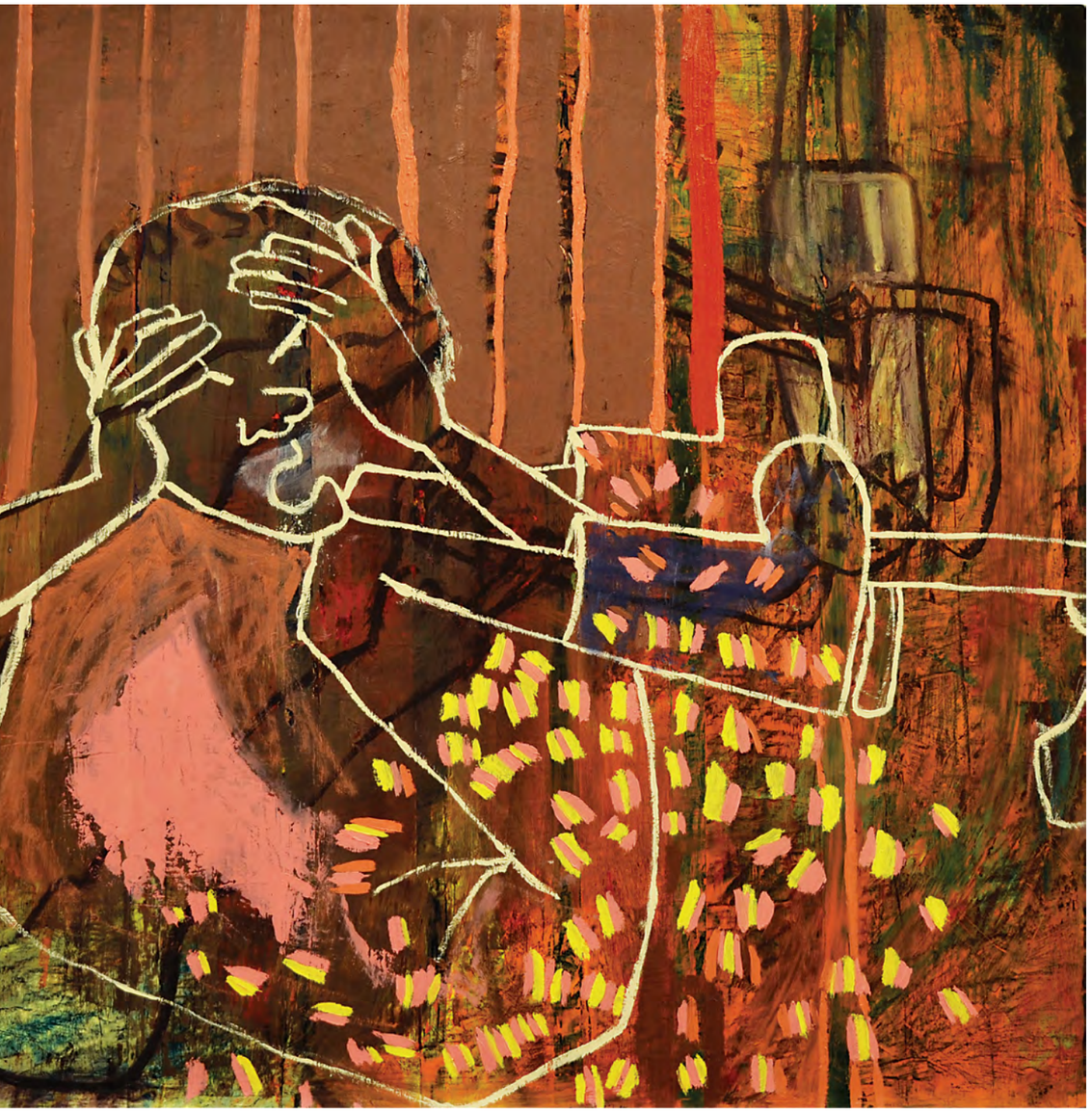
MAIA SNOW

Don't Look, 2013
oil on panel, 35 x 35 in



courtesy the artist

JONATHAN FRANZEN

Out from Underground

Notes on Making Peace with Germany

I first came to Germany by way of the sitcom *Hogan's Heroes*, one of the most popular American TV shows of the late sixties and absolutely my own favorite when I was nine and ten. Why a comedy about a German POW camp ("Stalag 13") so appealed to Americans during the worst years of the Vietnam war has been a fruitful subject for academic cultural critics ever since. But to me the show's appeal was straightforwardly personal. Its premise—amusing Allied POWs pay lip service to their strict but lovable German captors while secretly leading an elaborate life underground—approximated my own situation with my parents. Indeed, I'm still a sucker for this particular kind of romance. It's how I construe the motley and embattled minority of people who continue to care about books and literature in an age of technological hegemony. It's how I think about the secret lives of birds under the oppression of human modernity. The people and animals I care about are the ones who are forced to lead lives that are in some sense underground.

