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## The Desire to Achieve "Normalcy" - Peter Schneider's Post-Wall Berlin Novel Eduard's Homecoming

### Abstract

As one critic correctly observed on the occasion of Peter Schneider's sixtieth birthday (21 April 2000), the author's life and work have been defined by two momentous events whose import far surpasses that of happenings of merely local significance (see Karasek)...

### Keywords

Peter Schneider, normalcy, Karasek, Eduard's Homecoming, Berlin, reunification, post-wall, post-wall Berlin, 2000, 60, sixty, sixtieth birthday, Eduards Heimkehr

The Desire to Achieve "Normalcy"—Peter Schneider's  
Post-Wall Berlin Novel *Eduard's Homecoming*<sup>1</sup>

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As one critic correctly observed on the occasion of Peter Schneider's sixtieth birthday (21 April 2000), the author's life and work have been defined by two momentous events whose import far surpasses that of happenings of merely local significance (see Karasek). A permanent resident of (West) Berlin since 1962, Schneider has had ample opportunity to experience first-hand the actual and metaphorical shadow cast by the Berlin Wall, an infamous edifice that began to be constructed on 13 August 1961 and that was unceremoniously but spectacularly breached on 8 November 1989. It was Schneider who in *The Wall Jumper* (1982; tr. 1983) first questioned the convenient accommodation to the Wall particularly in the West, where it had become largely accepted during the 1970s and 1980s. The Wall seemed to secure the comfortable political status quo by lessening East-West tensions; Schneider drew attention to the anomaly of its existence by vividly illustrating the both curious and dire psychological consequences for Germans in general and Berliners in particular. In his narrative, Schneider felicitously coined a phrase that would prove to be prophetic and gain wide currency: "It will take us longer to tear down the Wall in our heads than any wrecking company will need for the Wall we can see" (*WJ* 119). Subsequently, the expression "the Wall in our heads" served as a concise reminder of the chief obstacle that prevented Germans in East and West from rapidly conceiving of themselves as one people

after the Wall had collapsed. The slogan “Wir sind ein Volk” during the final phase of the GDR had articulated East Germans’ desire for reunification.

Schneider first elaborated on the post-Wall situation in his collection of essays *The German Comedy: Scenes of Life after the Wall* (1990; tr. 1991) and gave vent to his satiric penchant in vignettes that depict scenes bordering on the absurd. Berlin, the Wall, and its results continued to preoccupy Schneider. In his first full-fledged novel *Couplings* (1992; tr. 1996), Schneider cast a glance backwards and focused on the milieu of the former student activists in West Berlin. In the 1980s, they had become somewhat complacent veterans who lived in materially comfortable circumstances; their former political zeal had diminished without becoming altogether extinct. Some twenty years earlier, in the narrative *Lenz* (1973; tr. 2001), Schneider had fictionalized his own break with the ideological constraints imposed on their adherents by the various leftist groups in the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Couplings* is chiefly concerned with the virtual wall that has begun separating the sexes and the often chaotic and bizarre relationships the protagonist, the biochemist Eduard, and his circle of friends are engaged in as a result of the sexual revolution that had been preached and practiced as part of the total transformation of society that the student activists had sought to achieve. However, the actual Wall’s uncanny and palpable presence cannot be entirely ignored (see Mews 1996, 151-55). For instance, the figure of Theo, poet, writer, and dissident intellectual par excellence, serves as a constant and vivid reminder of the division of the city and the country in that he, somewhat paradoxically, tends to adopt a quasi-official GDR point of view in order to provoke his Western discussion partners. He does so despite the fact that he is allowed to cross the Wall from the Eastern part of the city and back; he enjoys this rare privilege only because the GDR authorities assume he will eventually choose to remain in West Berlin. Moreover, although rarely mentioned in conversations among Eduard and his friends, the Wall has assumed almost mythical dimensions: “[I]ts shadow was long enough to reach the farthest corner of the most out-of-the-way

pub; its presence was like that of the Old Testament God, who has no name and whose likeness may not be replicated" (C 84).

Unsurprisingly, Schneider's next major project, a film script, again involved the Wall; in fact, the Wall's construction and its demise provide the chronological boundaries of the narrative in the movie *The Promise* (1994; subtitled version 1995), directed by Margarethe von Trotta. The ominous Wall and its bureaucratic appendages and ramifications are impressively featured in various scenes, and the somewhat sentimentalized love story of Sophie and Konrad gains its poignancy through the lovers' separation on account of the Wall—their private lives are subject to political forces beyond their control. Yet the narrative eschews a happy ending; the film's inconclusive open ending is, perhaps, indicative of Schneider's reluctance to suggest that the fall of the Wall would automatically resolve all problems in both the private and public realms that were caused by its existence. In addition to his prose texts and the aforementioned collection of essays, *The German Comedy*, Schneider published two further, not (yet) translated volumes of essays entitled *Vom Ende der Gewißheit* (1994; *The End of Certainty*) and *Die Diktatur der Geschwindigkeit* (2000; *the dictatorship of speed*). In these essays, he proved to be an astute observer and diagnostician of the Germans' emotional state after unification as well as an outspoken critic of the brand of leftist ideology that his erstwhile comrades-in-arms of the student movement continued to espouse after the fall of the Wall. Inasmuch as Schneider incorporated several of the shrewd observations and topical themes from his essays in *Eduard's Homecoming* (1999; tr. 2000)—occasionally, in verbatim formulations—the novel may be considered both a continuation of and supplement to the author's essayistic work in fictional guise and on a different discursive level. It proved to be fortuitous indeed that after a hiatus of nearly half a century Berlin, Schneider's place of residence and preferred setting, again became the capital of unified Germany, the "Berlin Republic." Hence Berlin has become the uncontested focal point of the political and mental changes that have taken place since 1989 (see Bielefeld) and a rewarding subject for Schneider.

