Review Essay

Sollors, Werner. *The Temptation of Despair*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard U. Press, 2014. 390 pp.

Sollors, Werner. *Die Versuchung, zu verzweifeln*. Trans. Sabine Bayerl. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017. 398 pp.

Reviewed by: **Andrew Gross** (Seminar for English Philology, American Studies Department, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen), E-Mail: andrew.gross@phil.uni-goettingen.de

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In *The Temptation of Despair* Werner Sollors returns to the rubble of postwar Germany to examine what it meant to live between the "no longer" and the "not yet" (p. 21; DE p. 23). The Nazis were no longer in power, but democracy had not yet taken root. To those wandering among the ruins, it was not clear what would grow out of the broken and divided landscape or if it would even be worthwhile to find out. Survivors remarked that they were waiting for the gas to start working again so they could turn it on "but not light it" (pp. 249–250; DE p. 254). At this historical moment, when suicide looked like the only way out, "surrealistic nightmares and nonrepresentational modernist art [...] seemed to have become a physical reality" (p. 15; DE pp. 16–17).

Sollors' excursion through this forgotten terrain contributes to a growing body of literature – by W. G. Sebald and others – dedicated to excavating the memories of destroyed German cities. The memories were buried under guilt and shame, but the shovel was wielded by progress. If German aggression had called down vengeance from the sky, then building a better future took precedence over dwelling on the past. This book is an effort, then, to recover the despair that did not fit into the new architecture of postwar "success" (1, DE 1). Sollors pieces together photographs, reports, diaries, novels, and films, and these fragments of cultural memory trigger recollections of a more personal sort. The result is equal parts archeology and anamnesis. *The Temptation of Despair* takes us on a journey into the past, but also through the experiences of a German boy whose childhood among the ruins made him receptive to American culture and led him to pursue an American academic career. Sollors' ongoing interest in migration and ethnicity was "Made in Germany" – a phrase that retains its English in the new German translation – but pursued in the United States (p. 293; DE p. 293). *Die Versuchung, zu verzweifeln*, translated by Sabine Bayerl, performs the valuable service of bringing Sollors' recollections back to their language and place of origin. It also

demonstrates, in keeping with Sollors' analysis, that any attempt to return to the past involves a translation of what occurred.

This point is neatly captured by the cover art. The English edition reproduces Tony Vaccaro's black-and-white photograph of a man painting a picture of a bombed-out ruin *en plein air*, thus stressing the mediated nature of representation (p. 97, DE p. 110). The color photograph by Ray D'Addario, on the cover of the German edition, seems to place the viewer directly on a road to the ruined center of Nuremberg. The difference between the photos suggests an allegory of memory. Memory is more immediate than representation in the same way the German translation is closer to its origin. Or so it seems. Behind the color picture of Nuremberg, in need of excavation, is the American photographer who had access to color film and whose work documenting the Nuremberg Trials informed his perspective (DE p. 107). Sollors "remembers" the past by reading images and texts symptomatically, in terms of experiences that are partially buried or difficult to express. Memory thus only seems to be immediate. What was "Made in Germany" in the 1940s must be perceived through the lens of Sollers' American experiences.

The two editions present slightly different collections of photographs. In both, D'Addario's work is set in dialogue with other images and texts in a chapter entitled "After Dachau." The title might seem provocative for a part of the book that spends more time discussing ruined German cities than concentration camps. However, the provocation is deliberate and in no way meant to suggest a moral equivalency between what happened inside the camps and outside. Rather, in the landscape of memory, laid out in Sollors' childhood and subsequent career, the road to the cities must first pass through the concentration camps. Adorno's "After Auschwitz" provides the moral compass in the journey, but Sollors invokes it mainly to distance himself from Adorno's philosophical deliberations. Sollors is less interested in whether art should or can represent the Holocaust than in how early representations registered the witnesses' despair over what they saw.

