of 1989 from the vantage point of a party-line Stasi junior. In other words, it unrestrictedly subjects the reader to a certain pathology inherent in the narrative perspective that lacks any corrective counterpart. Instead, the protagonist's eccentric self-representation builds the novel's exclusive narrative frame. A strung-up, obscene, and at points naive torrent of words interspersed with a few critical insights as it progresses, his quasi-autobiographical monologue simulates an oral history. Each of the novel's seven chapters pretends to represent a tape recording containing the confessional narration of his life story. Writing in the form of a self-indulgent eyewitness report given to a *New York Times* journalist named Mr. Kitzelstein, the protagonist prides himself on being the missing link to explain the fall of the wall. Kitzelstein, the silent listener he occasionally addresses, may or may not be just a figment of the narrator's overexcited imagination. His name, at any rate, adds to the overall impression that we are listening to a roguish monologue that is meant to produce laughter rather than serious retrospection.

In his classical psycho-genetic theory of laughter and the comical, Sigmund Freud points out that the attention paid to a person's bodily functions and his expenditure of energy on them is a central ingredient of the comic: "a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones (...)."⁹ Similarly, Henri Bergson's seminal philosophy of laughter, which defines the causes of laughter in relation to the mechanization of life resulting from a decline in its liveliness, points to the physical nature of the human being as the key source for comedy.¹⁰ According to Bergson, comic effect is created through the impression of a stiff mechanism, for instance through compulsive postures, gestures, and movements of the human body that resemble an automization. In *Helden wie wir*, these two concepts of the comic, namely, Freud's emphasis on an unusually high expenditure of energy on bodily functions and Bergson's stress on the mechanical compulsiveness of a person being plagued by physical impulses, resurface in the phallic obsessions of Brussig's protagonist.

What will bring us yet another step closer to an understanding of the production of the comic in Brussig's novel is the tradition of grotesque-comic laughter embodied by François Rabelais. As Mikhail Bakhtin has shown, the grotesque-comic in Rabelais emerges from a medieval tradition of subversive popular laughter, manifesting itself in the affirmation of unrestrained physicality and the release of repressed affects.¹¹ It certainly would be ahistorical to claim an unmediated analogy between Rabelais's medieval culture of carnevalesque laughter and Brussig's retrospect satire of the GDR. A link, however, may be established if we

consider that, after all, it was Bakhtin who decoded this dimension of Rabelais's work and that, for him, the subversive nature of the Rabelaisian carnevalesque culture of popular laughter served as an implicit criticism, as a heretical counter-concept to the non-carnevalesque despotism of the Stalinist era and its perpetuation through the earnestness of socialist discourse. We may detect precisely such anarchical rebellion against the restraining and asensual tendencies of East German culture and its discourses as the major impetus of Brussig's satirical writing.

The collective carnevalesque culture celebrating the nonrepressed sensuality of which Rabelais's work is a part offered an inversion of everyday reality, its norms and rituals, as well as its social and political hierarchies, through images of grotesque physicality and its exuberant functions. In psychoanalytic terminology, Rabelais's images of comically grotesque physicality (i.e., the images of the deformed body found in *Gargantua and Pantruguel*) show the result of the partial drives taking over in the imagination. Thus, they are the manifestation of a single unmitigated pleasure that prevails over the mechanisms controlling the unconscious.¹² We encounter examples of such grotesque Rabelaisian physicality in Brussig's *Helden wie wir* in the image of the exaggerated phallus (in Rabelais, the mouth, nose, or belly are additional exaggerated organs). Brussig links the comic to sexuality and obscenity:¹³ the protagonist's perpetual failure, his lack of self-confidence, manifests itself in his physical constitution, for the entire course of his life is determined by his devastating impotence that only at the end of the narrative, as we will see, becomes its grotesquely exaggerated opposite—namely, an omnipotent virility capable of toppling the Berlin wall itself.

From its very opening, *Helden wie wir* establishes itself in the comic narrative tradition. In picaresque style reminiscent of Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus* and Günter Grass's *Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*), Brussig establishes a link between the individual life story and the larger political history in a typical comic manner when he describes the birth of his protagonist on August 20, 1968. While his pregnant mother had been vacationing in a small village in the Erz Mountains, her fetal son, the soon-to-be protagonist, panicked when troops and tanks were passing by the village in the direction of Prague to crush the democratic uprising. As a result, he ruptured the amniotic sac to enter what he calls "a political world." His pedantic and notoriously ill-humored father would later add his dry comment on the risky nature of the son's sudden birth on a living room table by emphasizing that it took place "in the absence of any trained staff" ("in Abwesenheit geschulten Personals") (20). The discrepancy between the father's use of formal, bureaucratic language with its attention to terminological precision and the actual disordered event he seeks to describe introduces, as we will see, a recurrent laughter-inducing pattern.