In *Eduard's Homecoming* Schneider resorted to the time-honored device of penning a kind of sequel to *Couplings* in which both protagonist Eduard and his friend Theo (as well as some other figures) reappear in a Berlin environment. Actually, the author suggested that *The Wall Jumper* and the two novels in question form a loosely knit "Berlin Trilogy" (see Schlant 217) that represent distinct phases in Berlin's postwar history and foreground the city in its various manifestations such as its topography, architecture, climate, and, last but not least, its inhabitants. Although the city of Berlin constitutes an undeniable and impressive presence in all three texts, their distinct differences, especially between the two novels on the one hand and *The Wall Jumper* on the other, tend to subvert the validity of Schneider's suggestion. The texts' dissimilar narrative perspectives, generic divergences, and lack of a comparable constellation of characters lead one to surmise that Schneider launched the concept of a "Berlin Trilogy" as an afterthought before or during the completion of *Eduard's Homecoming*.

True, there are brief references in the novel to Alfred Döblin, author of what may count as the most famous literary representation of the dynamic cityscape of Berlin, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, (1929; tr. 1931), and to other writers who chose Berlin as their subject (see *EH* 208). Although Schneider's cursory allusion to his literary predecessors does perhaps not suffice to establish the city as a fully autonomous agent in *Eduard's Homecoming*, these writers had discerned an enduring and defining trait, as the director of Eduard's institute points out to him in self-deprecating fashion: "All of them had testified that Berlin was rebuilt in their day. The city had been undergoing reconstruction for centuries, but it would evidently never be finished" (*EH* 208). In inviting the reader to perceive the momentous changes Berlin is undergoing through protagonist Eduard's perspective, Schneider is seeking to perpetuate a literary tradition that represents the capital as a dynamic metropolis of continual transformation. Indeed, Eduard, who is very much in the center of this conventionally structured novel that hews to a third-person narrative and a linear plot development, turns out to be a keen observer who avidly

registers the rapid changes in the cityscape that are taking place particularly in the Eastern part of Berlin. A committed explorer rather than an uninvolved flaneur, Eduard attempts to read the city like a book or a text with several layers of significance and meaning that evolve only gradually owing to the experimental nature of the urban reconstruction on a grand scale.

Like many of Schneider's protagonists, Eduard exhibits distinctly autobiographical traits. He had left West Berlin before the collapse of the Wall "half in anger" (*EH* 8) because he wanted to escape a "kind of spell, a fine web of discontent and mistrust that paralyzed all spontaneity and left you with only enough energy to crack cynical jokes"—a malaise that afflicts a "large, well educated minority" (*EH* 106-07). The members of the intellectual elite have found a sanctuary with a "precarious, insular cosmopolitanism" (*EH* 51) that, curiously, is protected from outside interference by the Wall. Eduard's departure for the United States entailed, without doubt, his attempt to distance himself from his former ideological allies; at the same time, as one critic polemically posited, Eduard's defection amounted to a virtual surrender to the erstwhile arch enemy of the student movement, "American Imperialism" (see Bielefeld). In the USA, Eduard established his reputation as a research scientist at Stanford. His return to Berlin at the beginning of the 1990s—Schneider does not provide an exact chronology of events—is caused by both an unexpected inheritance, a large apartment house in the then (East) Berlin district of Friedrichshain, as well as by a job offer from a research institute in the Eastern part of the city. Eduard's extended sojourn in the United States has not turned him into a convert and uncritical admirer of the American Way of Life; conversely, his experiences in this country have enabled him to view conditions and situations in Berlin that, on account of his long absence, he is unfamiliar with, in the light of his American experiences. His position of a virtual outsider is especially pronounced in that half of the city he knows least: "In the utterly unfamiliar, plowed-up environment of East Berlin he'd seen himself as a kind of pioneer" (*EH* 165). This outsider position, however, offers the advantage of making him keenly aware of the enormous architect-

tural project in progress—a project that is fraught with political, social, and cultural implications. Both author and protagonist had experienced the event that had caused these changes to take place, the fall of the Wall, from abroad. When Eduard had looked “at TV shots of the Wall’s demolition . . . he was experiencing a surge of exultation at the sight of East Germans brandishing beer cans and making the V sign as they streamed westward through the Wall” (*EH* 35). Nevertheless, Eduard immediately curbs his brief, spontaneous outburst of patriotic sentiments when he notices the subdued reaction of his wife Jenny, the daughter of “an Italian father and a German Jewish mother” (*EH* 53). Jenny’s emotional detachment from an event that was enthusiastically greeted by many Germans is indicative of Eduard’s own, subconscious reservations and misgivings that, at the beginning of the novel, come to the fore in his nightmare about “a reprise of the German centennial celebrations.” These festivities celebrating the breaching of the Wall are marred by the surfacing of “decades-old reproaches disguised as jubilant cries, destructive impulses concealed behind welcoming gestures, a desire for revenge and exposure camouflaged as offers of salvation” (*EH* 7). Such an intimation of the settling of old scores bodes ill for Eduard, who has been thrust into the thick of the developing post-Wall tensions between East and West. The initial jubilation and sense of unity have been replaced by disillusionment and contentiousness; Berlin has become a “hothouse with a microclimate of its own” (*EH* 159) in which it is difficult for newcomers such as Eduard to survive and prosper. Eduard’s discomfort is exacerbated by the actual climate of the city, the “cement-gray, unbroken overcast” (*EH* 138) of the Berlin winter that he is no longer accustomed to, and the notoriously impolite behavior of the native population. Eduard’s aggravations range from his dismay about the “turds daily deposited on the city’s sidewalks by its hundred thousand dogs” (*EH* 138) to what he perceives as a new traffic menace, “ecologically legitimized” cyclists who race along “at near-Olympic speeds . . . scattering dogs, children, and old people” (*EH* 142) in their path.