A key figure in his discussion is Martha Gellhorn, a writer who reported on the liberation of Dachau for *Collier's*. Gellhorn was so disturbed by the enormity of the crime she had to describe that she quickly penned a novel featuring a Jewish protagonist who runs down random Germans with a Jeep. The revenge fantasy reflects the need to see "*all* Germans as mass murderers, or at least as accessories to murder" (p. 90, DE p. 92). The need was widespread. American liberators, and many Germans as well, regarded the destruction of German cities through the lens of German guilt – the D'Addario photograph is an example. The frontispiece to the chapter offers a mute commentary on what the presumption of collective guilt meant for individual Germans. It is a photograph of a young boy

looking at photographs of concentration camp victims displayed on an official poster or "guilt placard." Such placards, bearing the title "These Atrocities: Your Guilt!" were placed in prominent locations by the American occupying forces (p. 84; the German translation reproduces the poster in a larger format, DE p. 95). Whom exactly does the poster address? (p. 94, DE p. 96) Could it be the boy dressed in short pants?

The boy could have been Sollors as a child. Indeed, *The Temptation of Despair* reproduces many images of children whose fate, like Sollors', was to grow up "after" (p. 290, DE p. 290). There is a photograph of a young boy trying to imitate an American soldier's relaxed body posture or "*Lässigkeit*"—the significance of the word underscored by the use of German in both editions (p. 218, DE p. 222). Although the soldier in this image is white, Sollors points out that it was black G.I.s who provided the most compelling examples of the posture that would soon be called "cool" (p. 214, DE p. 218). His comments evoke an early fascination with American lifestyles, but also the challenge of growing up burdened by an overwhelming sense of guilt – a burden that fostered the psychological need to identify with the liberators as figures of paternal authority, not with the German fathers who had committed atrocities. African-American men may have offered German children a psychological compromise because their postures, and positions, hinted at their own ambiguous relations to authority (p. 212; DE p. 215).

The one actual image of Sollors as a boy shows him holding a black doll stitched together by his mother. His commentary, in the italics he uses to mark off personal reflections: "*I know how easily one could come up with all sorts of problematic readings of this image, but it also does suggest a friendly relationship to a maternally and lovingly created image of blackness in my early childhood*" (pp. 201–202, DE pp. 204–205). Why did blackness have a positive image for Sollors? Sollors suggests that African-American G.I.s, embracing a paternal role often closed to them in the segregated United States, showed remarkable kindness to German children, for instance by handing out chocolate (p. 200, p. 215; DE p. 204, p. 217). The presence of mixed-race "occupation children" is evidence that fathering occurred in literal ways as well. *Toxi*, a German film that dealt with the issue of mixed-race children, made such a strong impression on Sollors as a child that he never forgot the theme song (p. 242; DE p. 246). At the end of the film, Toxi's black father appears, *deux ex machina*, to take his daughter back to the United States (p. 233; DE p. 237). The situation of actual "occupation children" in Germany was more vexed, and more ambiguous. Sollors recalls seeing a parade float depicting the offspring of a mixed-race couple as striped, checkered, and polka-dotted (p. 242, DE p. 247). A similar float bore the inscription: "Made in Germany." Such memories help explain the genesis of Sollors' interests as a

scholar: "*perhaps here*," he writes, *lies a deep origin of my interest in interracial family symbolism*" (p. 242, DE p. 247).

They also put him in touch with one of the major transformations in American social history, which took a decisive turn through occupied territory. (The chapter on black G.I.s in fiction is tellingly entitled "Are You Occupied Territory?"). Germans were not the only ones to notice that the American troops, stationed to enforce the principle of equality, were themselves highly segregated. Many African Americans returned from their tours of duty to continue the fight for equality on the home front (pp. 189–190, p. 294; DE pp. 191–192, p. 295). There is a sense in which the Civil Rights Movement was also Made in Germany.