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Klaus Uhltscht, whose difficult-to-pronounce name is one among many sources of his embarrassment, seems doomed to perpetual comic failure. This is due to a number of factors: the simple-minded naiveté that prevents him from grasping anything of significance; his misguided attempts at making sense of a confusing world; and his futile efforts at proving his personal abilities to his constantly interfering parents. That is to say, part of the humor results from his naive bouts of confusion, a type of comedy that Freud locates in close proximity to the joke¹⁴ (for instance, when the young Stasi student officer misunderstands the term "microfiche," thinking that it designates some type of microorganism). Comic effect is also generated through descriptions of the young boy's exaggerated anxieties, most of which are induced by his parents' concerns for him. It often results from the discrepancy between the innocent perception of the young boy or the naive confusions of the teenager, which the first-person narrative brings in close proximity, and the laconic, sober, conceptional, at points pretentious language the adult narrator draws upon to describe simple matters. The use of this language lends a rational quality to the boy's experiences that they lack in actuality.

One among the countless examples of this kind with which the novel bristles, where the comic effect is similarly embedded in the phrasing the narrator uses, is the description of the pubescent boy's bashful efforts to purchase a copy of Dr. Siegfried Schnabl's classic East German sex handbook, *Man and Wife Intimately*—one of the numerous trivial details from East German everyday culture that the book takes up—in order to gain clarity about female physiognomy. In describing his exaggerated two-week preparation for the actual purchase, during which he "examines plastic bags with regard to their opacity" ("indem ich Plastiktüten auf ihre Undurchsichtigkeit hin begutachtete") (77) before he eventually buys the book at a distant bookstore so as not to be recognized by acquaintances, he justifies his efforts by referring to the book as an "embarrassing publication" ("ein verfängliches Druckerzeugnis") (76).

Accumulating all conceivable inhibitions to characterize his protagonist and equipping him with what may appear as an assembly of Freudian clichés, Brussig alternates between satirical depictions of typical male pubescent anxieties and the hyperbolic portrayal of a psychopath. The well-bred only son of a mother who works as a hygiene inspector and a father who conceals his high-ranking function as a State Security officer (Stasi) by claiming to occupy a position in foreign trade, Brussig's protagonist narrates his upbringing in a righteous, dutiful, and conformist East Berlin family and his grotesque transformation into what he himself refers to as the GDR's "worst zombie" ("übelster Zombie") (106). The oscillation between his inner voice of self-abasement and his megalomaniacal fantasies of omnipotence creates the

hilarious foolishness in the novel. An anti-hero, as he grows up he is at pains to cope with the typical anxieties of pubescent male sexuality. Yet his virile obsessions and lasciviousness gradually grow out of proportion. Wavering between fantasies of omnipotence and a pervasive sense of inferiority, Brussig's antihero personifies the eventual disintegration of East German society, the moral corrosion and loss of meaning of a society held together by pressures, taboos, and empty rituals. Similar to Oskar Matzerath, the midget protagonist from Grass's *Blechtrommel* who refuses to grow as the Nazis gain power, Klaus Uhltscht is both an outsider to the social order as well as its immediate product. "A child from their midst" ("ein Kind aus ihrer Mitte") (105, 282), he embodies the travesty of East German socialist society.

The novel's delineation of how normalcy and conformity with the system nevertheless produce morally abject monstrosities is a key in understanding its inherent provocation. Brussig puts his finger into an open wound by hinting at the failures of the GDR's founder generation whose sacrifices and tireless efforts were, in spite of their best intentions, unable to prevent East German society from subverting its own integrity and eventually falling apart.¹⁵ While he does not claim to provide a serious analysis of the GDR's decline, Brussig's depiction of a philistine family idyll gradually going awry offers a detailed satirical depiction of the psychopathology of the East German family that adds up to a harsh semiserious diagnosis of East German society.

Perhaps the most refreshing comic feature of *Helden wie wir* is its detailed, satirically distorted account of the sterile and stifling climate of East German family life during the 1960s and 70s. Momentarily liberating the reader from its oppressiveness, Brussig's satire pokes fun at features of family life that go beyond the borders of East German society, making the book enjoyable for an international audience. Tapping into a nearly universal condition of middle-class families of the period, *Helden wie wir* describes the protagonist's farcical tale of woe in a prohibitive atmosphere, where both parents relentlessly force their will onto their son whom they infantilize as a result, an environment where orderliness and cleanliness are dominating values. Klaus grows up overprotected—he is not even sent to kindergarten—and unfamiliar with the harsh street manners of the children he encounters in school later on. Always urged by his domineering mother, who is fervently engaged in the proper upbringing of her son, to speak in full sentences, he does not understand the local school jargon and is therefore shunned as an arrogant idiot. By relieving him of the burden of independent thinking, the parents, in spite of the mother's best intentions, raise a son who makes a perfect subaltern prototype. Because his parents withhold everything from him, Klaus, in contrast to his seemingly all-knowing and experienced peers, shows an

unparalleled naiveté and ignorance that becomes a persisting character trait throughout his childhood and youth. A spoiled only child, he for instance refuses to let other children play with his frisbee, and prefers to run back and forth in order to catch and throw his Frisbee himself instead of letting any other child participate in the game. At home, he receives approval for his asocial behavior from his parents whose suspicious minds, as usual, let them fear potential mischief, might the frisbee be stolen by one of the other kids. As is to be expected, the first separation from his mother, when he is sent to summer camp for the first time, causes him to suffer tremendously in contrast to the other children, to whom the narrator refers as “uprooted kindergarten kids” (“entwurzelte Kindergartenkinder”) (52). At the summer camp, he encounters for the first time boys whose early maturity, coarse rituals, and outspokenness about sexual matters fill him with confused bewilderment and helplessness. It is the annual experience at the summer camp that initiates him to matters of sexuality, a rite that later recurs in the training camp for young Stasi officers, and that will pave the way for his virile obsessions and his eventual sexual debauchery.