Yet Eduard cannot be but impressed by the promise and potential of the architectural changes that are taking place and that are particularly evident in the rebuilding efforts in the center of the city. Among the city spaces that attract Eduard's attention, the once barren and desolate Potsdamer Platz stands out. In this void, merely remnants of the once mighty and impenetrable Wall are to be found; the site has been turned into a beehive of construction activity. Despite Eduard's ironic comment about an invitation to a reception that "rather vaingloriously" refers to "Europe's biggest construction site," (*EH* 112) his depiction of the spectacular site itself is undeniably informed by awe at the scope and difficulty of the reconstruction enterprise as well as local pride. There certainly is no hint of Eduard taking "a dim view of the changes occurring in Berlin" (*Costabile-Heming* 503):

All that could be seen of the building project itself were the aids to its construction: stacks of pipes, steel girders, winches, reinforcing bars, tracked vehicles, portable site offices. Situated in and beside the pit were dozens of cranes, the tallest he'd ever seen. It was only when one watched their huge jibs swinging around that some idea of the true scale of the project became apparent. Berlin, it seemed, was marking the end of the millennium by emulating the pharaohs. (*EH* 112-13)

The construction of the new "pyramids"—the term Schneider uses in the German original (156)—and his characterization of the "Potsdamer Platz development" as an "undertaking of Herculean proportions" (*EH* 117) or, as the original has it, "an adventure of Homeric proportions," (162) do not signify the glorification of the new Berlin by comparing it to the architectural wonders of antiquity. Rather, the demolition of the remaining chunks of the Wall as well as the vast excavations for the foundations of the new buildings bring to light what had been hidden from view during the existence of the Wall. These relics, such as the vestiges of Hitler's bunker, which had been demolished after World War II, the "Führer's garage bunker" (*EH* 203), the bunkers of various Nazi offices and ministries, but also "a monitoring shaft the CIA had driven a hundred yards into GDR territory during the Cold War, (*EH* 203), pertain to different phases of

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Berlin and German history. Their almost coincidental rediscovery poses the complex problem of how to deal with the ruins of the past without either completely ignoring or attributing undue importance to them. In particular, the difficulty of creating an appropriate site for commemoration in a terrain in which history has left its distinct imprint is evident from Eduard's observation that the air raid shelter of "Propaganda Minister Goebbels" would soon "have a Holocaust memorial superimposed on it" (EH 203). Schneider contents himself with merely referring to the intensely debated and controversial concept and design of the memorial (see Ladd 167-73) without elaborating and without taking sides; he does, however, acknowledge the perhaps insoluble problems inherent in addressing the legacy of the past and its proper memorialization.

In contrast to Schneider, Günter Grass in his post-Wall novel *Too Far Afield* (1995, tr. 2000), presents the Potsdamer Platz as an object of capitalist speculation where the historical architectural reminders are going to be paved over and buried by shiny new buildings made of glass and steel: "[A] strip that for many decades had been a barren no-man's land and was now a vacant lot, panting for developers; already the first projects were underway, each striving to outdo the others; already the building boom was breaking out; already land prices were on the rise." (Grass 6-7) Schneider is far more ambivalent than Grass; the working title of his novel, "City without a Center" (see Schlant 259, n. 6), provides an indication as to what was at stake. In two essays, he addressed the singular challenge posed by the unprecedented project of creating a new center in the empty space of the previously divided metropolis (see Schneider 1993). Schneider pleaded for time so as to enable city planners and architects to devise comprehensive and appropriate designs and encouraged citizens' input so as to achieve a high degree of their acceptance among the populace. In *Eduard's Heimkehr*, Schneider resorts to metaphor by characterizing the Potsdamer Platz as "the site of the city's open-heart surgery" (EH 202). The implication is clearly that the complex operation will eventually determine success or failure of the difficult process of East-West reconciliation and presage Berlin's

role as the capital of united Germany. Hence Eduard's anguished rhetorical question: "What heart would be inserted in this chest and start beating within it, and what life-form would it awaken?" (EH 203) Inasmuch as the novel depicts the new city center in its construction phase rather than in its stage of completion, the question as to what extent the architectural design can be considered a statement of the new "national self-definition" (Wise 157) of the "Berlin Republic" is not really addressed. Eduard, at any rate, ultimately tends to adopt a cautiously optimistic approach, and he rejects the predictions on the part of one of his acquaintances concerning the dire consequences that would ensue from the opening of the Wall: "[N]ationalism, racism, intertribal slaughter—all the old horrors" (EH 34). In this as in other instances, Eduard is echoing the author's sentiments about the critics of unification. Among these critics, Grass, who had persistently advanced the thesis that the legacy of Auschwitz served as a powerful argument against unification (see Mews 1994, 123-27), represented a prominent voice (see Plonien 197-207). Grass, however, has since modified his stance, as he shows, for example, in tackling in his novella *Crabwalk* (2002; tr. 2002) a previously taboo subject, the expulsion of millions of Germans from the areas East of the Oder-Neisse line.

One may conclude from one scene in particular that Schneider appears to advocate a moderate form of nationalism in the manner of poet and essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who argued that it was appropriate for a self-confident nation to display a degree of patriotism that would not infringe upon the rights of Germany's neighbors (see Enzensberger 2000, 3-4). In *Eduard's Homecoming*, Theo, who in *Couplings* had indulged his penchant for provoking others with his politically unorthodox views, tells Eduard that he again had managed to infuriate his friends, the habitual customers of a pub in the Western district of Charlottenburg, Eduard's old haunt, by betting "that at least half the room would join in if someone . . . started singing the national anthem" (EH 43). Theo wins his bet because a Turkish poet, who had recently become a German citizen, forcefully "took up the melody" (EH 43) when Theo stopped singing on account of a