Childhood memories give Sollors' analysis its personal quality. Children are also his allies in challenging the official history of friend vs. foe because, still in the process of forging their identities, they are in some ways innocent of partisanship, which is to say ethnically ambiguous (pp. 15–16, DE p. 17). Sollors spends an entire chapter with a child whose picture resonates with that of the boy looking at the "guilt placard" described above. (The title "After Dachau" also refers to the chapter's placement directly after this one.) This boy too is dressed in shorts and seems to speak directly to us, or, as Sollors adds in one of his personal asides, "to me, at least, who was dressed very similarly when I was Sieg's age" (p. 82, DE p. 85). The boy is Sieg Maandag, but he went unnamed when his photograph appeared in *Life* above the caption, "Young boy walks past corpses. Bergen-Belsen, April 20, 1945" (p. 56, p. 67; DE p. 58, p. 69). The shocking image, taken by photographer by George Rodger, was first circulated as evidence of German indifference (p. 65; DE p. 67). The boy seems to stroll along a country road, undisturbed by the bodies sprawled on the ground. However, Sieg was not German but a Dutch Jewish survivor of the camp who had been separated from his parents; his father, he discovered later, was killed in Auschwitz, and his mother, who survived another camp, eventually found him through the photograph (p. 71; DE p. 73). After recounting the stories of the boy and the photographer, who met again decades later to discuss their first encounter, Sollors asks, "Do the alternative identifications of the child in the photograph restrict us to a view of history according to which a given subject must be either an accomplice to perpetrators or a victim?" (p. 82, DE p. 85). Sollors' own identification with various children clearly works against this and other binary distinctions. In Sieg's case he even finds "a small kernel of hope" after reading the personal story back into the image of this child survivor; this hope offers an alternative to "the temptation of despair" without declaring allegiance to any party or ideology of success (p. 82; DE p. 85).

Identification is a form of sympathy, and Sollors holds it up as a corrective to fixed forms of identity, which divide the world into victim and perpetrator, friend

and foe, German and Jew, black and white. His guide here is one of the figures he excavates as an eyewitness. Victor Gollancz, a British Jewish writer who warned of impending genocide in 1943, expressed his despair at the ruined German cities in 1945. Alarmed that the destruction was widely seen as retribution, he warned that collective blame was simply another instance of the "horrible vice of personalizing a race or a nation and depersonalizing the individuals who make it up" (p. 117, DE p. 120). This extremely trenchant definition of racism finds its correlative in Sollors' anti-allegorical approach to his material. Sollors insists on telling individual stories and resists making them representative of group identities. The sheer multiplicity of these stories gives the book a casual, anecdotal, even *lässig* feel, but the effect is deliberate (p. 5; DE p. 5). The organization follows the model developed by Sollors and Greil Marcus in their *A New Literary History of America*, and it is intended to give weight to telling details over grand historical narratives (p. 16; DE p. 17).

Sollors, like Gollancz, insists on personalizing individuals and warns against personifying groups. The chapter on Carl Schmitt and Karl Loewenstein, which in some ways seems like an odd fit with the other, more anecdotal chapters, offers an object lesson in the dangers of identity politics. Schmitt's and Loewenstein's academic careers intersected in Germany in their younger days. Loewenstein fled the Nazis in 1933 and wound up at Amherst College, where he developed democratic theories of jurisprudence in publications that no longer receive much attention (p. 156, p. 159; DE p. 160, p. 162). Schmitt joined the Nazi party, actively supported Hitler, accepted official positions under the Nazi government, and went out of his way to prove his credentials as an anti-Semite, lamenting the "tragic German dependence on Jews" in language so extreme that it bordered on unintentional self-parody (pp. 166–167; DE pp. 169–70). Sollors argues that Schmitt "ingratiated himself to the new regime [...] by emphasizing the need for *Artgleichheit* (identity of species or race) and racial belonging" (p. 164; DE p. 167). Since Schmitt had always understood politics as the form antagonism takes between homogenous groups, it was not a big step from friend vs. foe to German vs. Jew (p. 159; DE p. 161). When Loewenstein returned to Germany with the occupation forces to aid in official denazification efforts, he saw in Schmitt an intellectual threat to democracy, initiated legal proceedings against him, and ordered the confiscation of his library. Schmitt was never convicted, but he did spend time in prison while undergoing questioning. Sollors recovers the story of the antagonism between the two thinkers because it demonstrates the challenges involved in transforming Germany's ruin into success, but also because it shows the shortcomings of Schmitt's identitarian model of group relations. Loewenstein's efforts to establish a "militant democracy" in Germany that would be strong enough to silence anti-democratic voices, may seem problematic in light of

