

1994

## Günter de Bruyn: Zwischenbilanz. Eine Jugend in Berlin

Janet Swaffar  
*University of Texas at Austin*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/gdr>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

---

### Recommended Citation

Swaffar, Janet (1994) "Günter de Bruyn: Zwischenbilanz. Eine Jugend in Berlin," *GDR Bulletin*: Vol. 20: Iss. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/gdrb.v20i1.1124>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in GDR Bulletin by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

"entwickelten Sozialismus" hatte Volker Braun nie etwas am Hut. Er sah die DDR-Gesellschaft schon immer als "im Übergang befindlich" (S.199), wie er im letzten Teil dieses Bandes abgedruckten "Gespräch mit Peter von Becker und Michael Merschmeier" sagt. Man mag einwenden, daß all dies jetzt nach dem Zusammenbruch der DDR ein alter Hut sei. Der letzte Text in diesem Band ist eine Rede Volker Brauns, die er 1987 auf dem X. Schriftstellerkongreß der DDR gehalten hat. Sie trägt den Titel "Die hellen Orte" und zeigt, wie fremd Braun bei aller DDR-spezifischen Thematik das Verweilen im kleinen Raum eines Staatsgebildes ist. Ihn interessiert die größere Herausforderung "auf dem freien Feld": "wo wir das Eigene nicht einpassen ins Gewohnte sondern einen neuen Ort erfinden" (S. 206). Er fragt sich "angesichts der industriellen Megamaschine, die die Natur verheert," ob er "den Wahnwitz des Weltzustands in (s)einen Texten fasse: und die neue Chance zugleich" (S. 206, 207), und schließt seinen Beitrag mit der Erkenntnis, daß es nicht mehr möglich ist, "die Probleme in Menschengruppen und Regionen einzugrenzen (...) und ebensowenig, uns herauszuhalten aus dem neuen Denken, der solidarischen Weltvernunft, die unsere Orte erhellt. Wir schreiben, wie Anna Seghers sagte, 'damit viele aufatmen unter dem Licht der Worte'" (S. 210).

Wolfgang Ertl  
University of Iowa

De Bruyn, Günter. *Zwischenbilanz. Eine Jugend in Berlin*. Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1992. 378 pp.

Born in 1926, Günter de Bruyn's autobiography deals with his life up to the early 1950s. The concept "tapestry" comes to mind in a search for terms to describe his narrative approach. This is a very self-conscious book, whose author presents conversations obliquely (often as indirect speech) but with the voice of someone who remembers every word and gesture (often in extended adjectival constructions). Even his failure to remember is recast as probative ("Ob ich, wie meine Erinnerungen will, die Begegnung mit dem US-Piloten an diesem Tag hatte, stelle ich lieber in Frage: sie paßt hier zu gut. Jedenfalls war es auch ein schneeloser Wintertag..." p. 162). Little retrospection occurs about how time may blur images or cause memory to lapse. Perhaps for this reason, although the book is elegantly phrased and informative about history, people, and places, I found it disturbing. What it boiled down to for me was the question of what autobiographies as a genre are supposed to do: presume a collective consciousness about a shared reality or reveal the private life and psychological development of the self vis-à-vis a tenuously concretized public sphere. De Bruyn chose to speak for others rather than uncover aspects of himself. The result is a documentary gesture, self exposition rather than self discovery.

The author presents his life as a piece of history revealed in his participation in public events. Those events, in turn, have images and language recreated by a magisterial narrator. Because his virtual omnipotence as narrator focuses on events rather than mediating recall with the author's current or reflected reactions to those events, the end effect is to say "this is what happened" rather than reveal how de Bruyn the writer has changed or responded to shifting points in his experience. Indeed, his assessments of events make implicit claims to objectivity. But de Bruyn does not tell us when he made his assessments nor what questions might be raised against his memories.

Thus, after meeting a downed American pilot who is in search of a German prisoner-of-war camp, the author reports that even those effected by the air raids blamed the war, not Hitler or the enemy ("Auch die Bombengeschädigten, unter denen ich später saß, verwünschten weder den Feind noch den Hitler, sondern den Krieg schlechthin." p. 163). Two characteristics of what I find "magisterial" in de Bruyn's tone stand out here. First, the author tends to attribute problems to the machinery perpetrating events, the impersonal functions, not its agents.]

Second, de Bruyn "cites" those around him as the authority for these memories. Whereas he may be uncertain about the time or place of an event, its import is frequently confirmed by clearly recalled "others" or "we." In short, de Bruyn's position is frequently withdrawn into normative, collective memory.

When he expresses opinions, it is to describe behavior rather than explore its origin, contemporary social implications, or psychological impact. In the section called "Aber keine Menschen" (p. 201), the author relates meeting his former military drill sergeant after the war, someone he remembers as having made his life a misery for weeks on end. The drill sergeant, on the other hand, is delighted to see him and recalls only having shared a period of common suffering. When de Bruyn points out that his own perspective was that of a victim rather than a comrade-in-arms, the man responds that the military encourages the personnel to be brutal so that trainees will prefer serving on the front to remaining in the barracks (p. 202). De Bruyn concludes that although the former drill sergeant can analyze the mechanisms of the oppressive system extremely well, he has never attempted to break out of those systems. With such observations de Bruyn concomitantly implies that there exists for him a higher standard than the one he critiques in others. But how de Bruyn came by this standard, what the standard is and how it might function remain unstated. Thus the author analogizes others to his views (people are like or unlike him except for a missing characteristic). He rarely tells us what that person's behavior made him, de Bruyn, think or feel. Exceptions do occur, notably the section "Wie in schlechten Romanen," but they are not the rule.

What is troubling, then, in *Zwischenbilanz*, is a lack of agency and a lack of subordinate ideas, notably the missing "because." Why, in de Bruyn's view, is the drill sergeant the way he is? Has he changed since 1944 or hasn't he? Are perceptions from then and "now" similar or dissimilar? These are, after all, the questions of autobiographies and autobiographical novels (one thinks here of Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, Rehmann's *Der Mann auf dem Kanzel*, Grass' *Die Blechtrommel* or Lenz' *Deutschstunde*). Thus, the recent autobiographical accounts of, for example, Ruth Klüger (*Weiter Leben*) or Jost Hermand (*Als Pimpf in Polen*) often inform by frankly acknowledging memory lapses or discrepant memories (which frequently are revealing in their own right) and juxtapositioning present awareness with a corollary or disjunctive experience from the past. Klüger, in her reflections about Nazi

domination and responses to events in the 1930s and 1940s, melds consciousness from multiple narrative strands: descriptions of people and circumstances are linked to emotional and physical sensations. Many reflections have both past and present manifestations. Rather than, as in *Zwischenbilanz*, presenting history as a sequence of experiences, Klüger's narrative voice prompts readers to rethink and challenge the societal assumptions that enabled those experiences.

In her autobiographical *French Lessons*, author Alice Kaplan reflects about an author who sometimes uses his child voice and sometimes writes as an adult remembering. In *Zwischenbilanz*, de Bruyn uses only a sovereign, cognitively-distanced adult voice. The resulting autobiographical tapestry is rich in detail, but its effect and the particularity of its message are muted.

Janet Swaffar  
University of Texas at Austin