A main feature of the novel is the connections it establishes between the political, the familial, and the sexual. Sexuality becomes a primary locus of human behavior, from which one can delineate familial dynamics. As the narrative progresses, the nexus between family dynamics and sexuality increasingly comes to establish the motives for the protagonist's actions and their political implications within the wider social sphere and the means by which he expresses them. In portraying the stale air of the repressed family climate, Brussig locates the origin of his protagonist's virile and phallic neurosis in the family structure that itself reproduces the taboos of society at large. His satire of a righteous yet disciplinarian East German family and its stifling sterility is shown in the collision of Klaus's physical and libidinal urges with the obligation to conform that his upbringing demands of him. The constant humiliation and patronization to which he is subjected from an early age shapes the worldview of the protagonist. The overbearing mother with her overprotective and at the same time demanding attitude and militant supervision of her son's hygiene is a major cause not only of his extreme obsessive-compulsive behavior, but also of his strong sense of inferiority. Nothing, it seems, escapes her scrutinizing and critical eye. Her disinfection mania overlaps with her sexual repression; hence, she teaches her young son that he must not touch his penis except while urinating. Concerned about the small size of his masculine organ, he remains haunted by repressed sexual impulses. Later in his life as a young adult, they reappear as omnipresent sexual obsessions he can no longer control. The mother's tutelage and her ceaseless attempts at controlling every move of her son, especially her repeated insensitive interference with the intimate details of

his awakening sexuality, lead him to take ever more abstruse and eccentric precautions against being discovered and embarrassed by her.

A particularly comic episode involves Klaus's efforts to keep his masturbation a secret from his mother. It illustrates one of Brussig's strategies for evoking laughter: Klaus's fear of being discovered and his desperate attempts to spare himself the reprimands of his relentless mother (even though nothing escapes her notice) bring on a chain of subsequent entanglements with unforeseen consequences that blow up the issue immeasurably and transform the normal anxieties of a pubescent young man into grotesque and ludicrously tense behavior.

In order to prevent his mother from discovering his autoerotic activities, Klaus sleeps with a scouring cloth in his pajama pants so that no stains in the sheets will betray him and provoke his mother to scold him. To distract her attention from the actual use of the cloth, he uses it during daytime as a cover for a bicycle rim that he has procured and positioned next to his bed exclusively for this very purpose. As is to be expected, the arrangement triggers the mother's irritation. However, it is not, as Klaus anxiously assumes, the prohibited masturbation that causes her agitation. Instead, the bicycle rim itself triggers her disapproval. Since she cannot think of any other purpose for it than to be used for the construction of a bicycle, she inexorably demands that her son get rid of the rim. She suspects that he secretly plans to build a bicycle, which, however, she intends to prevent at all costs because riding a bike could cause her son to have an accident. Powerless to resist his mother's demands, the obsequious son subsequently has to think of an alternate measure to keep his masturbation undiscovered. Thus he buys a total of four sets of white sheets with an irregular brown pattern apt to conceal the traces of his ejaculation—a purchase that costs the sixteen-year-old a fortune. To legitimize this new acquisition to his curious mother, however, he claims that he won the sheets in a competition in which the would-be future Nobel Prize winner regularly participates. What he did not reckon with when he made up this excuse, however, is that it would provoke his father's suspicion. At a time when, due to insufficient supply, there was a high demand for sheets, to award them as a prize would, according to the father's reasoning, be an unmistakable signal drawing attention to the most recent failure of the socialist economic plan. Klaus fears that his father will call the newspaper because he suspects a subversive act against the state. Confronted with the imminent threat of his father discovering his lie, he eventually admits that he bought the sheets himself. Although his confession still meets with the parents' bewilderment as to his motivations, the issue ultimately comes to nothing.

Using one of his many comic techniques, Brussig portrays the diametrically opposed personalities of Klaus's

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mother and father that, notwithstanding their differences, have an equally strong and lasting effect on the infantilized and repressed son who is slowly and painfully developing a "well-adjusted" personality. Contrasting the way the two parents open a door, one sees the division between the mother and the father in all clarity. The mother's friendly politeness is reflected in the way she first gently presses down the door handle, opens the door a crack and sticks her face through it as if she were looking at a table of Christmas gifts before entering the room with a smile on her face. By contrast, the father's rudeness in opening the door is tellingly captured when his behavior is compared with that of someone intending to rescue hostages (28-29).

