



**Der fremde Vater: A New East German *Väterliteratur*?**

Elizabeth Priester Steding, Iowa

ISSN 1470 – 9570

## Der fremde Vater: A New East German *Väterliteratur*?

Elizabeth Priester Steding, Iowa

The West German phenomenon of *Väterliteratur* in the 1970s and 1980s is well-established in German literary history. In this article, links are drawn between these texts and those written by young East German authors since German unification, based upon shared themes and the social context of their origin. There are unmistakable similarities in the portrayal of the father-child relationship, most notably the recurring themes of authoritarian behaviour and emotional distance. Volker Altwasser's novel *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* (2003) and Kerstin Hensel's narrative *Tanz am Kanal* (1994) serve as foundations for textual analysis.

### 1. Introduction

The literary exploration of the father-child relationship is nearly as old as literature itself. "Vater-Suche – dies ist kein beliebiges Motiv neben vielen gleichrangigen anderen, sondern zeichnet sich dadurch aus, daß es hier um die *Kernfragen menschlicher Identität*, um das Grundprinzip menschlicher Existenz geht" (Langenhorst 1994: 23, Italics in the original). Literature about the father serves as a vehicle for social criticism, a reckoning with the author's own father (or a generation of fathers), and a search for one's own identity. German literature is no exception, with its centuries-long tradition of father-child (mostly father-son) stories.

In this article, the focus is on newer examples of father literature, beginning with West German *Väterliteratur* and moving on to a new 'generation' of *Väterliteratur*: father-child texts written by young East German<sup>1</sup> authors since 1989. Although obvious differences exist between the two groups of texts, one also finds striking similarities, most noticeably in the portrayal of the father and the father-child relationship. Both corpora are also literary responses to social upheaval – the challenging of established social structures during the West German student revolt and the dissolution of the GDR after unification. These periods of social instability have resulted in a literary focus on the intimate (the father-child relationship) in an attempt to deal with and perhaps understand large-scale social turmoil and chaos.

## 2. Väterliteratur

### 2.1 West German Väterliteratur

The wave of texts which came to be known as *Väterliteratur* appeared in West Germany in the late 1970s and 1980s; some of the best-known examples are Elisabeth Plessen's *Mitteilung an den Adel* (1976) and Christoph Meckel's *Suchbild: Über meinen Vater* (1980). Deeply influenced by events of the 1960s, such as the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials, the rise of the politically conservative Grand Coalition and the student movement (perhaps more accurately described as a 'revolt') these texts were a reflection of the widespread social unrest and tension between generations which erupted in Germany. Authors born during or after World War II began to confront their fathers' political choices during the Nazi regime. Whether Nazi party members, soldiers or silent *Mitläufer*, these fathers were judged, condemned or pardoned by the younger generation. Their differing social roles allow the father figures to portray "ein Typenspektrum 'deutscher Männlichkeit'" (Vogt 1998: 390). The texts, all of which contain autobiographical elements, were reckonings with both the individual father and the image of 'the father'. "Hier geht es nicht nur um den je individualbiographischen Einzelfall, sondern um das Phänomen einer ganzen Generation" (Langenhorst 1994: 26). Father and child generations stood on opposite sides of a vast political and social divide, and the sins of one father stood in for the sins of a whole generation.

There are striking thematic similarities between these *Väterbücher*. One is that the death of the father serves as a catalyst for writing. It is not until the father is forever absent that protagonists begin to (re)search and perhaps (re)construct his life. While the father's death may give authors liberty to write about him openly, "within a [...] Freudian analytic framework, the death of the father is precisely the event which perpetuates the father's rule: in death the father acquires more power than he ever had in life" (Brockmann 1999: 158). Although freed from the father's physical presence, the authors must now deal with his life in death.

