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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A *Wende* in representing the Holocaust in German literature? From Jurek Becker to W. G. Sebald

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Abstract

This article examines Jurek Becker's 1976 novel *Der Boxer* and W. G. Sebald's critical essay on Becker "Ich möchte zu ihnen hinabsteigen und finde den Weg nicht. Zu den Romanen Jurek Beckers" (posthumously published in 2010) to show how they reflect the changing norms of Holocaust testimony in German literature. Becker's well-received novel narrates the refusal of a traumatized Jewish survivor to conform to the normative expectations of Holocaust testimony in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Sebald's essay, written in the early 1990s, however, accuses the novel of being inauthentic and by implication unethical. The polemic demonstrates Sebald's attempt to establish norms of Holocaust representation in the period following the *Wende*. Becker's novel and Sebald's response to it shed light on restrictive norms and expectations that surrounded Jewish survivor testimony to the Holocaust, both in the GDR during the 1970s and in post-unification Germany of the early 1990s.

Debates about how to represent the genocide of European Jewry in German literature, and about who can most ethically represent the position of its victims, have been a structuring force in German literary debates for the past 80 years.[1] Various turning points have been suggested in these German debates, among them the supposed testimonial turn ushered in by the era of the witness following the Frankfurt and Eichmann trials in the 1960s (Wieviorka 96), and the "memory boom" of the 1990s (Winter). As historians including Jeffrey Herf have shown, different norms about how the Holocaust was to be represented were established and developed, both explicitly and implicitly, in both the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (3). In West Germany, these norms were conditioned by a political atmosphere that focused on public contrition accompanied by private exculpatory narratives. Erin McGlothlin identifies a West German "anxiety about the ability of Jewish writers to do justice to the exploration of German perspectives on the Holocaust, as if

their history of suffering and feelings of revenge might distort their representations," an anxiety that, in the early years following the end of the war, extended to an anxiety about the ability of Jewish writers to represent the Holocaust in any form (234). These norms also led to a trend for representing the Holocaust as a "sacred, transcendental event that borders on the divine" (235), one where Jews were passive victims and Germans either SS "monsters" or ordinary dupes of Hitler. The German author W. G. Sebald was a pioneering critic of this self-exculpatory norm, as in, for instance, his essay attacking Günter Grass's inability to mourn, "Konstruktionen der Trauer. Günter Grass und Wolfgang Hildesheimer," first published in 1983.

In East Germany, a complex system of forces including censorship, control, official writers' groups, and the legal system ensured that literature about the Holocaust prioritized a heroic view of the supposed communist resistance against the Nazis (Dahlke 15; Ward 13). These norms changed once more following the *Wende* in 1990 due to a partial re-evaluation of literature produced in the GDR in the wake of the Christa Wolf affair in 1991, discussed in more detail below, as well as the memory boom identified by Winter (Anz). This article aims to trace how these norms changed between the 1970s in the GDR and the 1990s in post-unification Europe. It examines as a case study an intersection between two significant German writers on the Holocaust: the Jewish survivor Jurek Becker (1937–1997) and the gentile author Sebald (1944–2001). In an essay written in the early 1990s, but first published posthumously in 2010, Sebald decries the popular and well-respected Becker as inauthentic and by extension as unethical. Sebald's essay opens up clues as to how the norms surrounding Holocaust representation in German literature were in flux around the time of the *Wende* in 1990–1991.

I therefore probe the norms surrounding authenticity and ethics in German-language Holocaust fiction in the GDR and examine how these were negotiated at two historical hinge points: the Biermann affair in 1978 and the *Wende* in 1990. First, I examine how Becker's writing contested East Germany's normative antifascist discourse in the 1970s, at a time when Wolf Biermann's expatriation was throwing the cultural legitimacy of the GDR into renewed question domestically and internationally. I read Becker's 1976 novel *Der Boxer* as an exemplar of refusal to conform to GDR expectations of literary testimony and note that neither his critical writing about the GDR nor his status as an East German author in West Germany and then united Germany dented his canonized status. Second, I examine how Sebald's critique provides an insight into the changing debates surrounding authenticity and memory in German-language Holocaust testimonials at the time of the *Wende*. The publication history of Sebald's essay, which has been traced by Uwe Schütte, shows how Sebald sought to become an influential figure in debates around these literary norms in the early 1990s. I end by suggesting that, although the norms surrounding Holocaust representation in the FRG, the GDR, and the *Wende* period were very different, both Becker's novel and Sebald's response to it indicate that Holocaust survivors had to contend with norms of Holocaust testimony when writing literature in German, no matter which German state they lived in.