severe coughing spell. Most of the guests joined in, but the “regulars heard the forbidden strains with disbelief, with every sign of horror . . . [and] left the place in a panic without settling their debts” (EH 43). This scene—albeit a somewhat anecdotal one owing to the fact that Theo reports it to Eduard—may serve as an indication that Schneider wanted to create a positive counterpart to the opponents and critics of unification. He selected a Turk living in Germany who, on account of not being burdened by the legacy of German history, may be the better patriot who is capable of demonstrating to his fellow citizens how to articulate patriotic feelings. The irony that one critic detected in the depiction of this scene (see Balzer) is then not directed against the singing of the national anthem but rather against the excessive reaction of Eduard’s former fellow-travelers. Schneider’s view of the unproblematic relationship of non-German residents to Germany is supported by a neutral observer, the successful Austrian dramatist Peter Turrini. Turrini’s play *Ich liebe dieses Land* (I love this country) was staged at the end of 2001 at the Berliner Ensemble; it takes place in Germany and features as protagonists a Polish cleaning woman and a Nigerian immigrant in danger of being deported. They, as Turrini explained, are the only characters in the play who genuinely love Germany; in contrast, native Germans appear guilt-ridden and are constantly toying with the idea of living in another country (see Turrini 242).

Schneider’s character Eduard initially drew the obvious conclusion from his discontent and emigrated. His return confronts him not only with the problems of the post-Wall present but, as his reflections on the historical architectural ruins indicate, also with those of the past—a past that includes the legacies of National Socialism, the GDR, and the intellectual baggage of the student movement. But Eduard’s endeavors to come to terms with both the past and the present do not only take place on a level of abstract reflection; rather, Schneider uses the inheritance as a device to show Eduard’s personal and inextricable involvement in issues from which he had previously remained aloof because they did not seem to concern him personally. Especially the new laws seeking to redress the expropriations during both the Third

Reich and the GDR have created an entirely novel situation: “[A] magic formula termed ‘restitution’ . . . was bringing the history of the last sixty years home to the present generation in the form of family history” (EH 75). Although he is legally the owner of the aforementioned apartment house that he (and his brother) have inherited from their grandfather—whom they had never met—Eduard’s attempt to inspect his property meets with resistance on the part of the anarchist squatters occupying the building: they shoot at him. The police are of little help; Eduard notes to his chagrin a “West German officer’s perplexing adaptation to his new working environment, and his readiness to empathize with his East German colleagues” (EH 22) when that officer typecasts Eduard in the role of the wealthy West German who is bent on exploiting his poor East German compatriots in the apartment house. Yet, as Schneider makes clear, in Eduard’s case this cliché does not apply; moreover, the story of the occupancy does not support an interpretation based on a dichotomous East-West pattern. Actually, the initial cooperation between the occupants from both East and West Berlin eventually resulted in the suppression of the former by the latter, the experienced and “tough urban guerillas.” In the end, “the Osis were more or less expelled by the Wessis” (EH 67)—the self-styled Western victims of capitalism are devoid of solidarity with their Eastern counterparts.

In further complicating the plot, Schneider subjects his protagonist to additional trials. Unlike the representatives of the student movement, whose relationship to the media was characterized by hostility, the squatters do not avoid contact with the media; quite the contrary, they skillfully use them as a means of manipulating public opinion. They spread the rumor that Eduard’s grandfather Egon Hoffmann had participated in the “Aryanization” of property by taking advantage of his Jewish business partner Kasimir Marwitz and acquiring the apartment house from him for a sum that was far below its fair market value. Accompanied by TV crews, the squatters demonstrate, carrying banners with slogans (they have been changed from the original and adapted by the translator for an American reading public) such as “BACK TO YOUR LAIRS, NAZI HEIRS ARYANIZERS, TERRORIZERS!”

(EH 212) that seek to establish a link between Eduard, the presumed beneficiary of Nazi injustice, and the “lobbyists [who] advocated reconstructing the historic castle of the kings of Prussia” (EH 215).<sup>2</sup> The castle, situated in the old center of the city, had been heavily damaged during World War II and then razed in 1950 by the GDR authorities. In order to gain public support, the advocates of the castle’s reconstruction mounted an effective advertising campaign and erected an entire wall that replicated the original in the form of a “painted backdrop” (EH 214) on scaffolding. The castle controversy, which still has not been entirely resolved, serves Schneider as a means of involving his protagonist in one of the significant debates about Berlin’s post-Wall future that pitted East against West inasmuch as the reconstruction of the castle entailed the demolition of another edifice, the Palace of the (former German Democratic) Republic (see Ladd 58-70), and thereby “developed into a war over Berlin’s history and identity” (EH 215). Whereas the castle advocates were branded by their opponents as adherents of “Prussianism, the monarchy, and fascism” (EH 216), East Berliners viewed plans to destroy the Palace of the Republic as yet “another attempt by the ‘colonialists’ from the West to rob them of a piece of their history” (EH 215). Schneider’s successful intertwining of Eduard’s comparatively unimportant inheritance matter with weighty, hotly debated issues of collective identity leads to paradoxical results. Although Eduard has parted company with his former friends of leftist persuasion, he has retained strong convictions about fairness, decency, and justice. Hence he is both chagrined and despondent about his newly acquired public image: “Eduard, the erstwhile hope of the biology students’ Red cell, was being made to look like a rabid landlord, the evil jinni of expropriation and colonialism, and a representative of the castle lobby” (EH 218). Yet his attorney Klott, a former follower of Mao Zedong who has managed to establish a lucrative law practice, counters Eduard’s criticism of the restitution practice with a weighty argument that is buttressed by the documentary evidence cited by Schneider (see EH [309]). Furthermore, Klott provides a brief history lesson that Eduard cannot possibly refute: “Restitution would be justified

even if its sole purpose were to give back exiled Jews their land and buildings. Large tracts of central Berlin used to be owned by them" (EH 243). Only after the fall of the Wall had it become possible to achieve a measure of justice owing to the fact that the GDR had perpetuated the Nazi practice by declaring formerly Jewish possessions to be "national property" (EH 243).