The theme of absence runs throughout all of these texts as well, with the absence of the father through death being merely the most recent. For many of these authors and protagonists, the father was physically absent during their early childhood because of the

war. His much-anticipated return was also problematic; although children were glad to have a father at home, his return (as well as the end of the war itself) markedly altered the mother-child relationship. Returning fathers are often depicted as authoritarian figures who value obedience and achievement more than a close emotional relationship with their children. “Lack of demonstrative love is an accusation frequently made by all of these children. The father who held a position of authority, such as a lawyer, doctor or officer, displayed similar authority within the home, that is, when he found the time to be at home” (Bagley 1990: 24). This emotional distance is exacerbated by the complete silence in many families about the war itself. “Gemeinsam ist allen eine starke psychische Panzerung, die sich in kommunikativer und affektiver Starrheit äußert” (Vogt 1998: 390). Children dare not ask their father about his past, and many of them also choose not to tell him about their present. Adult protagonists recognise this silence as a pattern that has been handed down over many generations of German families and made worse by the trauma of World War II, and their literary reckonings with the father are an attempt to break the silence.

In all of the *Väterbücher* there is a sense that what is really taking place is a search for self. Only by understanding the father can one truly understand oneself. As Georg Langenhorst states: “Um mich selbst finden zu können, muß ich zunächst wissen, wer mein Vater ist” (1994: 23). For many West German authors in the 1970s and 80s, this knowledge was painful and hard-won; the Nazi past of the father (generation) and the emotional distance in the father-child relationship all contribute to the overall tone of anger, regret and melancholy in these works.

## **2.2 East German *Väterliteratur***

In West Germany, it was the social questioning of the 1960s which focused literary attention on the problematic father-child relationship, but it is the events of German unification which serve as a catalyst for what I view as a new generation of *Väterbücher*. Although father literature – including texts about the Nazi past – also existed in the GDR, it was not a specific reaction to greater social upheaval or change, but rather an attempt to address and alter the system from within (Stenger 2002: 400). The events of 1989/90 and the aftermath of unification so radically altered or dismantled GDR social structures that dozens of younger authors responded with texts about their lost childhood homeland and

their (often decidedly not idyllic) family experiences. Added to this is the fact that the father generation had fallen, and its actions could now be judged. Unification was a compelling reason for many East German authors to openly address the social and familial issues that play such a large role in *Väterliteratur*, and these authors responded quickly: “Whereas it had taken three decades for father literature to appear in the Federal Republic, father-son and father-daughter literature from writers of the former GDR began to appear almost immediately” (Brockmann 1999: 150).

This immediacy of young authors’ literary confrontation with the past also means that the death of the father is not necessarily the point of origin for the East German texts. Unlike West German texts, in which the ageing father serves as a symbol of a past the child does not share, the East German father and child share history on both sides of the *Wende*. Therefore the death of the Nazi past does not need further symbolic emphasis through the death of the father. The East German father’s past begins in the GDR, the same ‘time’ and place where the child’s past begins as well. Some texts do use the death of the father as the reason for the protagonist’s exploration of the past (such as Kathrin Dorn’s *Lügen und schweigen*, 2000), but in others, the father-child relationship is still in the present tense (for example Ingo Schramm’s *Fitchers Blau*, 1996).

The social reality of German unification also plays an important role in East German *Väterliteratur*. Unlike West German society of the 1960s, in which the student movement challenged (but did not always change) social structures, the end of the GDR dramatically affected *all* East Germans. Social structures, institutions and individual decisions were altered, dismantled or made moot. For younger East German authors and protagonists, the social upheaval of the immediate post-unification years coincided with the personal emotional upheaval of late adolescence, exacerbating the ‘identity crisis’ so often faced in the teenage years: “[E]s genügt, daß bestimmte psychosoziale Umstände zusammenkommen und den Boden für die Bildung oder Bewahrung persönlicher Identität ins Wanken bringen” (Straub 1998:84-5). A generation of writers was seeking to shape their own identities amidst social instability. As the search for father is also a search for self, it comes as no surprise that the past fourteen years have spawned a wave of East German *Väterliteratur*. And although these East German texts are often not as (openly) autobiographical as their earlier West German counterparts, they are still accurate

reflections of East Germans' experiences: "[Es] kann von Autoren erwartet werden, zumal wenn sie sich um Realismus bemühen, daß sie aufmerksam ihre eigene Gegenwart beobachten und in fiktionale Texte verwandeln" (Stenger 2002: 391). These texts, even the most fantastic ones, arise out of East German reality.