DER BOXER: REFUSING TESTIMONY, CONTESTING GDR NORMS

Jurek Becker's work offers a unique perspective on the act of writing testimonial literature of the Holocaust in the specifically restrictive GDR context in the 1970s. His second Holocaust novel *Der Boxer* is significant for its portrayal of a survivor's *refusal* to testify to the Holocaust according to the normative expectations of the GDR. Indeed, the refusal of his protagonist to conform to these norms raises questions about how this novel of nonconformity immediately found a place in the canon of GDR literature. Becker's successful career in the GDR as a writer of three landmark novels about the Holocaust may seem surprising, given the antifascist ideological structures governing cultural production in the GDR and the state's reluctance to assume inherited responsibility for the genocide of European Jewry (Kahane and Jander 18). Nonetheless, as scholars of GDR culture, among them Pól Ó Dochartaigh, Thomas Schmidt, and Elizabeth Ward have shown, although strict guidelines existed for the representation of the Holocaust in the GDR, both the representation of the Holocaust by gentiles and the testimony to the Holocaust by Jewish survivors could be produced within the interpretative frameworks and systems that structured GDR cultural production.

From the foundation of the GDR in 1948, cultural representations of the Holocaust were dominated by an antifascist framework in which political victims were cast as active *Kämpfer gegen Faschismus*, and Jewish victims were presented as passive *Opfer von Faschismus* (Ward 13). In this schema, cultural representations that favored stories of heroic communist resistance against fascists, often centering around the supposed "self-liberation" of Buchenwald, were privileged. Moreover, in both East and West Germany, mainstream discourse on the Holocaust in literature was previously dominated by the success of novels by gentile writers—Bruno Apitz's 1957 *Nackt unter Wölfen* in the GDR and Günter Grass's 1958 *Die Blechtrommel* in the FRG. However, in the late 1960s, a thaw in the cultural policy of the ruling Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) enabled the publication of three testimonial novels about the Holocaust by Jewish survivor-writers in the GDR: Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* (1969), Peter Edel's *Die Bilder des Zeugen Schattmann* (1969), and Fred Wander's *Der siebente Brunnen* (1971). The publication of these three novels by Jewish survivors heralded a more moderate, less dogmatically antifascist tone in GDR cultural politics, one that allowed space for Jewish themes and discussions of antisemitism (Pinkert 27), without requiring Jewish characters to be seen solely in terms of their relationship to communism (Conter 307). The success of Becker's *Jakob der Lügner* both in the GDR and internationally is particularly noteworthy, given that it was written behind the Iron Curtain and has an ending that is in no way redemptive or emotionally cathartic. However, Schmidt theorizes that the politically uncomfortable elements in Becker's novel, which met with only muted criticism in the GDR, were assimilated into GDR culture "unter dem Signum *antifaschistische* und *humanistische Literatur*" (418).

The second book of what Sander Gilman has called Becker's Holocaust trilogy, *Der Boxer* is yet more radical in that it thematizes the inability of a survivor and his narrative to assimilate to those norms of antifascist and humanist literature. This refusal can be understood in the charged context of its production, when Becker was already writing with an eye to a West German audience and considering a long-term move to the FRG. *Der Boxer* was published by Hinstorff-Verlag in 1976 against the background of the Biermann affair, which saw many East German artists, including Becker, protest against the expatriation of dissident singer Wolf Biermann. As a result, Becker was expelled from the SED and the Schriftstellerverband (Fox, *In the Shadow* 152). Gilman has shown how *Der Boxer*'s critique of the failure of socialist education and "the failure of the GDR to serve its most vulnerable citizens" gained traction in GDR Jewish circles at the same time as Becker was stepping up his criticisms of the state for its treatment of Biermann (102). *Der Boxer* thus served a powerful critical function within the literary history of the GDR at the time of the collapse of the state's legitimacy for many of its key intellectuals.

Even while still in the GDR, Becker was writing with an eye to West German and international literary norms. Olaf Kutzmutz shows that Becker asked his West German editor, Elisabeth Borchers, to cast an eye over the manuscript to give a "non-GDR" view of it, a request that demonstrates Becker's desire not to produce a novel with the particular characteristics of GDR literature: "Er fordert ihren kritischen Blick auf sein Manuskript ein, 'weil ich es bis heute nicht für ausgeschlossen halte, daß es so etwas Ähnliches wie DDR-Augen gibt, die Du nicht hast'" (87). This may account for the more radical content of the novel, which, as Poutrus comments, contains "weder Hoffnung auf Linderung unerträglicher Zustände noch ironische Distanz zu den Verhältnissen der Gegenwart" (187). Moreover, *Der Boxer* does not represent Nazi violence, concentration camps, or ghettos at all, tropes that even by the 1970s were becoming familiar in cultural representations of the Holocaust. *Der Boxer* was nonetheless translated into several languages and has been in print ever since 1976, as well as being adapted by Karl Fruchtmann for West German television by ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen) as *Der Boxer* (1980).