The boy adores his mother, who combines strict prohibitive discipline with motherly tutelage and devotion; despite her attention, however, the boy fears she will withdraw her love from him. By contrast, he both fears and admires his pedantic, grumpy father whose mediocrity and narrow-minded prejudices Brussig ludicrously describes. The father's demoralizing behavior toward his son, to whom he never says any more than necessary, substantially contributes to Klaus's general lack of self-esteem. The daily reunions at the dinner table, a supposedly well-intended family institution with the democratic aim of facilitating communication among family members, that is, as a "forum for the *occurrences of the day*" (*Forum für die Begebenheiten des Tages*) (33), remind the boy of the American court trials he evidently watches on West German television. Regardless of what the issue is, they always follow the same pattern. According to this pattern, Klaus is the guilty defendant who has to endure the interrogation led by his parents that, in the best of all circumstances, ends with his acquittal due to the mother's convincing defense of his cause. Overall average in his performance (except for math, where he excels because the effort at concentration allows him to combat his unwanted erections), Klaus is driven by a yearning for public recognition and heroism and thus fantasizes about becoming a future Nobel Prize winner. These yearnings are of a markedly Oedipal nature. His scientific endeavors reveal the exaggerated expectations he has of himself and are fueled by the underlying desire to prove himself worthy of the respect of his father, whom he believes despises him and regards him as a failure. He triumphs when a photo depicting him with a Politburo member makes the title page of several newspapers, celebrating him as a "master of tomorrow." However, this exultation for which he yearned so long eventually shatters when years later, he learns from one of his peers at a summer camp that the photo was only part of a conspiracy. This disquieting information is given to him by one of the many privileged boys in this camp for sons from *appartchik families and future students of one of East Berlin's elite high schools*: the camper casually says to Klaus that the photo's aim was to discredit the Politburo member as someone

incompetent enough to call for scientific advice from a young boy. Klaus learns that his father, among the top three hundred on the Stasi payroll, was possibly responsible for this political scheme. The bitter disillusionment resulting from the discovery of this set-up for which the father used his own son exacerbates Klaus's sense of inferiority, and this, as Brussig suggests, propels him to follow in his father's footsteps and to join the Stasi. He subsequently abandons his dream of becoming a future Nobel Prize winner and replaces it with the fantasy of devoting himself to the historical mission of the universal victory of socialism.

Through descriptions of Klaus's learning experiences in school, Brussig details some of the components that shaped the young boy's infantile political views and inner beliefs. We see how these elements pave the way for his mental affirmation of the socialist system and his emotional identification with it. They explain his attachment to a system in which he often finds himself subjected to the will of others. For instance, Klaus divides the world geographically according to the divisions set forth by his student atlas and the classical Marxist rhetoric: one side of the world is red (i. e., socialist) and the other is blue (i. e., capitalist), both fields fighting over the remaining areas. The inherent rhetoric of historical necessity, according to which socialism would inevitably outdo capitalism, allows Klaus to identify with the victors of history. Adding to this master narrative, Brussig further illustrates the young boy's initiation into the ideological schemes that legitimized the government's power. In stories about the adventurous struggle of the communist leader Ernst Thälmann, affectionately referred to as Teddy, the young pioneer is introduced to the collective legacy of antifascist heroism—a source of collective pride that compensates for the individual's lack of self-worth. Hence his willingness to sacrifice his fantasy of becoming a future Nobel Prize winner and putting his individual fate in the service of the larger historical mission of advancing socialism. The song about the "Little Trumpeter" that he learns as a young pioneer—a main ritual of East German socialist education—provides him with the ideological groundwork for his new aim in life. Like the "Little Trumpeter" in the song who sacrifices his life for the communist leader he is willing to do the same. It is a combination of these elements in the educational system, in conjunction with familial upbringing, that explain how the system perpetually interpellates the individual citizens, prompting their emotional willingness to sacrifice themselves to the collective cause. In Brussig's satire, which bases its comic effects largely on the sexualized worldview of the protagonist and its link to the political, the image of the "Little Trumpeter" becomes not only the symbol of the protagonist's political unconsciousness, it also grotesquely symbolizes Klaus's physical inaptitude, embodied in the small size of his genital organ (his "little trumpet"), which

is the focal point of his sense of inferiority. He seeks to compensate for this inaptitude through eccentric fantasies, here paired with his willingness to sacrifice himself for the communist cause (97 ff.).

As a result of his desire for adventure, which begins to replace the universal fear instilled in him by his mother, Brussig's hero steps into his father's footsteps. He winds up as an officer candidate for the state security force and sees himself as East Germany's James Bond operating undercover on an important mission in the West. The novel's portrayal of the Stasi is a pastiche mocking its working methods and highlighting the cynicism that its bureaucracy of surveillance had reached during the GDR's final years. Brussig brings to the fore the absurd banality of the Stasi's evil doings.¹⁶ He describes the monotony and stupidity of the tasks (such as observing a supposed dissident without even knowing the person's identity) to which Klaus initially fully devotes his energy because he assumes a deeper sense of meaning underlying its senselessness. The discrepancy between his expectations and adventurous fantasies with regard to the Stasi, and the actual dullness of his daily routine as one of its countless subalterns induces a schizophrenic split in Klaus. While he clings to his grand vision of the Stasi and his fantasy of becoming a master agent, he interprets his actions as only a preliminary stage and refuses to assume responsibility for them: "I wait and nothing of what I will do during this time I mean or intend in this way. Thus I have not harmed anyone. *I wasn't the one* who broke in, kidnapped, trailed, intimidated and frightened people. *I only waited.*" ("*Ich warte, und nichts von dem, was ich in dieser Zeit tun werde, ist von mir so gemeint oder beabsichtigt. Ich habe deshalb auch niemandem geschadet. Ich war das nicht, der einbrach, kidnappte, verfolgte, verunsicherte, verängstigte. Ich habe nur gewartet*") (169).