### 2.3 Unifying Themes

As well as being literary responses to social upheaval, East and West German *Väterliteratur* share other similarities, most notably the themes of authoritarianism and emotional absence. Jochen Vogt, although writing about West German father figures, describes a "Scheitern an der Vaterrolle" (1998: 391) which also occurs in East German *Väterliteratur*:

Diese Väter sind unfähig zu sprechen (besonders über sich selbst), familiäre Beziehungen affektiv auszufüllen, kindlichen Eigensinn zu dulden, Vaterautorität nachvollziehbar zu begründen und ihren Kindern Abgrenzung und Autonomie zu ermöglichen. Sie versagen, pauschal gesprochen, genau dort, wo die affektiven Bedürfnisse der Kinder liegen (1998: 391).

Whereas West German *Väterliteratur* presented literary challenges to authoritarianism in the 1970s and 80s, this topic is addressed on a large scale in East German literature only after the *Wende*. Although continually denied in official GDR rhetoric, part of the power of the father originated in the continuation of authoritarian family structures within German culture. Joachim Garbe argues: "In diesem autoritären Staat galten ähnliche Erziehungsprinzipien, wie im Kaiserreich oder im deutschen Faschismus" (2002: 118). The new literary depictions of East German families suggest that GDR society allowed fathers nearly unfettered freedom to raise and discipline their children as they saw fit. In this respect, the much-touted 'new society' was actually nothing new at all, merely a continuation of centuries-old childrearing practices that centred upon the power of the father and the powerlessness of the child.

Because the father-child relationship in these texts centres around issues of power, it is difficult if not impossible for an emotionally satisfying father-child relationship to develop. In all of these East German *Väterbücher*, sons and daughters recount their unfulfilled longing for a deep connection with their fathers. For some children the emotional distance is the result of the physical absence of the father through death, divorce or defection (Grit

Poppe, *Andere Umstände*, 1998). For others it is the inability of fathers to step out of their role as authority figures (Thomas Brussig, *Helden wie wir*, 1995). For still others the estrangement arises from the father's workaholic tendencies or his focus on other priorities (Annett Gröschner, *Moskauer Eis*, 2000). But regardless of its causes, the emotional distance continues throughout the father's life. In West German texts, protagonists seem to feel closer to their father after his death than at any point during his life. Some East German texts have a more open ending in that the father doesn't die, allowing perhaps the possibility of an improvement in the father-child relationship. But even in texts with open endings, the results of a lifetime spent longing for the father are obvious: protagonists struggle with their individual identity, they are unsuccessful in maintaining close romantic relationships, they doubt their own abilities to be nurturing parents. The search for father – and thus the search for self – remains problematic.

### **3. Textual Analysis: Volker Altwasser's *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* and Kerstin Hensel's *Tanz am Kanal***

The two texts chosen for analysis here are representative of this new generation of *Väterliteratur*, with its focus on emotional distance in the father-child relationship<sup>2</sup>. They also represent the breadth of the genre: male vs. female author, father-son vs. father-daughter relationship, and working class vs. upper class social backgrounds. Even texts depicting differing East German lives and lifestyles portray similarly estranged father-child relationships.

#### **3.1 Plot and Literary Form**

Volker Altwasser's 2003 novel *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* is set in post-unification Greifswald, but the narration jumps between present events and childhood and teenage memories. The unnamed first-person narrator, whose working-class parents divorced when he was a young child, has a very strained relationship with his alcoholic father Heiko. As a child, his way of coping with the arguing, violence and chaos of his family life was to cut pictures out of magazines and books. As an adult, he uses writing instead, hence the title of the novel.