The novel traces the failure of its main survivor-witness Arno Blank to integrate into postwar East German society on his return from imprisonment in Nazi camps. Through the narrative device of an importunate interviewer, it registers the pressure on survivors to testify in a way that is acceptable to a predominantly gentile post-Holocaust world. *Der Boxer i*s therefore significant as a novel of refusal of the expectation that survivors would testify to Nazi brutality while expressing their solidarity with the new society of the GDR and thereby shore up a postwar East German national culture. Despite this potentially critical theme, Becker's fame and international reputation meant that the novel was published after only a few internal discussions with GDR presses. Beate Müller cites Becker's tactical submission of his works to West German presses before negotiations in the GDR were complete as a factor behind the unproblematic publishing history of *Der Boxer* despite its critical bent (389–90).

Der Boxer has strong autobiographical overtones, with elements of Arno's relationship with his son Mark echoing Becker's own relationship with his father Max (Gilman 24). Although Arno is united with a child who is probably his son at the end of the war, he remains uncertain whether he is in fact Mark's father, and their relationship develops in a chilly and uncommunicative fashion. Arno's attempts to build friendships and sexual relationships with women all end in failure, again, Gilman argues, a reflection of Max's own emotional isolation following the murder of his wife in Sachsenhausen (32). Immediately after the war, Arno changes his name from the more Jewish Aron. This change signifies a break with his Jewish heritage, suggesting that he refuses to play the role of an exemplary Jewish member of a supposedly tolerant socialist society. The change of name also indicates the irredeemable destruction of Jewish heritage in the wake of the Holocaust. This heritage cannot be recuperated by rebuilding the Jewish community in the GDR: Arno avoids the company of other survivors, or *Lagerruinen,* as he terms them (Becker 193). Moreover, his son's survival and reunion with his father do not signify any continuity of Jewish heritage. Arno's uncertainty about Mark's identity leads him to realize that it is the (German) authorities of the children's home where he is found who have determined who his son is (Becker 51). Further, in keeping with the orthodox East German insistence that Jewish identity was a matter of religion, not of ethnicity, Arno rejects the deterministic suggestion that he should have brought up Mark as a Jew simply because he himself was "durch Erfahrung und Erziehung eingeimpft worden" that he was Jewish (Becker 247). At the end of the novel, Mark defects from the GDR, eventually disappearing in Israel during the Six-Day War. The loss of Mark triggers Arno's withdrawal from almost all human interaction. He cannot perform the imaginary role of the vengeful boxer that gives the novel its title, nor fight back against the ongoing oppression of the GDR: "Aron war dorthin geraten, sagt er, wo man aufhöre, Widerstand zu leisten" (Becker 243). The only resistance that he can perform is the refusal to testify in the role of a grateful, assimilated survivor.

The novel marks not only the change in GDR norms in the 1970s that permitted the publication of *Jakob der Lügner* but also a shift in Becker's direction toward a West German readership as he prepared to leave the GDR. Mark's defection to Israel, and Arno's inability to find a home in East German society, present an implicit criticism of the GDR, undertaking "important revisions of East German Holocaust discourse, while at the same time remaining within the parameters of that master discourse" (Fox, *Stated Memory* 122). Unlike Edel's affirmative *Die Bilder des Zeugen Schattmanns*, which depicts the GDR as a place of reconciliation and justice for its Jewish survivor-protagonist, *Der Boxer*, written almost a decade later, is a novel of the failure of *Ankunft* in the new socialist society. Neither the father nor the son manages to integrate into the supposedly antifascist GDR, and indeed the novel remains saturated with anger and revenge fantasies (Fox, *In the Shadow* 166). As Anna Chiarloni notes, Arno's testimony remains stubbornly individual rather than exemplary in a socialist realist fashion (690). In Fox's words, it "demonstrates that the 'Jewish question' was not solved by the East German rhetoric of assimilation into the

melting pot of socialism" (Fox, *In the Shadow* 162). The novel deliberately frustrates the antifascist myth, as neither the role of communists in supposedly overthrowing fascism nor the supposed subsequent creation of an East German antifascist state is treated with any depth in the text. Indeed, although Arno expresses the general belief that the Russians dealt more thoroughly with Nazis after the war than the other Allies did, he later worries that East German primary schools are still likely to employ teachers "die in [seinen] Augen nicht frei waren von dem Verdacht, Faschisten und vielleicht sogar Mörder gewesen zu sein" (Becker 169). Arno only overcomes these concerns because of his fear of the authorities, which he metonymically characterizes as "Gesetze, Schulpflicht," not just because of his desire for Mark to learn to read (Becker 169). Here, Arno deems the GDR legal framework to be potentially restrictive and the educational institutions of the GDR to be oppressive points of continuity with Nazi educational policies.

