

An abstract painting featuring two stylized figures. The figure on the left is primarily red with a white face and a small blue mark. The figure on the right is primarily white with a red face and a red mouth. They are set against a dark, swirling background. The overall style is expressive and modern.

**GEORGINA PAUL**

**PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER  
IN POST-1945 GERMAN LITERATURE**

# Perspectives on Gender in Post-1945 German Literature

Georgina Paul



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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The cover image, one of a series of six woodcuts that, together with Köhler's seven poems, constituted the first, freestanding, limited-edition publication of *Elektra. Spiegelungen* (1985), is used by kind permission of the artist, Gudrun Höritzsch. My thanks to her, and to Barbara Köhler and Werner J. Hannappel for their help in scanning the image.

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## Note on the Translations

IT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT to me during my work on this study that it should be accessible to readers who do not read German, notwithstanding the importance of textual detail, including linguistic texture, to the way literature works. For this reason, all quotations from primary texts are given in both German and English, the latter from published translations where these are available. For reasons of length, all works of theory, philosophy, and critical commentary are, where the language of the original is not English, given in English translation only. So, too, are most (though not all) statements made by the authors in interviews and other non-literary forms. English sources of non-English texts are indicated throughout; where only the German source is given, the translations are my own.



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## Introduction

THROUGHOUT HUMAN HISTORY and in all forms of human society, the existence of two sexes and the social organization of their relationship to each other have generated a diversity of concepts and meanings, ideal characteristics and qualities, that come together in abbreviated form in the gender terms "masculine" and "feminine." What masculinity and femininity mean in any given society is, among other things, mediated through culturally symbolic forms such as art, dance, music, and literature. This book is an investigation of gender as a culturally symbolic category in a sequence of major literary works by key German-language writers in the period since 1945. Conceived as a comparative study of works by male and female authors, the book focuses on the way gender has played into the conceptualization and representation of human subjectivity within European modernity since the Enlightenment — and how notions of the masculine and the feminine interact in literary works from the post-1945 period that critique the culturally predominant masculine-connoted conceptualization of subjectivity and historical agency. I argue that the critique of masculinity, as the condensed expression of the cultural values of Enlightenment modernity, and the projection of the feminine, as the symbolic site of resistance to those values, underlie gender's function as a symbolic category in the literature of the postwar era and also shape writers' conceptualization of their own gendered positions as authors.

The study comprises two parts. Part I presents a summarizing historical account of the way gender functioned as a cultural-critical category in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century German thought in order to provide a frame of reference for the textual readings that follow in part II. The relevance of gender to the cultural critique of modernity in German-language culture has been investigated in a number of important recent studies, above all in relation to the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and for this reason chapter 1 begins at that historical juncture. By investigating the use of the gender metaphor in the critique of modern culture in the early modernist period and in the reaction to that critique, notably in the form of the fascist reformulation of gender roles during the Nazi period, the book opens up a perspective on the theoretical continuities between the *fin de siècle* and the gendering of cultural critique in the post-Holocaust era, the period that is the focus of chapter 2. There were not only continuities, however. A significant difference was that, in the postwar period and especially after the watershed of 1968, women writers

and theorists began taking control of the meanings ascribed to gender for their own cultural-critical purposes, a move that changed the parameters within which male writers deployed gender symbolism in their works.

Part II presents a sequence of readings of thematically linked pairings of texts, one by a male writer, the other by a female writer. The themes on which I have chosen to focus reflect the dominant concerns of gender-inflected cultural critique in the post-1945 period. Chapters 3 and 4 consider the construction of subjectivity, including the way identity is determined by conventions of self-narrative, through a comparative reading of Ingeborg Bachmann's 1971 novel, *Malina*, and Max Frisch's *Mein Name sei Gantenbein* of 1964. In chapter 5, Frisch's *Homo faber* (1957) and Christa Wolf's *Störfall* (1987) exemplify the literary critique of instrumental rationality as the defining characteristic of the de facto male Enlightenment subject. Pathology, as a form of subjective rebellion against a too-restrictive social status quo, is examined with reference to Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin* and Rainald Goetz's *Irre* (both 1983) in chapter 6, and chapter 7 looks at the "end visions" of Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977) and Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1983), two works imbued with pessimism at the prospects for a radical renewal of the Western philosophical and cultural tradition in which they are self-consciously located. Considering writings by male and female authors alongside each other illuminates the extent to which they share common cultural concerns, though the authors' respective sex places them quite differently in terms of their perspectives on issues of identity, cultural-historical agency, and what they wish of the opposite sex. Chapter 8, the last chapter, presents not a textual pairing, but the response of Barbara Köhler, the youngest writer to be considered in the book, to the problems involving the representation of gendered subjectivity that haunt the texts explored earlier. Köhler's early poem-cycle "Elektra. Spiegelungen" (1984–85), I shall argue, initiates a concern in her work with exploring ways out of the impasse of gender conflict and gender difference. While there is some movement back and forth in time between the chapters, taken all together, the readings offer a broadly chronological review of the period from the 1950s to the late 1980s.