The childhood of Gabriela von Haßlau, the protagonist of Kerstin Hensel's 1994 narrative *Tanz am Kanal*, is very different. The only child of the wealthy surgeon Ernst von Haßlau and a stay-at-home mother (a rarity in the GDR, especially as there is only one child), Gabriela is taught to follow rules and to mind appearances. Her father's later conflicts with authorities who deny his request to build his own medical clinic begin the family's social downfall. Gabriela's mother runs away with another man, her father turns to alcohol and eventually flees to the West. Living in the imaginary town of Leibnitz in the early 1990s, Gabriela is homeless, writing her life story on any scrap of paper she can find.

While each of these texts tells its own unique story, there are obvious similarities in form. *Tanz am Kanal* is a long narrative, while *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* is a (short) novel. Both are narrated in the first person, and both mix present time narration with childhood flashbacks, formal characteristics they share with many West German *Väterbücher*. Events in the present are narrated roughly chronologically, and are interwoven with memories from childhood and youth. These flashbacks are also roughly in chronological order, thus resulting in two strands of narration which merge at the end of each text.

### 3.2 Portrayal of the Father

On the surface, these two fathers have very little in common other than nationality and the fact that they have a child. Ernst von Haßlau works as "Erster Venenchirurg (chief vascular surgeon) (Hensel 1994: 11) and is later appointed *Obermedizinalrat* (chief public health officer) at the surgical clinic (Hensel 1994: 17). Heiko works in construction and then later as a furnace stoker (Altwasser 2003: 80). Ernst von Haßlau owns a villa, while Heiko inhabits a small apartment. Ernst von Haßlau quaffs *Napoleon-Cognac*, while Heiko swills beer and vodka from the supermarket. Even the men's names seem to reflect their social status: Doktor von Haßlau vs. Heiko – who doesn't even warrant a last name.

The differences in social class are also reflected in the different expectations these fathers place on their children. Growing up in an affluent, traditional family, Gabriela is contained and constrained by the expectations placed upon daughters: to be polite, obedient, and socially conscious. "Vater achtete darauf, daß ich nicht in falsche Gesellschaft gerate, allein es gab überhaupt keine Gesellschaft für mich, keine richtige und keine falsche" (Hensel



1994: 11). One could claim that Gabriela's father sees his daughter as an extension of himself – a possession which must be minded and molded. This familial possessiveness is, however, paired with emotional distance. The father-daughter relationship is based on duty and responsibility, not on a close loving relationship. Gabriela comments: "Ich fühlte keine besondere Liebe zu Vater, eher beobachtete ich ihn wie ein fremdes Tier" (Hensel 1994: 50). Gabriela receives attention from her father only when she behaves badly (such as skipping school with her only friend) or very well (when she is charming to guests at family parties). This emotional distance widens as family circumstances worsen and Gabriela's father descends into alcoholism. Although he manages to overcome his alcoholism, the rift is unbridgeable. "Es war, als ginge er mich nichts an, und es kümmerte ihn wenig" (Hensel 1994: 55). Both father and child have retreated from each other. Eventually even the most tenuous bonds break as Ernst von Haßlau defects to the West without even telling his only child.

The father-son relationship in *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* is outwardly very different. Instead of expecting his son to be socially perfect, Heiko seems to have no expectations for his son. The narrator is only five when his parents divorce, and doesn't see his father again for nearly a decade although both continue to live in the same town. In a sense, the tables are turned on the typical father-child relationship, since the son is deeply embarrassed by his father's alcoholism and lifestyle. On a brief visit to ask for money for a trip, the narrator recalls that his father "trug nur einen ausgebeulten Slip und ein Unterhemd. S/ein Haar war ungekämmt, und s/ein Blick huschte wie ein Dieb durch nächtliche Straßen...Es gab ein Tisch mit Glasplatte. Die Platte war über und über mit leeren Schnapsflaschen vollgestellt" (Altwasser 2003: 24). The father is portrayed as a man who has few expectations for himself, let alone for his son. It is only as an adult after unification that the narrator meets up with his now sober, more socially acceptable father, a father who now hopes to revive a relationship with his son. It comes as no surprise that his attempts are pointedly rebuffed by the son, who claims Heiko is stepping into the role of father "zwanzig Jahre zu spät" (Altwasser 2003: 197).