Eduard's dilemma is resolved in an unexpected fashion when the professed anti-capitalistic occupants turn out to be savvy businesspeople and purchase the apartment house. The way for such a surprising outcome is paved by the "rehabilitation" of Eduard's grandfather, a nominal member of the Nazi party who, it turns out, did not exploit his business partner's predicament. Rather, the grandfather provided a refuge for him when he was threatened with arrest and bought the apartment house from his daughter for considerably more than the asking price. Somewhat paradoxically, Egon Hoffmann was not, by any means, a heroic resistance fighter in the mold of the students of the White Rose or the conspirators of 20 July 1944 who failed in their attempt to assassinate Hitler—Schneider speculates that, had the plot succeeded, the group of Count Stauffenberg would have established an authoritarian version of democracy inferior to the actual democracy that eventually prevailed in West Germany (see Mews 2002, 13). Schneider seeks to undermine the potential hero worship of resistance fighters by endowing the grandfather with considerable human (or, rather, male) weaknesses that made him the black sheep of the family: "Egon probably made a disastrous husband and father. He was a show-off, a gambler, an incorrigible ladies' man" (EH 271), the daughter of Kasimir Marwitz and Egon's former mistress, who succeeded in escaping to Florida, tells Eduard. Despite having been betrayed by Egon, she magnanimously encourages Eduard "to be proud of him" (EH 271) because he had displayed the "courage and decency" (EH 275) that many of his compatriots lacked. Apart from Editha Marwitz's narrative function as a "deus ex machina" (Kirsch) who provides the missing links in the inheritance matter, she also articulates Schneider's views on how to appropriate the past: "Any German third-grader can spell the names of Hitler, Goebbels, and

Eichmann, but he's never heard of the Egons. You're doing a regular PR job on those murderers! What sort of examples do you want to imprint on your children's hearts and minds?" (EH 275-76).

It is surely not entirely free of wishful thinking when Schneider has a Jewish survivor advocate a different approach to the Nazi past, an approach that instead of privileging the great criminals draws attention to the small number of unsung decent Germans and proclaims them to be models for those postwar generations that are untainted by any connection to the Nazi crimes. It is noteworthy that a similarly understanding Jewish survivor, who encourages the guilt-ridden first-person narrator, is to be found in Bernhard Schlink's novel *The Reader* (1995; tr. 1997). Egon Hoffmann may then be considered a pocket-size Oskar Schindler (see Rohloff); he is the fictional equivalent of those Berliners who helped their Jewish fellow citizens survive the war in the underground. In his essay, "Saving Konrad Latte," which was first published in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 2000, Schneider told the authentic story of a Jewish musician who, with the help of several non-Jewish Germans, had managed to escape deportation to a concentration camp in war-time Berlin and lived to see the end of the war. This story is remarkable not only because of Konrad Latte's luck, ingenuity, and survival instinct but also, as the subheading of the article states, because "[f]or every Jew who was saved, dozens of Germans performed everyday acts of heroism to make it possible." (Schneider 2000, 3) Yet when Schneider was asked in the 1970s to pursue the matter, he eventually declined on account of not wishing, "in the spirit of '68 . . . to belittle the past," (Schneider 2000, 3) that is, he did not want to provide arguments to those engaged in suppressing or denying Nazi crimes. In *Eduard's Homecoming*, Schneider takes issue with his former position that enabled him and his political friends to benefit from the "structural settling of accounts"—a concept that allowed them to refer to "the generation responsible for Nazi fascism" (EH 75) in general without making individual distinctions. In concentrating on " 'the sociological and psychological preconditions' for the megacrime" (EH 75) neither the



"little cowardices, the gratuitous denunciations and despicable acts" (EH 75) that had facilitated the Holocaust nor the "minor acts of decency" (EH 75) had caught the attention of the student movement. Only after abandoning and modifying previously held convictions has Eduard become capable of developing a more complex understanding of the past that does not fit a simplistic black-and white pattern. However, acknowledging and honoring the courage and decency of ordinary citizens is not intended, as Schneider emphasizes both in his essay on Konrad Latte and in the novel, to "neutralize German guilt" (Schneider 2000, 3); rather, "the story of *one* relatively decent individual magnifies the guilt of innumerable conformists and accomplices rather than minimizing it" (EH 288).

In seeking to promote a differentiated view of the past, Schneider polemicizes—implicitly in the novel (see EH 210) and explicitly in his essays—against the simplistic and hence popular theses of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen in his *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996). Schneider takes issue with Goldhagen's tendency to reduce centuries of German history to the prehistory of the Holocaust and to revive the notion of collective guilt by establishing a dichotomous pattern of victims and perpetrators in which all Germans during the Nazi period appear to be driven by "eliminationist antisemitism" (Goldhagen, 80-128). Yet Schneider has been facing an uphill battle in seeking to convey to both his German and American readers his conviction that "German identity cannot be founded on the history of the Holocaust alone and on the belief that one belongs to a people of murderers" (Schneider 1996). As a case in point, he cites his attempt to publish an essay in the *New York Times* that satirized the stereotypes of Germans prevailing in the American media (Schneider 2000, 21). After tough negotiations with the editors, the article was published—with Schneider's consent—largely devoid of satire; it ended with a plea to acknowledge—despite Auschwitz—those "thousands of Germans [who] risked their lives to help Jews" (Schneider 1996). To counter the image of the brutal, heel-clicking, blond, and blue-eyed "Hollywood German" who is constantly barking orders—an image popu-

larized by innumerable films—postwar generations of Germans adopted, particularly when abroad, a mode of behavior and mindset that is diametrically opposed to that image, Schneider claims. The “good German” is continually “struggling with his past . . . feels guilt . . . shuns patriotism and rejects a unified Germany” (Schneider 1996). Eduard, in fact, may in part qualify as a representative of the “good German.” For example, in San Francisco he meticulously avoided sounding like a “Hollywood German” (see *EH* 53), and he is plagued by latent guilt feelings about the sins of his forefathers.