the fundamental democratic right of free speech (p. 170; DE pp. 172–173). Sollors' point, however, is another one. Loewenstein has been largely forgotten, while Schmitt, a "strident supporter of the extreme Right [...] is now often cited or invoked by writers on the Left" (p. 155, p. 292; DE p. 159, p. 292). Identity politics, in other words, has prevailed over Lowenstein's procedural theories of militant democracy, and if it subscribes to irrevocable antagonisms, it also makes for strange bedfellows.

When fighting monsters, one must take care not to become a monster oneself. Sollors concludes by discussing a film (by another returnee) that illustrates this dictum with a twist. Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair* is a denazification drama featuring an earnest Colonel Plummer who is doing his best to democratize occupied Germany. John Lund plays a subordinate American officer who takes advantage of his position, as a member of the colonel's staff, to conduct an affair with an ex-Nazi played by Marlene Dietrich. He can get her what she needs. She has no choice but to exchange sex for basic necessities. (Sollors devotes a lengthy discussion to the desperation of German women, and their systematic rape by Soviet occupation troops, in chapter one.) In a key scene Dietrich jokingly offers her so-called liberator the Nazi salute, recognizing him, in what is clearly intended as foreplay, as her new "Führer." Sollors asks, "In thinking about the American occupation of Germany after World War II, is it really Plummer's 'We have helped them to start a free press and institute parliamentary government' or Erika's 'Heil, Johnny' that best defines the moment?" (p. 277; DE p. 279) The answer is both, presented through the kind of irony that can only be sustained in comedy. Though the film represses many of the ambiguities of American occupation, such as the problem of racism within the American army, it is "extraordinarily balanced" in its representation of the difficulties of bringing democracy to an occupied country on the tip of a bayonet (p. 273; DE p. 276). Perhaps this is why the film could not be shown in Germany until 1977. When Sollors saw it for the first time three years later, he was "*surprised at what had been kept from [him] for all these years*" (p. 261; DE p. 267).

What had been kept from him was laughter. In concluding with Wilder, Sollors condones his ironic approach to history. In a coda entitled "Comic Relief?" he suggests that "black humor" could be "an effective secular way of fending off the devils of despair," at least temporarily (p. 287; DE p. 288). Many of the Nazi leaders were buffoons and clowns, but Nazism took itself very seriously (p. 281; DE p. 283). Black humor, in which the repressed returns in the form of laughter, thus constitutes "a ritual of exorcism" that has a "slightly different effect from those raw gestures of victorious superiority that Victor Gollancz targeted for his criticism" (p. 281; DE p. 283). Humor, embodying the "spirit of disobedience," evokes the past without enthroning the identity categories used to make history,

categories like German and Jew or black and white (p. 286; DE p. 287). Humor can be unifying in ways that go beyond ethnicity, and of the disrespect it shows to hierarchies is at least potentially democratic. In returning to the ruins, Sollors invites us to remember despair, but not without laughter. His impressive and moving book will prove essential reading for anyone interested in post-war German and American relations. Part of its significance lies in the way it translates despair into humor. Cultural history that forgets irony is a joke.