Der Boxer also traces a refusal to testify to persecution in the Holocaust in any officially prescribed or even textually coherent fashion. Even if we read the novel as written with one eye to a West German readership, it still pushes against the norms expected of Holocaust fiction at that time in the FRG. *Der Boxer* baffles any expectation of a linear, conciliatory text that could easily be assimilated into a progressive narrative of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Like the earlier *Jakob der Lügner*, it does not offer a redemptive "escape story" from the camps (Klüger 140). We do not know how or exactly when Arno's persecution by the National Socialists came to an end. Nor does *Der Boxer* represent a generically stable form of literature; its instability is particularly caused by its manipulative and aggressive narrator.

The instability of Arno's testimony is emphasized by the frame narrative, told by a younger writer who interviews Arno over a period of 2 years. The power struggle between the nameless interviewer and Arno becomes a structuring force in the text, as Arno repeatedly refuses to testify in the rational, didactic fashion that the interviewer expects of him. This power struggle is shown in the following passage, which contains a suggestion that Arno does not and perhaps cannot perform a coherent selfhood following his persecution:

> "Wie erklärst du mir deine plötzliche Großspurigkeit?"
> "Ich erkläre gar nichts," sagt Aron, "ich erzähle."
> Oft zieht er sich hinter eine Wand zurück, hinter die ich ihm nicht folgen kann. Ich halte es nicht für ausgeschlossen, daß er hin und wieder von einem Aron berichtet, der er gerne gewesen wäre, doch diese Unterstellung kann ich, wobei ich kein anderes Recht als er in Anspruch nehme, nicht beweisen. (Becker 128)

Arno's narrative is pieced together from just such recalcitrant dialogues with the interviewer, reported dialogues with other characters, and at times baffled interpretation on the part of the interviewer. It is full of lacunae. The narrative elides Arno's time in the camps, as well as his life before—"die alten Zeiten waren eine Sache und die

neuen Zeiten eine andere, und dazwischen keine Brücken"—and also much of Mark's later childhood in the 1950s (Becker 141). Arno at times shows the interviewer documents that might fill in parts of the story, such as Mark's letters to his father after his defection, but he refuses to let him read them, punctuating the text with voids of meaning.

This narrative instability and fragility stage a resistance to expectations that Holocaust survivors will testify willingly and in line with the testimonial norms of the postwar society where they are living. Arno deliberately refuses to play the exemplary roles that he suspects the interviewer-narrator expects of him, such as that of an authentic Jew or of a patriotic citizen of the GDR who refuses to emigrate to Palestine out of love of his country. When the interviewer asks Arno why he did not emigrate, Arno immediately tells him that he will not give him any confession of loyalty to the GDR:

> "Ich versteh schon, warum du fragst. Du willst ein Bekenntnis hören. Du willst von mir hören: Hier ist meine Heimat, hier bin ich aufgewachsen. Hier und nirgendwo andres fühl ich mich wohl, darum will ich hier sterben, und hier soll auch mein Sohn aufwachsen." Er sieht mich wieder an, und seine Augen fragen: "So ist es doch?" Er sagt: "Lassen wir die Frage offen, wieviel mir das Land hier bedeutet. Besser, wieviel es mir damals […] bedeutet hat, denn darum geht's. Wenn ich es hassen würde, würdest du nichts erfahren, und wenn ich es lieben würde, würdest du noch weniger erfahren." (148)

Der Boxer's uncomfortable model of testimony is not the forceful mode of address that, for instance, Cathy Caruth has suggested that Holocaust testimony can be—an event that creates a political change (56). To a certain extent, Arno acknowledges that the testimonial process has been therapeutic: "mit der Zeit, als nach und nach das Nötigste ausgesprochen war, sei ihm ein bißchen leichter geworden" (Becker 9). Yet, despite the interviewer's vague good intentions (Fox, *In the Shadow* 165), the interviewer does not fulfill the psychoanalytically and ethically privileged role of secondary witness.