In Berlin, Eduard has the opportunity to study the dialectics of accommodation and (minor) acts of courage and resistance during the second German dictatorship in the GDR—a dictatorship that, in several respects, is not comparable to the terror of the Third Reich. Yet just as during the Nazi era, individuals had a choice, Schneider suggests. The case of Rürup, director of the Molecular Biology Institute, Eduard’s place of employment, offers a case in point. Appointed to his post after the fall of the Wall not because of his scientific achievements but rather because he has not politically been tainted by cooperating with the GDR authorities—he refused to work for the Stasi, the dreaded secret police—in retrospect Rürup is not sure whether he made the correct decision. He realizes that “the talented colleagues who had compromised with the regime and retained access to international congresses and exchanges of information were definitely his superiors today” (*EH* 86). For Rürup then the unanswerable question is: “If the price of moral integrity is isolation, inactivity, and, ultimately, bemedaled stupidity, what is there to be said for it?” (*EH* 86). It is also Rürup who draws Eduard’s attention to the consequences of the Western takeover of the institute where the underprivileged and underpaid Eastern coworkers greatly resent what they perceive as the undeserved privileges of their superiors from the West. What at first glance seems to entail a glaring example of colonization and exploitation assumes a different connotation through Rürup’s anecdote about a bank in Washington, DC, where the directors were white and the employees black. The latter treated their white customers with “undisguised con-

tempt"—a treatment the customers accepted meekly because their status as "slaveholder descendants" (EH 83) served as a powerful impediment to protest. The East German coworkers' attitude toward their West German counterparts corresponds to that of the black employees—an indication of the possibility for East Germans to transcend the role of victims in a conflict that is unlikely to be resolved immediately.

On the one hand, Schneider's extensive sojourns in the United States provided him with models for interpreting the complex problems that arose in the wake of German unification; on the other, he also emphasizes the comic potential of these problems—notably in the area of literature or, more precisely, the academic pursuit of literary studies. In a satirical passage, Schneider sketched what may qualify as the outline of a mini campus novel. On account of his numerous guest professorships in various German departments of renowned institutions in the USA, Schneider is fully conversant with trends in literary scholarship in general and the course of German Studies in particular. In the 1970s, "a hitherto neglected field of research: the literature of 'the other Germany'" had been discovered that "proved a boon" to a faculty that was forever balancing on the knife-edge of its own superfluity: it was virgin research territory awaiting investment" (EH 38). Schneider's satirical thrust is motivated in part, one may surmise, by the alleged claim of the proponents of GDR literature that it was "infinitely better than the West German writing" (EH 38). Yet whereas the West German author Schneider sought to elicit laughter about the American academics who tended to overrate GDR literature and grossly misjudge the state in which it was produced, his portrayal of the chief representative of post-Wall GDR letters is largely devoid of humor and irony.

The figure of aforementioned poet Theodor (Theo) Warenberg is based on the character Robert, friend of the first-person narrator in *The Wall Jumper*. Theo was inspired by both Thomas Brasch (d. 2001) and Heiner Müller (d. 1995). In contrast to *Couplings*, Theo's Jewish origins are barely mentioned in *Eduard's Homecoming*; therefore it is most unlikely that GDR writer Jurek Becker (d. 1997) served as a model, as one critic claimed (see Riordan

2000, 628). Brasch, the son of Jewish emigrés who had been living in West Berlin since 1976, lent Theo the features of the good and supportive “traveling companion” (EH 95) in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale that Schneider appropriated as an intertext in the novel. However, Theo’s traits that are derived from Müller such as his self-destructive consumption of whisky and cigars, his desire to provoke, his inclination to conceive of visionary, apocalyptic scenarios, and his Stasi contacts (in the novel, it is Theo’s brother who spies on him) tend to dominate. Above all, it is Theo’s unrelenting critique of unification—he had “aspired to bury triumphant capitalism under poetic gravestones so monstrously heavy that his brilliant obituaries would be all that remained of it” (EH 38)—that causes Eduard’s gradual withdrawal. Paradoxically, a suave and seasoned politician from West Berlin suggests at the grand memorial service in Theo’s honor that he, the seemingly implacable foe of capitalism, belongs “neither to East nor to West; he belongs to literature” (EH 286). Schneider—who has the service take place at the East Berlin Volksbühne instead of the Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht’s former theater, where Müller was honored—uses the politician, a former member of a dueling fraternity, to prevent the East from claiming Theo as a proponent of a separate identity—a skilful rhetorical maneuver that yields a result with which Eduard—albeit unenthusiastically—is inclined to agree: “Maybe Theo really did belong to everyone” (EH 286). In declaring Theo’s work part of a common intellectual and literary heritage that is shared by all Berliners (and Germans), Schneider questions the validity of attempts to maintain a separate Eastern identity.

Despite the fascinating figure of Theo and the intriguing questions the novel raises about the role of literature, writers, and intellectuals in general before and after the fall of the Wall, Schneider does not attribute major significance to literature—perhaps a legacy of the student movement that held literary studies in low esteem and considered them politically irrelevant. Rather, it is in the field of genetics—Eduard’s area of research and expertise—in which important decisions concerning the future

cussions that explore the scientific, ethical, and political dimensions of genetics; suffice it to mention that, in principle, these discussions boil down to the nature versus nurture conundrum. In one scholarly debate at his institute, Eduard is forced to take issue with prejudices prevailing in Germany on account of the inhumane Nazi practices involving the genetically "inferior." He persuasively contends that "genetically preprogrammed tendencies" are also "subject to environmental influences" (EH 210); hence behavioral characteristics can neither be exclusively attributed to the genetic makeup nor to societal and other effects. Here again Eduard departs from the Marxist-inspired tenets of the student movement that attributed supreme importance to socio-economic factors. In fact, Eduard repudiates all ideologies, social utopias, revolutionary designs for a future society, and philosophically founded promises of redemption; instead he opts for a new pragmatism that is based on the results of scientific research. Eduard now holds that the "faceless figures in laboratories were the revolutionaries of the future" and that they "would change society more lastingly than any social revolution or social genius . . . any future Lenins, Maos, or Che Guevaras" (EH 237).