My methodology of detailed textual analysis in comparative pairings in part II means that I argue my central theses concerning the relation between gender symbolism, the gender of authorship, and the cultural critique of modernity on the basis of a relatively small range of works from the period under study. The works I have selected are (with the exception of the lesser-known Köhler and possibly also Goetz's novel) generally regarded as key articulations of underlying cultural concerns in post-1945 German-language literature and as such are intended to be exemplary of wider trends. I chose to focus on few texts rather than many because the real work of cultural critique in literature takes place at the detailed level

of structure and form, character interaction, and linguistic texture, aspects that cannot be treated adequately in a broad literary-historical overview. It is my hope that this book identifies underlying patterns in the functioning of gender symbolism in the literature of the period that can be tested, refined, complemented, and if necessary corrected through the examination of other works not treated here.



**Part I: Gender, Subjectivity, and the  
Cultural Critique of Modernity:  
Twentieth-Century Perspectives**



## 1: Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Critique from the Fin de Siècle to Fascism

IN 1911, THE BERLIN SOCIOLOGIST and cultural commentator Georg Simmel published an essay entitled "Weibliche Kultur" (Female Culture). Written against the background of the increasing public impact of the women's movement and widespread debate on the so-called "Woman Question," Simmel's essay set out to consider the specific contribution that women might be expected to make to the shaping of human culture in the future. The objective manifestations of culture had — on this point he was unequivocal — hitherto been exclusively the creation of men: "It is men who have created art and industry, science and commerce, the state and religion."<sup>1</sup> The belief, he wrote, that there was a purely "human" culture for which the difference between men and women was irrelevant had its origins in the same premise from which it followed that such a culture did not exist — "the naïve identification of the 'human' with 'man'" (67). What was needed, he argued, was the acknowledgement of the completely different basis of female existence: "The naïve conflation of male values with values as such can give way only if the female existence as such is acknowledged as having a basis fundamentally different from the male and a stream of life flowing in a fundamentally different direction: two existential totalities, each structured according to a completely autonomous rule" (72).

There can be no doubt that Simmel was politically progressive in his intentions; indeed, his views were used by some contemporary campaigners for women's political and civil rights to support their arguments.<sup>2</sup> Yet when he comes to defining the constitutive values (*Wesenswerte*) of the two sexes in this essay, as the logic of his argument requires he must, Simmel slips as if inevitably into the repetition of familiar cultural pre-conceptions. On the one hand, he represents gender as a set of cultural norms or obligations (his word is *Sollen*) to behave in accordance with historically determined ideal social roles, in apparent acknowledgement of the extent to which gender might be regarded as a cultural construction. Reduced to an abstract expression, he argues, the norms are that man is required to be "significant" (*bedeutend*) while woman should be "beautiful" (*schön*) — though "naturally," he adds, such beauty is not restricted to the possession of a pretty face (88). On the other hand, however, within a few sentences his abstract "man" is represented no longer in the



hypothetical, but in the actual fulfillment of the cultural expectations leveled at him, all dynamism, activity, and achievement (in terms, moreover, which reek of sex), while the “constitutive idea of woman” is projected in static and organic form:

While man externalizes himself, discharges his energy into his achievements, and thus “signifies” something that is in some sense external to himself, dynamically or ideally, creating or representing — the constitutive idea of woman is that unbroken character of the periphery, the organic containment in the harmony of the constituent parts in relation to each other and in the symmetry of their relationship to their center — precisely the formula of the beautiful.<sup>3</sup>

From here, it is just a short step to the metaphysical — “For she is, in the symbolism of metaphysical concepts, the one who is [*die Seiende*] and man the one who becomes [*der Werdende*]” — and from the metaphysical back, in a perfect circular movement, to the ideal social roles of the sexes, whereby man now notably “must” as opposed to “should,” while woman remains obligated to the principle that defines her: “It is for this reason that he must attain his significance in relation to a thing or an idea, a historical or a cognitive world, while woman should be beautiful in the sense of this ‘bliss in and of itself’” (88–89, translation modified).

Simmel’s essay of 1911 is not the most obvious starting point for a study concerned with the culturally symbolic significance of gender in the German-language literature of the much-later post-1945 period. Yet his contemplations of gender are illuminating for the arguments of this book for a number of reasons. In the first place, the passage cited demonstrates a characteristic of discourse on gender so commonplace that it may not even seem surprising, yet it is a characteristic that this study is intent on subjecting to scrutiny. This is the constant slippage in the referentiality of gender, its historically derived and tendentially dualistic metaphoricality. Gender, while rooted in the perception of sexual difference — that is, the perception of the existence of two sexes, male and female, whose relations with one another must be socially regulated — has throughout the history of human culture been persistently placed at the head of sequences of dualisms that underpin the conception not only of sexual and social interaction, but also of psychological and cultural dynamics, of cosmic and metaphysical systems, of the principles of life itself in all its forms. As Simmel himself argues in the rather earlier *Philosophie der Geschlechter* (Philosophy of the Sexes) of 1906, wherever human beings think in dualistic oppositions — and the pervasive tendency to do so may have its self-perpetuating basis in the gender dualism — the gender metaphor will be at hand:

Whether we think to grasp the true reality of phenomena in the quiescent state of being or in the Heraclitan flow of becoming; whether