The underlying mechanism of Brussig's endeavor to laugh away the stupidity of the Stasi methods and its protagonists may be explained by reverting to Freud's theory of laughter and its emphasis on the production of comic pleasure through the procedure of degradation [*Herabsetzung*]. According to Freud, caricature, parody, and travesty (and their nonliterary counterpart, unmasking) "are directed against people and objects which lay claim to authority and respect, which are in some sense 'sublime.'"¹⁷ These techniques all have in common "the method of degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental functions on bodily needs."¹⁸ This method of exposing, unmasking, and degrading, which Freud sees at work also in the comic effect of sexuality and obscenity,¹⁹ derives its power from the comparison of a comic image with ourselves.

The source of the comic effect in Brussig's parody of the Stasi is precisely the mechanism of degradation that Freud describes: it aims at retrospectively breaking the

authority that the Stasi really possessed by demeaning their power and exposing it to derision. In addition, the inversion of social and political hierarchies in Brussig's parody of the Stasi also reverberates with the mechanisms and functions of subversive laughter in Rabelais. Perhaps the Rabelaisian mechanism at work in *Helden wie wir* led Wolf Biermann to assert that Brussig's witty parody belittled the gravity of the Stasi.²⁰

With his entry into the Stasi and transition to young adulthood, Brussig's novel abandons the tone of childlike and pubescent naiveté that still had a noticeable touch of sincerity inherent in it. Increasingly aggressive, crude, and obscene depictions dominate the last part of the novel. The narrative incessantly oscillates between the protagonist's heroic ambitions and the dubious ethics of his actions. In addition, it intersperses fragments of the narrator's critical and self-critical assessments of the opportunism of his fellow countrymen, including his own, and insights into the inhuman system that "disfigured human beings" ("*Es verunstaltete Menschen*") (105). The focus of the novel's second half, the protagonist's gradual moral corruption, thus appears as the grotesque reflection of the state of society.

The emphasis on sexuality as the prime locus of human behavior, which dominated the satire of East German family life in the first half of the novel, now serves to establish an analogy between the protagonist's sexual immorality (his sexual debauchery) and his political immorality (his violation of human rights through his activities with the Stasi). His "perverse" sexuality comes to epitomize the protagonist's ethical disfiguration.²¹ Gradually, the protagonist's persistent listlessness, his profound boredom with his tasks, as well as his latent sense of guilt about his actions lead him to yield to his sexual drives and he indulges in ever more abominable, virile obsessions and sexual debaucheries (such as his experiments with bestiality, involving an investigation into chicken rape). In addition, his misogyny leads him nearly to rape a woman; still obsessed with megalomaniacal fantasies of achieving international fame, he pursues the grotesque idea of developing "exportable methods of perversion" in exchange for western currency in order to overcome the GDR's economic predicaments. His conformism with the system completely goes berserk and results in his devious subversive activities of sexual debauchery.

With the increasingly revolting, often hyperbolic descriptions of the protagonist's maniacal obsessions that become more pervasive as the novel approaches its end, *Helden wie wir* enters the realm of the burlesque. Towards the end, the charm of the initial satire about childhood and puberty in the GDR is lost to an ever more piercingly aggressive tone of grotesque bizarrerie. Brussig now deals with his hero as if he were a zombie whose repulsive personality traits (opportunism, irresponsibility, and sexual repression) are the product of an infantilizing tutelage that

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made him emotionally and psychologically dependent on the very forces, i. e. his parents and the state, who are responsible for his misshapen personality. Adopting the rogue figure of the picaresque novel, Brussig's portrait of an average young East German caricatures the deformation of an individual in whom obedience and monstrosity intersect. Moreover, Brussig uses his protagonist's monstrosity to comment upon the collapsing East German regime. For instance, he describes how the faithful Stasi agent subjects himself to a fantastic medical experiment: the narrator says that Klaus's blood was transferred to the hospitalized political leader Erich Honecker, whose final actions the narrator characterizes as perverse and monstrous, after his release from the hospital at the end of the summer of 1989. In a burlesque scene, Klaus encounters a senile Honecker playing Mikado and knowing that there is no way he can win the game. This leads him to a disillusioning revelation that he cannot acknowledge: namely, that by donating his blood to Honecker he nearly sacrificed his life to a bogey, to a blindly enamored and hopeless old man and not, as the song about the "Little Trumpeter" suggested, to a glorious cause. At the same time as the paternalistic authoritarian state crumbles, Klaus's father dies, another detail that testifies to Brussig's analogy between familial pathology and social phenomena.