It is legitimate to ask whether Schneider's figure Eduard has compensated for his rejection of a societal model that was inspired by the student movement by substituting a different model that is supported by new hegemonic science disciplines such as molecular biology and genetics. As Enzensberger warned, the scientific-industrial complex adheres to similar fantasies of omnipotence as did the thoroughly discredited proponents of the now defunct "real" socialism (see Enzensberger 2001, 222, 219). Yet the inherent promise of happiness and fulfillment in the sketchy design of a brave new world that Eduard develops is, at best, evident on a discursive level; in the novel's plot, Eduard remains mired in his marital difficulties. Genetics, at any rate, do not (yet) provide any solution to Eduard's obsession with what he perceives to be his wife's lack of orgasms during marital intercourse. Next to the inheritance plot, this obsession forms an important narrative thread in the novel. In *Couplings*, Eduard had proceeded from the assumption of a limited cohabitation with

the women in his life, but the dream of “free love” and both male and female sexual emancipation (see Schneider 1981, 210-51) had yielded rather problematic results. In *Eduard’s Homecoming*, the protagonist has landed in the presumably safe harbor of an almost bourgeois marriage—as the offspring of three children indicates. However, his wife Jenny represents the type of a self-confident, thoroughly emancipated, and somewhat capricious woman who carries her independence too far, it seems to Eduard, by not succumbing to complete sexual fulfillment. How severely Eduard’s male pride is wounded is evident from his desperate, life-threatening experiment that is designed to achieve the desired sexual effect. This experiment takes place not in private seclusion but in a public space, one of the observation towers of the “only building far and wide to have survived the war,” the Weinhaus Huth at the Potsdamer Platz, now a “historical monument” (*EH*, 113) that was to be preserved at all costs. Eduard’s choice of locale provides an indication that what at first glance may be perceived as his misguided male fantasy, a desperately comical “slapstick” (see Bielefeld), or a “sex farce” (Kirsch) and a device to titillate the reader, ultimately transgresses the boundaries of a purely private marital relationship. Because of Jenny’s Jewish origins, the return of the family to Berlin, a cityscape resonant with the vestiges of the past, does put a severe strain on the marriage. Eduard’s (and Jenny’s) initial assumption that “it was the first and most important right of two lovers to thumb their noses at collective history” (*EH* 53) eventually proves to be untenable as collective history reasserts itself forcefully. Hence Eduard begins to attribute his assumed sexual failure to Jenny’s “problems with the Germans and their chilly city, [her] fundamental mistrust of a husband belonging to that murderous race, the price of a multicultural marriage” (*EH* 304).

The resolution of Eduard’s marital dilemma occurs only after Eduard’s short-lived affair with an East German coworker at his institute. Yet Schneider again disappoints the expectations of those who cast unification in terms of the male-aggressive FRG’s “conquest” of the female, passive GDR inasmuch as the coworker turns out to be a self-reliant, independent woman without any

trace of submissiveness. Like Jenny, Marina does not correspond to the ideal of the beautiful, rich, intelligent, but entirely domesticated woman—an ideal perhaps subconsciously desired by Eduard—that appears at the end of Andersen's fairy tale (see *EH* 96). Nevertheless, Eduard's short-lived liaison must be considered a fortunate coincidence in that his male self-confidence, which has been severely "rattled by the women's libbers" (*EH* 250) in the West, revives on account of his partner's infinite capacity for experiencing orgasms—a trait, Schneider avers, that she shares with women in the East, who statistically outstrip their Western counterparts in this field of endeavor (see *EH* 15, 251).

Apart from restoring Eduard's self-confidence in the sexual arena, Marina fulfills another important function: she suggests a weekend trip to the small, "thousand-year-old" town of Weimar (*EH* 255), the erstwhile residence of the German literary classics Goethe and Schiller. On what turns out to be a belated *Bildungsreise* rather than, as Eduard had imagined, a "pleasure trip" to a "health resort for his wounded manhood" (*EH* 247), she is instrumental in preparing the way for Eduard's complete reconciliation with the "native land to which he had become a stranger" (*EH* 250) and his acceptance of its entire legacy. On their way to Weimar, Eduard begins to "reaccustom himself to the beauties of restraint" (*EH* 249) that he perceives in a landscape that offers such a stark visual contrast to California. In the famed Hotel Elephant, he peruses the guest list that extends from Austrian dramatist "Grillparzer to Thomas Mann and Adolf Hitler" (*EH* 252) and speculates about the course of German history that is characterized by the close geographical proximity of the main locus of German classical literature and the Buchenwald concentration camp. Eduard begins to realize that urbanity and cosmopolitanism rather than a small-town atmosphere of narrow-mindedness and prejudice had prevailed in classical Weimar. He belatedly recognizes that a peculiar set of circumstances had deprived him and his entire generation in the Western part of Germany of access to a vital part of their history: "Remembering how allergic schoolchildren were to the saints of German classical literature, he suddenly thought how splendidly compatible that allergy had

been with the acceptance of the country's division." (EH 257) Therefore, a critic's contention that Eduard and Marina explore Weimar with an air of arrogance and superciliousness is untenable (see Bruns); rather, Eduard's reconciliation with the country of his birth and its history serves as a kind of prerequisite for a happy ending of sorts in the domestic realm. After his separation from Marina and an unintentional, foolhardy act of bravery, he finally succeeds in providing his wife with complete sexual fulfillment; there is, however, no guarantee of unending happiness.