### 3.3 Childhood Memories and Emotional Abandonment

To more vividly illustrate the roots and eventual effects of emotional distance in the father-child relationship, I would like to compare early childhood memories of both protagonists. These memories depict father-child relationships which were never healthy, but instead damaged by trauma from earliest childhood. Emotional distance is not something which creeps into these relationships, it is something that exists from the very beginning, perhaps replicating emotionally distant father-child relationships from earlier generations.

The opening scene of *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* is a painful illustration of how fathers (mis)use both their physical power and their traditional position of authority within the family. No physical abuse towards family members takes place, but their behaviour leads the reader to conclude that violence is a part of their lives with the father. Their comments and feelings are also completely ignored by the father as he drunkenly declares that his five year old son's pet bird Putzi stinks and needs a bath. The novel begins with the following passage:

‘Laß doch das arme Tier!’ sagte Mutter, aber er hörte nicht auf sie. Er hielt sich am Käfig fest und jagte den Wellensittich. ‘Komm her, du Mistvieh, du wirst gewaschen jetzt!’ sagte er. Ich umklammerte Mutters Bein. Sie legte ihre Hand auf meinen Kopf. Er schnappte Putzi und holte ihn aus dem Käfig. Als er sich umdrehte, lachte er mich an. Aber ich drückte mein Gesicht an Mutters Schenkel. Sie setzte sich, nahm mich auf den Schoß und hielt mir die Hand vor die Augen. ‘Das tut dem Vieh gut, das stinkt doch so!’ sagte er und ging aus dem Wohnzimmer. ‘Papa ist wieder betrunken’, sagte Mutter, aber das wußte ich schon (Altwasser 2003: 11).

Following his father into the bathroom, the protagonist watches as his father holds the bird under the shower and nearly drowns it. Twice the son attempts to interrupt his father's actions, but he is ignored. The father then proceeds to set the bird on the clothesline and blow-dry his feathers, which finally results in the bird's death. “Ich sah ihn [Vater] fest an, aber er sagte nichts” (Altwasser 2003: 11). The theme of silence and of ignoring feelings, facts and family continues throughout the rest of the novel. But what is perhaps most disturbing here is the father's reaction to his own behaviour. He calmly wraps up the bird, puts it in the freezer for later disposal, and pays off his son. The father offers no words of comfort, no apology to his young son; instead he attempts to ease his own conscience with money. To make matters worse, the father encourages his son to continue the cycle of silence and denial by hiding the money from his mother. This event, which is prominently

placed at the beginning of the novel, sets the scene for later encounters with the father; encounters that centre around the father's selfish, hurtful behaviour, his emotional estrangement from his son, and his eventual physical absence from the family.

Shortly after witnessing the murder of his pet bird, the son opens the door to his father's bedroom and makes the following discovery: "Mein Vater war weg. Gestern abend war er noch da gewesen. Er war weg. E/r" (Altwasser 2003: 20). It is at this point in the text that an interesting typographical shift takes place. The first person narrator no longer writes any words relating to his father – er, sein, ihn, den – in the normal way, but rather with a slash between the first letter and the rest of the word. The father's abandonment has led to his son making a non-person out of him, at least in his writing. But although the father is 'depersonalised' on a typographical level by the adult son-turned-author, it is evident that during his teenage years, the protagonist still longs for his father. The occasional chance meetings – termed "Überfälle" – during the protagonist's teenage and young adult years are unsatisfying, often leading the son to chastise himself for even caring. After one such encounter which led to a brief visit he declares: "Das war endgültig das letzte Mal, daß d/er mich so überfällt, das allerletzte Mal. Und ich fahre noch wie ein Trottel hin" (Altwasser 2003: 86). But for years, the son continues to be torn between his desire to separate from his father and to be recognised by him.