Helden wie wir culminates in a purposefully distorted yet somewhat flat grotesque revision of the historical events in the finale, a phallic saga of omnipotence. Brussig's novel claims that it was the protagonist Klaus Uhltscht who managed to bring down the wall instead of the masses who after years of oppression were too domesticated. Due to an accident in which he fell down at an underpass at Berlin's Alexanderplatz during the demonstration on November 4, injuring his head and genitals, his penis swelled to an oversized dimension. Its gigantic size impressed the border patrols so much that they were too perplexed to resist when he pushed open the gate. In the end, then, Brussig inverts his protagonist's insufficiency and lack into a physical symbol of omnipotence reminiscent of Rabelais's grotesque images of physiognomy and the anarchist culture of laughter embodied therein.²²

Brussig's grotesque-satirical revision of the historic events revolving around the fall of the Berlin Wall amount to a thoroughly disenchanting view of the political significance of historical agency in light of what has become of it in united Germany. Whereas the civic uprising in the fall of 1989 is typically thought of as a magic moment of collective protest that suddenly had a decisive historical impact, Brussig's comic inversion of the historical events disputes altogether the power of civic protest that East Germans demonstrated in the fall of 1989. In creating his megalomaniacal-picaresque protagonist as the "missing link" in the most recent German history, Brussig raises the provocative question of how it was possible that a nation of

conformists, who for decades had recoiled from an intimidating state apparatus, could suddenly develop the power of resistance, only once again to be overpowered by politicians making decisions from above. He makes the protagonist the mouthpiece of this view when he has him say: "Take a look at the East Germans, before and after the fall of the wall. Passive before, passive afterwards—how are they supposed to have ever overthrown a wall?" ("Sehen Sie sich die Ostdeutschen an, vor und nach dem Fall der Mauer. Vorher passiv, nachher passiv—wie sollen sie je eine Mauer umgeschmissen haben?") (319-20). Through this hyperbolic-grotesque revision, Brussig subverts any mystifying pathos of the *Wende*²³ as well as any palliative images of the GDR in nostalgic reinventions of it in recent years, known as *Ostalgie*. A phenomenon related to present hardships and the uncertain future, *Ostalgie* turns to a past that no longer exists and that therefore can be invested with imaginary meanings.²⁴ In exposing to laughter the stifling and asensual climate underlying the fabric of East German life, which has been largely neglected in the fictional and nonfictional discourse about the GDR, Brussig's reckless satire of recent German history has a liberating effect. The laughter it generates helps alleviate the weight of the past and the loss of identity resulting from the vanishing of the East German state.

In its finale, *Helden wie wir* turns to a disrespectful attack against Christa Wolf that is built into the narrative. This stretched-out episode goes beyond the scope of the satire about East German family life, the parody of the Stasi, as well as the burlesque revision of history through the saga of phallic omnipotence. One of the novel's most vicious and provocative passages, the attack on Wolf is of key significance in that in it Brussig implicitly addresses the valuation of East German literary culture and its social and ethical significance. Most certainly, this episode is the one most likely to fuel dissent among Brussig's readership because it disturbingly reverberates with attacks launched against Christa Wolf in the so-called German-German literary controversy (*deutsch-deutscher Literaturstreit*).²⁵

Brussig's protagonist witnesses Christa Wolf's speech at the famous November 4 mass demonstration on East Berlin's Alexanderplatz, which was organized by East Berlin intellectuals and artists. Indicative of the narrow cultural horizon that characterizes his personality despite his training at one of East Berlin's elite high schools, Klaus mistakes the famous writer for the East German ice skating trainer, Jutta Müller. He takes offense at her speech, which is cited at length, especially at her phrase, "when demands become rights, that is, duties" ("wenn aus Forderungen Rechte, also Pflichten werden") (285, 286). Irritated by her rhetoric as well as her plea for a reformed socialism, all of which reminds Klaus instantaneously of his mother's overpowering uprightness, flawlessness, and sense of duty, he attempts to get up to the stage and take issue with her

claim of an alternative socialism. Yet while intending to do so, he falls down the stairs at a pedestrian underpass and suffers from the injuries that will subsequently result in the aforementioned grotesque swelling of his penis. He does not recognize his error concerning the speaker's identity until he reads Wolf's novel *The Divided Heaven* while in the hospital, where it serves as a remedy against the erection of his penis that is causing him physical pain. When he enjoys sudden success as a porn star after the political upheaval and his transformed genital physiognomy, he even goes as far as to misappropriate the life-embracing scream of Christa Wolf's fictional character Christa T. in *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (*The Quest for Christa T.*) for pornographic purposes. While in tune with the overall burlesque silliness of the endeavors of Brussig's protagonist, the derision of Christa Wolf for Brussig's folly of sexual exuberance raises the question as to the mechanism by which it operates in the novel and its overall function in it.

One cannot help but think that Brussig uses his protagonist as a mouthpiece to voice his own stance with regard to Christa Wolf and her symbolic position in the public consciousness, although one may wonder why he would put his words in the mouth of this lunatic protagonist. Yet it is precisely the estrangement created through the foolish fictional protagonist that serves as a mask behind which Brussig can comfortably slip in his own views while simultaneously disavowing responsibility for the stance he attributes to his protagonist.

No doubt, Brussig's rebellion against Wolf and her symbolic role in the GDR's literary and public consciousness is clearly due to a generational conflict—a dimension explicitly reflected within the narrative (287-88). This generational gap exists between those indebted to the socialist project who, like Wolf, had experienced the transition from National Socialism, and the generation of Brussig, whose alienation from the reality of so-called real existing socialism makes them suspicious of Wolf's indulgent, solicitous discourse. His protagonist's reaction against Wolf's views reflects the younger generation's inability to find a voice that communicates their experiences *vis-à-vis* the all-pervasive dominance of the flawless moral solicitousness of his mother's generation, which he criticizes for claiming to "possess exclusive rights" over "a liberated language" ("Wo sie doch die Exklusivrechte an befreiter Sprache gepachtet haben ...") (311).

