

# Literary Portrayals of National Socialism in Post-Unification German Literature

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Michael Kleeberg's novel *Ein Garten im Norden* also thematizes this alternative truth, but there is a noticeable contrast to Walser. The main character Albert Klein conjures up a vision of a better Germany in which his imagined namesake, banker and philanthropist Albert Klein, creates a garden at the heart of Berlin in which different national garden styles can be observed, and which functions as a conciliatory and cooperative meeting-point for people of different nationalities, persuasions and political beliefs. In Klein's vision, historical figures such as Heidegger and Wagner undergo developments diametrically opposite to their actual biographies: Heidegger is a convinced democrat and anti-Nazi, Wagner a composer of popular music in a clear, uncluttered style far removed from that of his historical counterpart. Yet neither the idyllic garden nor these alterations to the biographies of figures arguably instrumental in providing the humus for German nationalism can prevent Nazism. It also transpires that the banker Albert Klein is a German Jew who has to emigrate. Not only is the 'alternative' tradition conjured by Klein the narrator powerless to prevent Nazism; it turns out to be a German-Jewish tradition, and thus part of the very heritage the Germans aim to destroy. The humanism the narrator seeks to inject into his version of German history slips out of his grasp and allies itself with the victims. Only by means of a narrative device, whereby parts of Klein the narrator's fiction are destined to come true at a personal level (if not in the grander historical scheme of things), is he able to claim a part of this humanist tradition for his own biography. He 'discovers' that his fictional namesake is none other than his own grandfather, that he himself has Jewish roots. His own father falls heir to the derelict garden. Klein plans to reconstruct it. The humanist tradition is thus rescued and resuscitated in the present. It may have failed to stop National Socialism, but it can serve as a means of creating harmony after the divisions of the Cold War, another of Germany's negative legacies (thus it is not without relevance that the garden is situated at the site of the former Berlin Wall, symbol of this division).

In short, then – only by becoming a German *Jew* can Kleeberg's narrator identify himself and German history with humanism. If this seems pessimistic from a German point of view, a contrasting reading might see Klein's 'discovery' of his Jewish ancestry as implying, more hopefully, that neat divisions into Germans and Jews are misleading. Klein is both German and Jew; it is merely a question of perspective. The love relationship, moreover, between banker Klein and the non-Jewish German Charlotte – widow of Klein's banking partner and Nazi supporter von Pleißen – leads to the birth of narrator Klein's father. He is thus the result of a German-Jewish love-match, of a spirit of German-Jewish symbiosis at personal level which resisted the rigorous division under Nazism. Examples of such symbiosis have become a vital feature of post-unification German culture. One reason for the success of Klemperer's diaries – recently televised in an ARD television series – was the surely heartwarming loyalty between Klemperer and his German wife. The film *Aimée und Jaguar* (1997) describes a lesbian love relationship between a German Jew and a German.<sup>1</sup> In Berkéwicz's *Engel sind schwarz und weiß*, Reinhold falls in love with Jewish women twice (Rachele and Golda). Such symbioses are inspiring for a German audience and readership because they suggest an alternative reality, at least at an interpersonal level, to that of Auschwitz, and create a bridge of continuity for the German-Jewish relationship across the atrocities. They become problematic when they are instrumentalized, as they were by Martin Walser,<sup>2</sup> as a means of suggesting that German history need not have ended in Auschwitz – for if it need not have, then German history becomes the plaything of chance. Kleeberg's novel succeeds so brilliantly because it tests German history against the hypothesis of a possible alternative development and fails to reverse it. But the heritage of personal examples of German-Jewish solidarity under Nazism is a possibility he allows for, and there is no reason why such a heritage should not provide a legitimate constituent of the historical basis for the renewal of German-Jewish relations in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Anna Parkinson's essay in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> See Martin Walser, *Das Prinzip Genauigkeit: Laudatio auf Victor Klemperer* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1996).