The frame narrative stages the tension between traumatized survivor and GDR society in miniature. To an extent, the interviewer frames his work in ethical terms, asserting a practice of allowing Arno to dictate his story on his own terms:

> auf Zwischenfragen verzichtet, lieber zeitweilige Unklarheit in Kauf genommen, mitunter auch langandauernde, und versucht, so entstandene Lücken kombinierend auszufüllen, um nur nicht seinen Redefluss ins Stocken zu bringen. (Becker 7)

Yet at other times, the interviewer hectors the survivor for his incoherent expression, refers to him as "Rohmaterial," criticizes aspects of Arno's life story, and

repeatedly refers to him by his former name, Aron, rather than the survivor's new chosen name of Arno. The interviewer also says that he "hätte von Anfang an meine eigenen Vorstellungen von einer Geschichte gehabt" (8). Empathy and intimacy between the two rarely arise. The testimonial moment is thus one structured by oppressive norms. These are in part norms specific to the GDR, as when the interviewer repeatedly expects rational explanations from the survivor, in the spirit of socialist educational literature. But the novel also challenges the broader post-1945 norms that expect Holocaust survivors to produce testimonial narratives on demand that are coherent, redemptive, and cast the survivor in a noble and politically palatable light. The interviewer's refusal to honor Arno's new chosen name reflects the ongoing racialization of Jews in the GDR, despite official rhetoric claiming that the GDR was a secular, post-racial society. The interviewer's hectoring of the survivor redoubles his revictimization and alienation.

Arno's refusal to testify is both a refusal to integrate into the new socialist GDR and an evident aftereffect of trauma. As he tells the interviewer:

> Du musst nicht denken, so ein Lager ist von einem Tag auf den andern zu Ende. Schön wär das. Wirst befreit, gehst raus, und alles ist vorbei. So ist es leider nicht, ihr stellt euch das viel zu einfach vor, das Lager läuft dir hinterher […]. Von draußen sieht es aus wie normales Leben, in Wirklichkeit sitzt du noch im Lager, das in deinem Kopf weiterexistiert. (85)

Refusing to testify according to the demands of a postwar world can thus be seen as part of Arno's passive resistance against the afterworld of the camps—a weak form of resistance that is all that is left to him once trauma has sapped his ability for active resistance. At the end of the novel, the narrator decides that Arno is looking forward to a new epoch in his life as "die alte [Geschichte] ist vorbei" (252). However, as Chiarloni points out, this positive ending can be viewed either as a classic socialist trope—the reconciliation of the older Jewish victim and the younger socialist reporter—or as Becker's sarcastic parody of a socialist happy ending, "um damit die Vergangenheit bewältigt zu erklären" (690). Both structurally and thematically, *Der Boxer* thus critiques not only socialist norms of antifascist narration but also wider German norms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Arno's refusal actively to engage with or even narrate key moments of GDR history—he hides in his flat during the 1953 uprising and expresses anxiety at any form of political change—is not just an implicit refusal to engage with the norms that conditioned the official GDR interpretation of its own history. It also points toward a refusal to accept the dominant postwar belief in both Germanies that the past was in fact past and that the antisemitic violence of the Nazi period could never return.

Der Boxer had a widely positive reception, both popular and critical. *Der Boxer* and Becker's third novel about the Holocaust, *Bronsteins Kinder*, may not be as widely read as *Jakob der Lügner*. Nonetheless, the novels of his Holocaust trilogy are

exceptional among GDR texts on the Holocaust in that they continue to be discussed and praised, both in the media and in the academic field, in post-unification Germany. Becker's posthumous reputation is evidenced, for instance, by a piece published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2008, "Ein glänzender Bildschirmdramatiker," by Marcel Reich-Ranicki, a champion of Becker, as well as by numerous feuilleton articles that commemorated the 10th anniversary of Becker's death. In 2017 *Deutschlandfunk* broadcast a "Lange Nacht" feature on Becker, centered around *Jakob der Lügner*. Several factors, besides the quality of his work, account for Becker's continuing strong reputation, not least his very public dissidence and defection in the wake of the Biermann affair. Becker could thus be seen throughout the 1990s and 2000s not only as a survivor-author whose works had been popularized through film and had been internationally successful but also as an author who belonged to both Germanies, unlike Edel and Apitz whose success was mostly confined to the GDR.