While the earliest childhood memory of Gabriela von Haßlau is less shocking than the murder of the pet bird recounted in *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam*, it also illustrates the disconnect between father and child. On her fourth birthday, Gabriela is given a violin by her father. At no time has Gabriela said that she wants to play the violin, or even that she likes music; this 'gift' is a symbol of the father's expectations. As the daughter of a prominent family, Gabriela should have suitable hobbies and skills:

Das erste, woran ich mich erinnere, war ein Geigenkasten. Ich bekam ihn zu meinem vierten Geburtstag. Außen braunes Leder, innen grüner Samt. Ich öffnete ihn und sah das Instrument. Ich hielt es für ein Tier, einen verzauberten Dackel. Als ich aufheulte, riß mich Vater an den Zopfschnecken.

- Das ist eine Violine.

Onkel Schorsch aus Sachsen war bei uns zu Besuch, er lachte.

- Das ist aber 'ne Binka, eure Tochter!

Mutter schämte sich, Vater skandierte mir ins Gesicht:

- Vi-o-li-ne! Vi-o-li-ne! Sprich nach!

Ich weinte über dem verzauberten Dackel (Hensel 1994: 8-9).

Although he hires a professional violinist as a teacher for his daughter, Gabriela continues to disappoint her father – musically and socially. Several months later, Ernst von Haßlau is appointed chief public health officer, Gabriela remembers: “Am Tag seiner Berufung war Vater ein Mensch. Zum Frühstück nahm er mich auf den Schoß” (Hensel 1994: 17). As a special surprise, he informs Gabriela that she will play her violin for him and his fellow surgeons. What the father sees as an opportunity to impress his colleagues with his well-mannered, cultured daughter turns into a nightmare for Gabriela. She is so nervous that she faints before she even begins to play. When she comes to, lying in the clinic, she innocently asks if she too has varicose veins like her fathers’ patients:

Es gab Gelächter in der Klinik, nur Vater lachte nicht.  
 - Wir werden eine andere Lehrerin für dich suchen, du hast mich in Grund und Boden blamiert.  
 Ich lag auf einer Pritsche im Op II, über mir jetzt die riesige runde Lampe. Ich hoffte, daß sie herabstürzt und mich begräbt. In Grund und Boden (Hensel 1994: 19).

Within the course of a few hours, Gabriela’s father goes from being a “Mensch” who takes her in his lap to stating publicly that he is ashamed of her. Throughout her childhood, her father continues to place unrealistically high social expectations on his daughter, while at the same time virtually ignoring her. The few times that Herr von Haßlau is portrayed as being actively involved in his daughter’s daily life are when Gabriela is having difficulty in school: when she is caught skipping with her friend Katka, when she nearly fails a grade, when she is denied entrance to the *Erweiterte Oberschule* (GDR equivalent of *Sekundärstufe* at the *Gymnasium*). Even in these instances, the emphasis is more on Gabriela’s level of accomplishment than on what is behind her behaviour. Father and daughter do not talk about feelings, about the everyday events that make up their lives, about anything beyond facts. There is little open resentment from Gabriela until she enters her teenage years, there is simply silence and distance.

Because both authors place scenes of childhood trauma, unreasonable expectations and abandonment so near the beginning of their texts, it is obvious that they intend the reader to carry this knowledge with them throughout the reading of the book. Subsequent episodes merely serve to strengthen these early impressions. And even though each protagonist deals differently with their specific family situation, the similarities in father behavior are

striking. Both fathers (in their own way) bully, ignore and abandon their children, and this behaviour leaves lasting scars.