Without doubt, *Eduard's Homecoming* can claim a position of prominence among recent Berlin novels in that it retraces and presents in fictional guise and via a suspenseful, entertaining tale virtually all of the relevant topical issues that have come to the fore after the fall of the Wall. Above all, Schneider conveys a sense of the dynamism inherent in the redevelopment of the capital's urban landscape in the mid-1990s without, however, succumbing to unbridled optimism concerning Berlin's future role. In granting his protagonist Eduard, in many respects the author's alter ego, a modicum of domestic bliss in a marriage that seems to hold the promise of complete reconciliation between Germans and Jews—at least in the private realm—as well as enabling him to settle the inheritance matter amicably and to restore his good name, Schneider opts for portraying a state of—albeit fragile—normality. As the author remarked in an interview, normality in itself is hardly desirable, and most individuals and nations endeavor to be exceptional rather than normal (see Mews 2002, 15). Yet in the German context the preoccupation with the past has tended to render aspirations to achieve “normal” conditions problematic (see Brockmann 134-35). The major debates of the 1980s and 1990s such as the *Historikerstreit*, the dispute about Goldhagen's book, the controversy about the Holocaust memorial, and Martin Walser's acceptance speech on being awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade association in 1998 which resulted in a fierce disagreement between Walser and Ignatz Bubis, then President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, offer ample evidence of the inescapable presence of the past. However, Schneider does both in his essays and in *Eduard's Home-*



coming, advocates a novel approach that avoids the pitfalls into which the two literary heavyweights and antipodes during the unification debate, Grass and Walser, appeared to have stumbled. Whereas Walser professed to be severely troubled by the media's instrumentalization of Auschwitz via its use as a "Moralkeule" or "moral cudgel" (Walser 20) in the sense that the invocation of Auschwitz immediately stifled further debate, Grass, as indicated before, considered Auschwitz a moral imperative that precluded striving for unification. As a member of the first postwar generation, Schneider, after his emancipation from the ideological regimentation of the student movement, accepted the legacy of Auschwitz—albeit not as a paralyzing, crushing burden—and began to conceive of the division of Germany as a result of the Cold War rather than as punishment for the crimes of the Hitler regime (see Mews 2002, 18). Hence Schneider, once the Wall had come down and unification had been achieved, viewed the many post-Wall changes that radically altered the cityscape of Berlin in an essentially positive light—as is evident from the previously mentioned happy ending of sorts in *Eduard's Homecoming*. Such an ending signifies by no means the complete acceptance of the *status quo* on the part of Schneider's protagonist nor does it signal the author's acquiescence in a complacent bourgeois existence, as one critic claimed (Schreiber 24). Rather, both author and protagonist remain critical—if pragmatic—intellectuals who offer constructive solutions for dealing with the past by proposing the emulation of positive role models rather than the continual indulgence in demonizing the villains of recent German history. It is then not so much Schneider's intent, as has been remarked, to engage in "a re-visioning of the recent German past" (Boyers 36); rather, he intends to shift the focus to a more productive, less inhibiting and paralyzing approach.

The publication of Schneider's novel occurred in March 1999, shortly after the federal elections of 1998 that brought about a generational change among the political leadership—with the result that Germany has been represented since 1998 by former members of the student movement such as chancellor Gerhard Schröder and minister of foreign affairs Joschka Fischer. It may

be argued that their biographies correspond to some extent to those of author Schneider and his fictional protagonist Eduard, notably in their gradual transformation from ideologically rigid activists to consensus-oriented, political pragmatists. Moreover, the generational change coincided more or less with the completion of the move of the legislative and executive branches from Bonn to Berlin. The political entity of the “Berlin Republic,” although in several respects a continuation of its predecessor, the West German “Bonn Republic,” has also begun to assume an identity of its own; metonymically, Berlin stands for Germany (see Nooteboom 48). Whereas *Eduard’s Heimkehr* depicts a transitional stage in the establishment of the “Berlin Republic” during the early and mid-1990s, the trajectory of subsequent developments in the political realm appears to confirm the novel’s implicit message that the East-West tensions will eventually be overcome.

More than perhaps any other post-Wall event, the establishment of the “Berlin Republic” marks a caesura connoting the definitive end of the postwar period. Yet in *Eduard’s Homecoming* Schneider does not, as has been demonstrated, consider the past a dispensable commodity. Rather, he provides an encompassing glance backwards but, at the same time, he projects cautious optimism about the future. It is then misleading to argue that “Eduard’s return codifies the very real and persistent division that still exists between East and West. (Costabile-Heming 507). Actually, Eduard’s return to the country of his birth and the city in which he spent the major part of his life is clearly a genuine homecoming and results, despite the initial difficulties of readjustment that he experiences, in his (and his family’s) essentially successful (re)integration into a dynamically developing metropolis that is striving for a new, post-Wall identity.

## Notes

1 The present essay is loosely based on my article, “Der Wunsch nach ‘Normalität’ – Betrachtungen zu Peter Schneiders Postwenderroman *Eduards Heimkehr*,” *Grenzgänge. Studien zur Literatur der Moderne*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol28/iss1/12>

*Festschrift für Hans-Jörg Knobloch*. Ed. Helmut Koopmann and Manfred Misch. Paderborn: Mentis, 2002. 327-43, and comprises an updated, enlarged, and thoroughly revised adaptation rather than a literal translation.

2 The distinction between "castle" ("Schloss") and "palace" ("Palast") is important here. In the German original (see 285, 287), the demonstrators deliberately misquote the motto of Georg Büchner and Ludwig Weidig's revolutionary pamphlet *The Hessian Messenger* (1834, tr. 1993) so as to avoid being misunderstood. The substitution of "castles" for "palaces" in "Friede den Hütten, Krieg den Palästen" ("Peace to the peasants / War on the palaces") signals their intent to fight the planned reconstruction of the castle of the kings of Prussia and German emperors as well as their determination to preserve the Palace of the Republic at all costs.

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