Underlying his protagonist's stance against the apparent flawlessness of Wolf's generation, ("That our mothers were so mercilessly blameless!" ["Daß unsere Mütter so gnadenlos untadelig waren!"] [311]), and his unfair derision of Christa Wolf as a model school girl striving for the teacher's approval by trying to write the best essay in the class, is also his depreciation of Wolf's moral stance, that is, of her claim to sincerity. This sincerity inscribed in her search for an authentic, that is, "pure" voice on ethical

grounds, which runs through her entire work like a red thread, must be considered against the backdrop of her efforts to liberate herself from the legacy of National Socialism that affected her youth.²⁶ It also surfaces in Wolf's postulation of "a liberated language" in her speech at the Alexanderplatz, which triggers the aversion of Brussig's protagonist.

Similar to the West German critical attack on Wolf in the so-called literary controversy, Brussig's derision of Wolf takes advantage of the vulnerability to which her poetics of "subjective authenticity" and engaged literature as well as her so-called writing of interiority have exposed her. His protagonist's lascivious decontextualization of a passage from *Christa T.* for pornographic purposes makes this particularly evident. It derives its powerful effect from sexualizing Wolf's asexual text and, on a larger scale, from violating Wolf's claim to purity (reflected in her poetics of authenticity), not on ethical, but on sexual grounds. Ultimately, Brussig's turn to a sexualized literary discourse of obscenity influenced by popular American fiction is another dimension of his vehement dismissal of Wolf's search for a purist voice and his distrust of the ideological implications of her poetics of sincerity and the ethical claim for which it stands.

The fact that Brussig's generational revolt expresses itself through a symbolic matricide (which is inherent in his protagonist's reckoning with Wolf as a kind of "super-mother" of socialism) resonates with the gendered politics of the so-called literary controversy.²⁷ Due to her public engagement, her position as a woman writer and the moral stance reflected in her poetics, Wolf made herself, as Brussig's novel shows once again with full clarity, a more vulnerable target than any of her male colleagues would have been. Brussig's derision of Wolf uncomfortably echoes the attack launched against her by the West German media. However, there is a crucial difference: unlike the West German critics attacking Wolf, Brussig has an immediate stake in reckoning with East German socialism in that it is part of his own past and therefore shaped his experience. Thus, Brussig's semi-serious and provocative view of the GDR, its cultural icons, and its legitimizing myths, no matter how aggressive, unfair, tasteless, or anarchical, fills a blind spot and needs to be included in the retrospective reflections on the GDR as the view of someone from a generation of young East Germans alienated by the reality of state socialism.

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Notes

¹At a press conference on 9 November, Günter Schabowski announced the opening of the German-German border. Originally this was meant as a regulation to channel the continuing flow of East Germans seeking to exit the GDR permanently. By mistake, he declared the new regulation effective immediately instead of on the following day. The events of the political upheaval in the fall of 1989 have been well documented in numerous publications. For a profound and insightful analysis of the complex circumstances of the GDR's demise, see Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997).

²Thomas Brussig, *Helden wie wir* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1995). English edition: Thomas Brussig, *Heroes Like Us*, trans. John Brownjohn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1997); in paperback also: (London: Harvill Press, 1998). References are to the German edition and subsequently will be indicated in parentheses within the text.

³Its phenomenal success was a crucial factor contributing to the survival of the novel's East German publisher, *Volk und Welt*, in the revamped publishing market of unified Germany.

⁴For a discussion about the film adaptation, see Thomas Brussig, "Zwischen Elfenbeinturm und Sunset Boulevard," *GrauZone* 9/10 (1997): 48-51.

⁵Christoph Dieckmann, "Klaus und wie er die Welt sah: Der junge Ostberliner Autor Thomas Brussig hat den heiß-ersehnten Wenderoman geschrieben," *Die Zeit* 8 September 1995: 37.

⁶Empirical sociological research conducted by the former East German Central Institute for Youth Research in Leipzig (*Leipziger Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung*), whose results were kept secret and did not become accessible until after the *Wende*, gives evidence of a rapid turning away of young East Germans from the propagated values of the East German socialist state since the mid-eighties. See Peter Förster, "Weltanschaulich-politisches Bewußtsein," *Jugend und Jugendforschung in der DDR*, eds. Walter Friedrich and Hartmut Griesse (Opladen: Leske and Budrich, 1991) 135-150; Walter Friedrich, "Mentalitätswandlungen der Jugend in der DDR," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 16-17 (1990): 25-37.

⁷The use of popular jargon, "jeans language," was one of the major points of criticisms East German critics held against Plenzdorf's novel. See for a discussion Alexander Flaker, *Modelle der Jeans-Prosa: Zur literarischen Opposition bei Plenzdorf und im östlichen Romankontext* (Kronberg: Scriptor, 1975).

⁸Thomas Brussig, *Wasserfarben* (Munich: dtv, 1994);

originally: Cordt Berneburger, *Wasserfarben* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1991).

⁹Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton & Company, 1963) 195.

¹⁰Bergson's influential publication on laughter, which stands at the threshold to modernity, originally appeared in 1900. See Henri Bergson, *Le Rire* (Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1940).