### 3.4 The Father and Personal Identity

As mentioned earlier, these texts not only portray emotionally unavailable fathers, they also depict a search for understanding of one's own past, oneself. Both protagonists struggle with forming their own personal identity precisely because of their fathers. Gabriela has grown up in a household where the father was determined to control everything, where appearances were important, where little true communication occurred. During Gabriela's childhood, her father's favourite phrase seems to be "sprich nach", as he commands her to repeat 'his' words: Violine, Saiten, Party. But instead of just a father wanting to help his daughter explore the world, Ernst von Haßlau comes across as a man who wants to define and determine her world and her identity. At several points in the text, the adult Gabriela poses the question of who she is: "Wo bin ich? Und wer?" (Hensel 1994: 112). Even her name seems to be more determined by others – her uncle, her mother, her father – than by herself: "Heiß ich Binka? Heiß ich Ehlchen? Heiß ich vielleicht Gabriela? Gabriela von Haßlau" (Hensel 1994: 80).

The narrator of *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* also struggles with his identity because of his desire not to be associated with his father. "E/r hatte mich in der ganzen Stadt bekannt gemacht. S/ein Name schwebte in gewissen Kreisen über mir und zwang mich fast, in eine bestimmte Richtung zu gehen, wie ein Gewitter: 'Ach, du bist der Sohn von Heiko'" (Altwasser 2003: 22). The narrator resents being associated with a man he barely knows, a man who abandoned his family. But more traumatic than the shared name is what the father *didn't* share with his son: how to be a man. In the last scene of the novel, the narrator finally confronts his father and describes the difficulties of growing up "unter Frauen" (Altwasser 2003: 198). He remembers the "Qualen eines heranwachsenden Muttersohnes, der um sich sieht und nicht weiß, wie er sich verhalten soll" (Altwasser 2003: 199). The son recalls the difficulties of not having an example to follow, the embarrassment of failure, his envy of sons with fathers. But unlike a son with a dead father, "vaterlos ist er ja nicht und kann den Vater nicht abhaken und muß immer mit dessen Eintreffen rechnen und hat nirgends eine Sicherheit" (Altwasser 2003: 199). It is the continual uncertainty of his

relationship with his father that is such a burden to the son, such a hindrance in his attempts to define himself and shape his life.

#### **4. Writing, Voice and Unified Germany**

One way in which both protagonists find their voice and shape their identity is through writing. Both are authors: Gabriela is writing her life story in serialised form for a West German women's magazine, and Altwasser's protagonist has won a literary prize for his writing. Both protagonists also experience writing as something very emotional, if not always therapeutic. Altwasser's protagonist uses writing as a coping mechanism, but unlike his childhood habit of cutting out pictures, writing stirs up emotions rather than calming them. In one scene, the protagonist suffers an anxiety attack while writing: "Als Ausschneidender war mir so etwas nie passiert. Ausschneidende lebten gesünder. Sie riskierten überhaupt nichts. Was immer ich als Aufschreibender produzierte, es kam mich teuer zu stehen" (Altwasser 2003: 140). But although writing is difficult and often frightening, his story must be told. Sitting under the bridge that serves as her home, Gabriela von Haßlau experiences writing in a different way: "ich erfahre das erste Mal seit Jahren wieder Freude. Es ist kein Zufall, daß mir das Schicksal dieses Papier bringt, denn ich bin auserwählt zu schreiben. Zu nichts sonst auf der Welt, als mein Leben zu erzählen" (Hensel 1994: 7). Both protagonists feel compelled to write their story, whether for themselves or for others. By creating protagonists who are writers themselves, the authors of these texts have emphasised the importance of the act of writing, the importance of individual East Germans telling their personal stories. These texts are literary artifacts of growing up in the GDR as well as literary challenges to not forget, gloss over, or deny the East German past.

This insistence on a clear-eyed look at the past connects these new East German texts with their West German counterparts. Both groups of texts arise out of social and political upheaval, when the actions of the father generation can and must be addressed. Although *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is a loaded term, that is exactly what these texts are – a 'coming to terms' with one's personal and political past.