My mother, who disapproved of *Hogan's Heroes* and my attachment to it, once made me read a newspaper column condemning the show for its implicit trivialization of the Holocaust. The columnist took particular exception to its portrayal of its Nazi characters as bumbling and sympathetic. I felt shamed by the column, but it didn't make me like the show any less. Being a child of American commercial television, I could see that there was also virtue in its nothing-is-sacred silliness. While the German characters on *Hogan's Heroes* were clearly German—rule-abiding, respectful of authority—they all had universal comic weaknesses. There was the fat and lazy Sergeant Schultz, whose refrain was "I hear nothing, I see nothing, I know nothing." There was General Burkhalter, a Helmut Kohl type who terrorized his underlings but could be bribed with superior food and wine; and Major Hochstetter, who wielded the power of the SS but was always afraid of becoming its victim. Best of all, there was Colonel Klink, played by Werner Klemperer, the son of Otto Klemperer. Klink was a kind of German everyman, obedient and anxious, helplessly ensnared in the military bureaucracy while secretly envying the freedoms of his Allied prisoners. Because of *Hogan's Heroes*, I grew up thinking of Germans not as faceless evildoers but as human beings. If you're very literal-minded, you can castigate American commercial

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culture for its willingness to do anything for a laugh. But if you trust people to distinguish between entertainment and reality, you can discern a rather sophisticated spirit of American generosity in the silliness.

Through a series of accidents, I ended up studying German, majoring in German literature in college, and spending two years in Germany. My first year was in Munich, a city that it took me some months to realize that I hated. I did like the beer and the food, and I loved my professors. But one of the reasons I'd majored in German was to distance myself from my parents, and although my parents had no German ancestry, they were spiritually Bavarian—conservative, orderly, hardworking, and somewhat kitschy in their taste in art and architecture. Even decades before the current European debt crisis, there was something *parental* about Germany's authority and competence. Munich seemed to me especially competent, especially parental, and so, month by month, I began to rebel against it. I took to riding *schwarz*—without paying—on the U-Bahn. I turned my camera away from the city's lovingly restored facades and trained it on vandalized phone booths, on the darker streets of Bogenhausen, on the richest concentrations of dog shit on sidewalks. I stopped even trying to make German friends. I went skinny-dipping in the Isar at two in the morning with a disaffected American girl. I stole paving stones from a construction site and used them as bookends. I ripped a Talking Heads concert poster down from a fence and hung it in my room. I fled as often as I could to southern Europe, and when I returned to Munich I railed, in my notebooks, against its handsome, satisfied citizens in their loden coats. I didn't actually have much to be angry about, except for my failure to find a girlfriend, and my acts of rebellion were absurdly tame. But for a person like me, in a place like Germany, they didn't feel tame. Here, even a privileged and highly responsible kid like me could feel like a romantic rebel.

At the same time, I devoted many pages of my notebooks to an anguished analysis of the ethics of riding *schwarz*. I went to a loud party in Studentenstadt, and when a German student knocked on the door and asked us to be quiet, our (American) host invited the student to join the party. The student replied: "Was nützt mir die Einladung wenn ich lernen muss?" ["What good does the invitation do me when I have to study?"] I was drunk and rebellious enough to urge the host to turn the music up even louder, but I also went home and wrote down what the student had said, because I thought it was a beautiful German sentence. Even as I was rebelling, I was enamored of Goethe and Hegel. I understood why Hegel had been so obsessed with subject and object, and Hölderlin with Italy and the halves of life. In a sense, I was rebelling against my own German soul.

Because I've written so much about it elsewhere, I'm not going to speak here about how directly and irrevocably my life was changed by German literature: by Kafka and Kraus, by Goethe and Rilke, and (although I resisted him even more strenuously than I resisted Munich) by Thomas Mann. The world of literature is obviously larger than Germany—Shakespeare, Austen, Tolstoy, Proust, Faulkner, and Christina Stead aren't imaginable as Germans—but two qualities of German-language literary production continue to seem essential to me. The first is humor. This may seem a little odd, given German culture's reputation for humorlessness, but a value is all the more precious when it appears where we least expect to find it. Finding humor in the Jewish-inflected work of Kraus and Kafka is maybe not so unexpected. But there's also a very rich vein of it running from Hoffman, Jean Paul, and Nestroy through Brecht and Böll and Brussig. It's even there in Thomas Mann. Think of the moment in *The Magic Mountain* when Hans Castorp is gushing to the sanatorium doctor about Clavdia Chauchat, and the doctor jabs him in the ass with a hypodermic needle. *The Magic Mountain* has a whole secret underground life as a comic novel.

The other indispensable quality of German literature is its preoccupation with *meaning*. This is the positive side of German culture's earnestness. In the right hands—in Kafka, in Rilke, in Mann—more meaning is packed in more ways into a sentence or a paragraph or a story or a novel than there is power and performance in a Mercedes or BMW. Their best works are highly innovative and finely tuned engines of meaning. Even the casual reader who merely wants to drive to the grocery store can sense how much power is under the hood, and if you want to take it out on the Autobahn and drive 200 km/h in a rainstorm, their work is equal to it. Meaning—the search for it, the daring construction of it, the quest for new ways of creating it—is or ought to be what literature is most fundamentally about. Nowadays, in the face of the random noise generated by the techno-media machine, it seems almost quaint to persist in feeling responsible for meaning, and so, of all the ways in which Germany has been consigned to play a parental role on the world stage, its literature's insistence on meaning in narrative is the one I'm most grateful for.