¹¹Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

¹²This is diametrically opposed to the Freudian theory of laughter, which conceives the ability to balance and merge the manifold tendencies of the drives as part of the underlying mechanism of the adult's psychic economy. According to Freud, the pleasure of the comic, of humor, and the joke essentially rests on their ability to reduce or save the psychic expenditure that is usually required for inhibitions, constraints, and repressions that civilization imposes on the individual. In discharging the surplus energy, he claims, laughter generates relief, while laying bare buried sources of infantile pleasure.

¹³Among the contemporary German writers, Edgar Hilsenrath's satirical fiction puts a similar emphasis on sexuality and the obscene. There are, however, some crucial differences between Hilsenrath's and Brussig's works and the role of sexuality therein: 1) Whereas Brussig's subject is the GDR, Hilsenrath writes about the Holocaust and National Socialism, and I do not mean to suggest an equation between the two. 2) Hilsenrath juxtaposes sexuality as a vital response to the inhumanity of the National Socialist regime, the only remainder of human nature in the post-Holocaust universe. Brussig, by contrast, focuses on the repression of sexuality to characterize East Germany as a taboo-ridden society. Sexuality, the more obscene and grotesquely perverse it is depicted, is used to expose the monstrous and obscene sides of the regime itself and its surveillance apparatus.

¹⁴Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* 182ff.

¹⁵Thomas Heise, in his controversial documentary film about Neo-Nazis and Skinheads in the East German town of Halle, *Stau—jetzt geht's los* (1992), explores the repercussions of the vanishing East German regime, its values, and its social infrastructure on the formation of right wing youth in present-day East Germany. Although the film does not hold the parents responsible for the political disorientation of their children, it points out the generational conflict as one dimension underlying the multiple causes for the right-wing orientation of these young people and shows the pro-socialist parents' helplessness in dissuading their children from their ideological convictions.

¹⁶Another example of Brussig's narrative that brings into

view incidents of political absurdity is the story about a high school physics teacher who loses his job for political reasons. The cause of his dismissal was supposedly the fact that he ran war films backward through the projector (10, 78), which the school authorities and the Stasi parents considered to be politically intolerable because it might create "pacifist illusions." Yet although a case like this may never have occurred in the GDR, it brings to mind all the absurdities that, while equally implausible, did in fact happen.

¹⁷Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* 200.

¹⁸ibid. 202.

¹⁹ibid. 222.

²⁰Wolf Biermann, "'Wenig Wahrheiten und viel Witz'" *Der Spiegel* (29 January 1996): 187.

²¹In associating the lack of political morality and sexual perversion, Brussig draws upon a model that has been recurrently employed as an analytical model for National Socialism, which accordingly is theorized in terms of sexual perversion. A prominent example of this approach to National Socialism is the psychoanalytical theory of fascism that Wilhelm Reich developed in the 1920s and 1930s. See Wilhelm Reich, *Mass Psychology of Fascism* (London: Souvenir, 1992).

²²The fantastic physical omnipotence that Brussig's protagonist miraculously attains in the end corresponds with Günter Grass's *Blechtrommel*: Oskar Matzerath, although a midget, has a fantastic physical ability in that his voice has the power of making glass shatter.

²³See Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR. Erweiterte Ausgabe* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1996) 501.

²⁴See for a discussion about the retrospective imaginary emergence of the GDR: Michael Rutschky, "Wie erst jetzt die DDR entsteht," *Merkur* 9/10(1995): 851-864.

²⁵This controversy was sparked by the publication of Christa Wolf's narrative about an East Berlin writer suffering from an identity crisis as she becomes the target of Stasi surveillance, *Was bleibt* in June of 1990. (Christa Wolf, *Was bleibt* [Berlin: Aufbau, 1990]. English edition: *What Remains and Other Stories*, trans. Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995]). It prompted West German critics to criticize her for allegedly construing herself retroactively as a victim of a system she herself supported and for clinging to the idea of socialism beyond the demise of the East German state without offering more substantial criticism of the regime. This controversy, which quickly extended into a controversy about the significance of East German literature and the evaluation of postwar literature in East and West as a whole, has been well documented and analyzed. See, for instance, *Der deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit oder "Freunde, es*

spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge" Analyse und Materialien, eds. Karl Deiritz and Hannes Krauss (Hamburg: Luchterhand, 1991); "Es geht nicht um Christa Wolf," ed. Thomas Anz (Munich: Spangenberg, 1991); Andreas Huyssen, "After the Wall: The Failure of German Intellectuals," *New German Critique* 52 (1991): 109-143; Bernd Wittek, *Der Literaturstreit im sich vereinigenden Deutschland: Eine Analyse des Streits um Christa Wolf und die deutsch-deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur in Zeitungen und Zeitschriften* (Marburg: Tectum, 1997).

²⁶See for a psychoanalytically informed discussion of this dimension of Christa Wolf's writing Julia Hell, *Postfascist Fantasies: Psychoanalysis, History, and the Literature of East Germany* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 135-250.

²⁷Anna Kuhn discusses this dimension of the so-called German-German literary controversy: Anna Kuhn, "'Eine Königin köpfen ist effektiver als einen König köpfen': The Gender Politics of the Christa Wolf Controversy" in *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections of the German Unification Process*, eds. Elizabeth Boa and Janet Wharton (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994) 200-215.