But while these East German texts are reckonings with the past, they are also reckonings with the present. This is reflected in the fact that the father's death is not necessarily the catalyst for their writing. Unlike the Nazi past of West German fathers that could be condemned and rejected by their children, the GDR past of East German authors is shared between father and child. The father-child relationship and the GDR past must be dealt with in the present, and with a realisation of the role which both father and child played in them. This focus on the family and (damaged) intimate relationships also gives young East German authors a way to write about their personal history while at the same time avoiding the overtly politicised aspects of the GDR past and the East German present.

These texts function as reminders to their readers of the enormous role of family and childhood. Just because a child grows up, declares their independence, or experiences the death of the father does not mean that the father's influence is nullified – and regardless of how westernised, how 'unified' East Germans feel, they carry with them the memories, habits and experiences of growing up in the East. As the protagonist in *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam* reflects shortly after unification: "Ich sah nicht nur auf meine Jugend, ich blickte auf einen Staat; einen Ex-Staat. Ich konnte das Bild nach seiner Vervollständigung betrachten; es verstehen, sehen mit unbedarften Augen und doch nicht als Fremder, sondern als Einheimischer" (Altwasser 2003: 160). The GDR may be gone, but its political and physical absence cannot erase its place in the East German psyche. Just like the dead father, its traces remain.

## Bibliography

- Altwasser, Volker H. (2003) *Wie ich vom Ausschneiden loskam: Roman*. Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch.
- Bagley, Petra M. (1990) The Death Of a Father: The Start Of a Story. Bereavement in Elisabeth Plessen, Brigitte Schwaiger and Jutta Schutting in: *New German Studies*, 16.1, 21-38.
- Brockmann, Stephen (1999) *Literature and German Reunification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garbe, Joachim (2002) *Deutsche Geschichte in deutschen Geschichten der neunziger Jahre*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

- Hensel, Kerstin (1994) *Tanz am Kanal*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1997.
- Langenhorst, Georg (1994) "Vatersuche" in deutschen Romanen der letzten 20 Jahre: Zur Renaissance eines literarischen Urmotivs. In: *Literatur für Leser*, 1, 23-35.
- Stenger, Cordula (2002) "Simple Storys" aus dem Osten? Wie eine Generation junger Autoren und Autorinnen ihre Erfahrungen in Literatur verwandelt. In: *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, 52, 389-415.
- Straub, Jürgen (1998) Personale und kollektive Identität: Zur Analyse eines theoretischen Begriffs. In: Aleida Assmann; Heidrun Friese (Eds.) *Identitäten: Erinnerung, Geschichte, Identität 3*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 73-104.
- Vogt, Jochen (1998) Er fehlt, er fehlte, er hat gefehlt... Ein Rückblick auf die sogenannten Väterbücher. In: Stephen Braese, et al (Eds) *Deutsche Nachkriegsliteratur und der Holocaust*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 385-400.

## Biodata

Elizabeth Priester teaches German at the Luther College in Decorah, Iowa and hold a PhD from Michigan State University. Her thesis deals with the father-child relationship in post-unification East German literature. Her research interests include GDR literature, contemporary literature, and undergraduate curriculum development. Together with Cate Brubaker, she has published "Culture at your fingertips: Implementing Internet Technology in the Foreign Language Classroom". In: Mark Girod and Jason Steed (Eds) *Using Technology in the college classroom: Humanities*, New Forums Press (forthcoming).

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'East German authors' to designate all authors born and raised in the GDR, not just authors who published in the GDR. This then includes a younger generation of authors such as Thomas Brussig and Jana Hensel, who do not necessarily consider themselves 'East' German authors, but who also openly thematize their East German past.

<sup>2</sup> This article is part of a larger dissertation project analyzing the father-child relationship in post-unification East German literature. Some of the other texts in my dissertation are Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1995), Kathrin Dorn's *Lügen und schweigen* (2000), Annett Gröschner's *Moskauer Eis* (2000), Grit Poppe's *Andere Umstände* (1998), and Ingo Schramm's *Fitchers Blau* (1996).