The caesura of the *Wende* in German literary politics did not change Becker's widespread popularity. As Gilman writes, Becker successfully mobilized his unique status to cast himself as a model for the new Germany: "foreigner, Jew, survivor, socialist, dissident, East German, West Berliner, and now German" (228). Becker's victim status, public dissidence, refusal to cooperate with the Stasi, and eventual defection meant that he was largely spared from the kind of re-evaluation accorded to Christa Wolf after the *Literaturstreit* in the 1990s. Around this time, a crisis of legitimacy led to a general re-evaluation of GDR authors. For instance, Monika Maron critiqued her own cohort of GDR authors as a complicit and "pampered elite" that was "guilty of arrogance, complacency and even hypocrisy" (Brockmann 50). While Becker was largely exempt from such criticism, his works are still subject to the ongoing scholarly tendency to read GDR authors as products of the political system from which they emerged to a greater degree than authors who published in the FRG. As a result, any resonances across the three Germanies in relation to literary struggles over norms and canonicity can be obscured, particularly when these struggles concern Holocaust literature. Turning to Sebald's attempted intervention on Becker in the early 1990s, at the time of the *Literaturstreit*, shows how these struggles demonstrate continuities across the three German literary systems.

SEBALD CONTRA BECKER: A *WENDE* IN NORMS ABOUT THE DEPICTION OF THE HOLOCAUST?

In the ongoing climate of general warm acclamation toward Becker, who died in 1997, Sebald was a dissenting but only belatedly heard voice. Sebald's charges against Becker's work not only show Sebald's generalizing dismissal of what he termed "GDR aesthetics" but also demonstrate the ethical and aesthetic criteria that he was developing for German-language Holocaust literature as a literary author himself. In 2010, *Sinn und Form* printed a previously unpublished essay of Sebald's, "Ich möchte zu ihnen hinabsteigen und finde den Weg nicht. Zu den Romanen Jurek Becker," which had been held in Sebald's literary estate in Marbach. In an accompanying essay,

Uwe Schütte explains the publication history behind this essay. It was commissioned by Irène Heidelberger-Leonard for her 1992 volume *Jurek Becker*. However, in the end, it was not included in the collection, which Schütte describes as consisting of affirmative contributions. Sebald's essay, by contrast, takes as its departure point his self-admitted long-standing prejudices against Becker. These are initially grounded in the supposed slanginess ("umgangssprachliche Leichtfertigkeit," 226) that Sebald finds to be typical of GDR literature and later result from the factual, if not emotional absence of the author that he diagnoses there on re-reading the texts for the essay. The fact that Sebald did not publish the essay during his lifetime perhaps shows, as Schütte speculates, that he had decided to save his ire for other German writers or perhaps that he had revised his judgment of Becker in light of Heidelberger-Leonard's rejection. It also demonstrates Sebald's lack of interest in engaging in the *Literaturstreit* that was raging at the time in the *feuilletons*, a lack that is in keeping with his disdain for mainstream debates in *Germanistik*.

Nonetheless, Sebald's essay echoes the generalizing and disparaging attitude toward GDR literature demonstrated by Christa Wolf's detractors at the time he was writing. Sebald criticizes the faulty narrative strategy of Becker's novels, describing the reporter-narrator of *Der Boxer* as an "ungeschriebenes Blatt" whose characteristics seem inconsistent—sometimes he is an empathetic and thoughtful person and sometimes grindingly *systemkonform* (Sebald 229). Rather than recognizing the interviewer figure as an incorporation of the oppressive testimonial norms that survivors were forced to contend with in the GDR, Sebald considers it incomprehensible that a cynical and disillusioned survivor like Arno could offer testimony to such a person. Further, he takes the narrative to task for an internal lack of logic, particularly in its use of dialogue to report conversations that happened up to 30 years before the testimonial conversation between Arno and the reporter. Sebald argues that this lack of internal logic, and a corresponding lack of a radically subjective position in the texts, means that Becker's work falls far short of that of Jean Améry or Primo Levi, presenting neither fragmentary documentary evidence of the Holocaust nor authentic, uncompromising feeling. Instead, Sebald claims, Becker supplements his narrative deficits with an insistent supply of irrelevant detail, slang, and minor characters. Sebald diagnoses a kind of *mauvaise foi* behind Becker's aesthetics that is grounded in Becker's inability to speak from his personal experience of the ghetto.