My second year in Germany was in Berlin, courtesy of the Fulbright Commission. In the early eighties, West Berlin was very much the anti-Munich, a mutilated city populated by *Autonomen*, peaceniks, soldiers, punks, eternal students, a large and largely unassimilated Turkish community, and the remnants of a working-class underworld that I recognized from Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. There wasn't much prettiness in Berlin to rebel against, and I was moving, in any case, beyond student rebellion into the darker alienation of a young writer. Here, too, although I did develop a good working relationship with two fellow students in a Karl Kraus seminar, I made no German friends. I spent vast amounts of time alone, in a squalid rented room in Reineckendorf. When my solitude began to harm my mental health, I moved in with a Canadian exchange student, James, who lived in a cavernous apartment in Neukölln. James gave me the largest room, which had an enormous stove that I had neither the money nor the energy to buy coal for. If I wanted to write, I put on three layers of clothes and wrapped myself in blankets and used a typewriter whose cold metal gave my fingers chilblains. To take a bath, I had to heat pans of water on the gas stove in the kitchen and run them down the hallway to the bathroom.

I then carried my alienation home with me and applied it to my own country, which I could see more clearly now, thanks to German literature.

I remember the freezing Saturday afternoon in January when James, to give himself a special treat, fired up the old coal-fueled water heater in the bathroom and took a luxurious bath while singing Bach chorales. He then dressed up for a hot date with a person named Harold. Not long after he'd left the apartment, still humming Bach, there came a pounding on the front door. I opened it and was confronted with a short, pugnacious man who seemed to have stepped straight out of the Döblin novel. As I recall, he was wearing nothing but saggy underpants. He shoved me against a wall and shouted in my face: "It stinks up there! I'm suffocating!" I had trouble understanding his Berlin accent, but I gathered that he'd quietly been drinking beer upstairs while his apartment filled with coal smoke from James's luxurious bath. "If this happens again," he shouted, "I'm going to knock your door down and kill

you!" When I reported all this to James the next morning, he seemed breezily unconcerned, but for me it became an emblem of what life underground was really like. Maybe not so romantic. One man's pleasure another's suffocation.

My two years in Germany, which ought to have drawn me out into the world, instead forced me deeper inward. But Germany is a good place to work, and I was writing. I'd already begun to plan my first novel when I was in Munich, and in Berlin I wrote the first pages of what became *The Twenty-Seventh City*. I then carried my alienation home with me and applied it to my own country, which I could see more clearly now, thanks to German literature. Undertaking a new novel in Germany became a pattern with me—I wrote some early chapters of *Strong Motion* in the Bavarian Forest, and the opening paragraphs of *Freedom* finally came to me at the American Academy in Berlin, in Wannsee. The only exception to this pattern was *The Corrections*, and even there, from a distance, Germany helped me write the book.

By the mid-nineties, my novels had been translated into a number of languages, but I still didn't have a German publisher, and this was a sorrow to me. German was the one foreign language I could read well, German literature had started me down the road to becoming a writer, and I believed that German readers were uniquely well suited to appreciate the ways in which I was trying to construct meaning. Of course, I was happy to have an Italian publisher. But I felt chastised by Germany's indifference to my work. To me it meant that I wasn't a serious writer yet.

Sometime around 1996, I was introduced to an extremely young-looking person, Alexander Fest, who owned a small publishing house and had read *The Twenty-Seventh City*. He wanted to publish my proposed third novel, and I promised to have it finished for him within a year and a half. But a year and a half later I was still nowhere with *The Corrections*, and thus began a very uncomfortable correspondence between me and Alexander. Another year passed, and then another. My letters to Alexander became increasingly evasive. His letters were polite but ever more pressing, as only a German's can be. Since my American publisher was infinitely patient, I might have taken another five years to finish the book. That I managed to finish it by the end of 2000 was due substantially to German pressure.

I forgave Munich a long time ago, and I'd like to take this opportunity to say that I hope it can forgive me. I do, even now, when I go to Munich, revert to my nervous twenty-year-old self and give my worst public performances, but that's only because I'm trying so hard to excel and make amends. Berlin, meanwhile, has changed even more than I have. It has matured into a city so congenial that I'm not even tempted to feel nostalgic for the place it was thirty years ago. It's in Berlin that I've finally found the German friends I didn't make as a young person, finally experienced the sympathy promised by *Hogan's Heroes*. Everything that felt wrong feels right now.

—This essay was originally given as the speech in Germany upon acceptance of the Welt Prize.

Jonathan Franzen is the author of four novels, including *The Corrections* and *Freedom*, three volumes of nonfiction, a translation of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, and, most recently, *The Kraus Project*, an essay and memoir in the form of annotations to his translations of the Austrian satirist Karl Kraus.

MAIA SNOW

Heart Out, 2013
triptic oil on canvas, 72 x 60

courtesy the artist