Sebald's essay on Becker is particularly significant because it shows the way in which he was working out the criteria for judging literature on the German past, criteria which have become globally influential in the decades since his death. Sebald developed this major theme of the Holocaust in his own literary work around the same time that he wrote his essay on Becker. *Die Ausgewanderten*, his first major prose work to deal with the aftermath of the Holocaust, also appeared in 1992. Torsten Hoffmann argues that a close connection can be seen between *Die Ausgewanderten* and the polemic *contra* Becker, as both are concerned with the leitmotif of the problematics of memory (157). Hence, Carole Angier notes that the essay was written at a turning point in his career, when Sebald was moving away from the polemical

critical practice of his youth and toward a new poetics of empathy (340). Schütte, slightly differently, argues that Sebald may have abandoned his essay on Becker following its initial rejection because having worked out his initial arguments about the deficiencies of postwar literature in this essay, he then instead targeted his substantial criticism at the exemplary postwar writer Alfred Andersch in the major 1999 essay "Der Schriftsteller Alfred Andersch" (238).

These readings suggest that Sebald considers the aesthetics and ethics of the poetics of memory to be intrinsically linked; Becker's aesthetically problematic work serves as a foil to his own concept of aesthetically and ethically successful literary remembrance, particularly of marginalized Jewish figures. Hoffmann argues that despite Sebald's general turn away from polemics at the end of the 1980s, Becker belonged to a category of authors particularly attacked by Sebald in his earlier years. These were "Autoren, die in der literarischen Öffentlichkeit als Gegner des Faschismus galten; […] unter den Kritisierten finden sich viele assimilierte jüdische Autoren (Jurek Becker, Peter de Mendelssohn)" (155). Hoffmann suggests that this attack on assimilated Jewish writers is motivated by Sebald's strong and lifelong ressentiment against the Germanist establishment. It is perhaps for this reason that Sebald's critique of Becker's Holocaust literature stands in contrast, for instance, to his homage to the survivor-writer H. G. Adler's literary sociology in *Austerlitz*, which helped propel the rediscovery and translation of Adler's work in the 2000s. Adler was an independent scholar who in no way formed part of the Germanist establishment, whose works were neglected by that establishment during his lifetime, and who wrote from exile in London. These characteristics contrast with Becker's hands-on participation in both the GDR and the FRG cultural spheres. Sebald's condemnation of slanginess and "falschen Realismus" in "sogenannte DDR-Literatur" implicitly privileges the nonrealist and aesthetically complex idiom of high modernism, favored both by H. G. Adler and by other writers Sebald valued such as Kafka (226). With this condemnation, Sebald also implicitly privileges literature on the Holocaust produced outside the aesthetic sphere of the GDR.

However, what Hoffmann describes as Sebald's dual polemic mode, at once attacking the author and the establishment, not only holds Becker to complex and politicized aesthetic standards but also demands of a traumatized survivor that he bears witness in a manner that conforms to Sebald's own idea of an ethical aesthetics. Sebald's aesthetic critique is linked to a biographical one, since he bemoans Becker's "durchgehender Defekt" of "die faktische nicht sowohl als die emotionale Absenz des Autors" (227). In Sebald's view, Becker's work is marked by an anxious attempt to forestall this critique, which is legible in his failure to give both characterization and legitimation to his narrators. This ethical failure of authenticity lies, for Sebald, at the heart of the illogical narrative mechanism of *Der Boxer*. It is exemplified for Sebald when Becker substitutes a kitschy "Rührstück" for an authentic moment of filiation, in the scene where Arno meets his son Mark for the first time after their separation in the ghetto (Sebald 230). Becker's real failure, in Sebald's eyes, is thus the failure to synthesize literature and history in a way that also exposes his personal stake in

that history. It is this personal exposure that Sebald is demanding when he compares Becker's work unfavorably to the "radicalism" of Levi and Amery. This radicalism risks the stability of the writing subject through its exposure to painful memory traces. Levi's work is therefore characterized by the "subjektive Anwesenheit eines Autors, der Zug um Zug selber in seine Schrift sich einbrachte, so weit, daß er ihr zuletzt nicht mehr entrann" (230). Sebald here seems to be approaching the prescriptive ideal of the "synoptic and artificial view" that he demanded of literature on the bombing raids in his controversial 1999 essay *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, a view that incorporates both eyewitness and documentary evidence (Wolff 87). Becker, for Sebald, fails on both counts: because he has a position as a writer with an ethical distance from the traumatically blocked events of his childhood, and because he writes in an idiom developed in the GDR, his work becomes "inauthentic."

This critique fundamentally misunderstands the nature of Becker's ethics and his precise refusal to appropriate the place of those who could access a direct memory of Nazi persecution. For instance, the supposedly sentimental scene in which Arno meets Mark again is framed with narrative ironies. These ironies at once demonstrate the way in which this relationship is from the beginning undermined by both characters' traumas, but they also suggest that the relationship between father and son mirrors the coercive relationship between society and survivor. As the interviewer does to Aron, Aron immediately subjects Mark to the "Regeln eines Verhörs," expecting that Mark performs the role of a loving, articulate son toward the father whom he has not seen since he was 2 (Becker 53). Once he has established a narrative of Mark's salvation in the camps that satisfies him, Aron further dictates that the camp is never to be discussed between father and son. This framing makes it clear that "authentic" testimony to the camps, whether by Aron or by Mark, is always already rendered impossible not least by the socially governed discursive conditions under which such testimony is produced. A conversation between Aron and the interviewer, held 40 years after this reported moment, forestalls Sebald's critique:

> Ich unterbreche Aron mit der Frage, warum er nie wieder mit Mark über das Lager sprechen wollte. Nicht weil ich seinen Beschluß für überspannt halte, sage ich, sondern weil ich mir verschiedene Gründe dafür vorstellen kann. Aron sieht mich lange an, ohne zu antworten, dann teilt er mir mit, es sei nun genug für heute, er sei jetzt müde.
> Sein Gesichtsausdruck verrät mir aber, daß er denkt: Wer solche Fragen stellt, der kann auch mit Antworten nicht viel anfangen. (Becker 53)

Sebald may have fallen into the fictional interviewer's trap, to ask the wrong kind of questions of this novel.

Sebald's comments on Becker foreshadow the critique he made of Andersch and the German literature on the air war a few years later (Wolff 52). They are also vulnerable to the same counter-argument made in response to those later remarks: that it would seem impossible to write in such a way as to meet Sebald's prescriptive

demands (Wolff 86). Sebald's essay does in part praise Becker's work, particularly for daring to deal with "den Auswirkungen, die die Verfolgung der Juden zeitigte auch noch in denen, die ihr entkamen," a theme that he recognizes as uncomfortable for postwar German literature, which preferred to represent the persecution of Jews as ending in 1945 (226). Nonetheless, he delegitimizes Becker's traumatized mode of writing as one that can accurately testify to the aftermath of persecution, by dint of both its supposed GDR characteristics and its failure to correspond to Sebald's ideas of authenticity. Sebald thus misreads the way in which Becker's testimonial writing resists the very concepts of Jewish assimilation and legibility that Sebald condemns while also ignoring the political significance of Becker's resistance to the GDR literary establishment 15 years previously. The essay is in a sense a watershed dividing Sebald, widely if not entirely accurately viewed as the exiled author of a new paradigm in Holocaust literature in the 1990s, from Becker, the Jewish survivor whose career spanned the GDR, the FRG, and post-unification Germany.

Sebald's essay comes perilously close to condemning a traumatized Jewish survivor for failing to testify in Sebald's aesthetically approved fashion to the suffering inflicted on the survivor as an infant. It stands as an example of failed de-canonization of a Jewish testifier by a gentile author who was about to become canonized himself. Sebald's literary career, which had begun with the publication of *Nach der Natur* in 1988, began to grow in international acclaim with the publication of *Schwindel. Gefühle* in 1990 and *Die Ausgewanderten* in 1992. Heidelberger-Leonard's rejection of Sebald's essay possibly also marks her own view of the correct ethical and aesthetic criteria for evaluating writing on the Holocaust and her sense that non-Jewish German authors did not always succeed in their attempt to imaginatively enter into the fate of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Later, she wrote that Sebald's own literary work consituted "ein heikler Balanceakt zwischen Usurpation und Restitution, der nicht immer gelingen will" (147). The debate about authenticity and usurpation in German-language writing about Jewish survivors, as shown here by the interventions of Becker, Sebald, and Heidelberger-Leonard, continues to resonate in wider debates surrounding the representation of the Holocaust.

CONCLUSION

Der Boxer exemplified an important turn in GDR cultural politics in 1976 by demonstrating that under the conditions and expectations of "real-existing socialism," it was not possible for a Jewish Holocaust survivor to integrate into German society nor to testify in a socially expected form. Sebald's essay marks a discursive literary caesura around 1990, one which coincided with the *Wende*. It also marks a turn from his own scholarly polemic work to a more literary approach to the twin concerns of Holocaust memory and Jewish life in Germany. Given that Sebald's essay was not published until much later, it did not receive the same form of public furor accorded to his polemics on Andersch and literature on the air war. It did not in itself contribute to public literary discourses about the ethical value of GDR literature in the wake of the Christa

Wolf scandal (Hahn). It does, however, suggest that the trend in German literature that was in operation since at least 1945, where German gentile culture attempted to determine the accepted norms for writing literature about the Holocaust, and at times attempted to prescribe these to Jewish survivors, was still manifest at the time of the *Wende*.

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