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"I have only you, Cassandra" : Antifeminism and the Reconstruction of Patriarchy in the Early Postwar Works of Hans Erich N ossack

Stephan, Inge

2001

https://doi.org/10.25595/310

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Stephan, Inge: *"I have only you, Cassandra" : Antifeminism and the Reconstruction of Patriarchy in the Early Postwar Works of Hans Erich N ossack*, in: Jerome, Roy (Hrsg.): Conceptions of Postwar Gertnan Masculinity (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 171-189. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/310.

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FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

Conceptions of Postwar German Masculinity

Edited by

Roy Jerome

with an Afterword by
Michael Kimmel

State University of New York Press

Cover Painting: *Trauriger Europäer*, 1977, Rudolf Hausner (1914–1995)

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, N.Y. 12207

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Patrick Durocher

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Conceptions of postwar German masculinity / edited by Roy Jerome.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7914-4937-8 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-4938-6
(pbk.: alk. paper)
1. Masculinity — German — History — 20th century.
I. Jerome, Roy, 1964–

BF692.5 .C66 2001
155.3'32'094309045 — dc21 00-053151

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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"I have only you, Cassandra": Antifeminism and the Reconstruction of Patriarchy in the Early Postwar Works of Hans Erich Nossack

Inge Stephan

I

The year 1945 was by no means the "zero hour" touted as the starting point for a new periodization of time and an unimpeded reconstruction in a devastated country, as research on the early postwar period has brought to light with welcome clarity. The question of responsibility for the "German catastrophe" (Friedrich Meinecke) divided not only exile authors and those of the "Inner Emigration," as demonstrated by the (in)famous controversy between Thomas Mann (as representative of the exile writers) on one side and Walter von Molo and Frank Thiess (representing the "Inner Emigration") on the other over Germany's so-called collective guilt, it also called into question the political, moral, and artistic identities of those authors who had remained in fascist Germany.[1] Even when authors such as Elisabeth Langgässer, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Ilse Langner, Marie Luise Fleisser, and Hans Erich Nossack could not be counted among the party supporters of the fascist regime, they nevertheless experienced the "German catastrophe" as a threat and a personal defeat. This strong personal identification with the "German catastrophe" was inextricably bound up with the shameful memories that these writers had of their own complicity, of their helpless attempts to conform, and of their humiliating powerlessness.

The debate over German guilt carried on by intellectuals between 1945 and 1948 has yet to be subjected to a systematic, scholarly investigation. This debate, as a perusal of the relevant texts from this period reveals, diverted attention away from the traumatic experiences of National Socialism and further served to repress the memory of the Holocaust in a breathtakingly rapid and cynical manner. We know today that

the effects of this diversion from and repression of the catastrophe during the early postwar years have had repercussions that continue to influence the political and intellectual climate of present-day Germany: the *Historikerstreit* (1986–1987), the German–German literary debate (1990–), the Goldhagen debate (1994–), and the controversy and critique surrounding the German *Wehrmacht*'s role in World War II (1996–). To outline an initial thesis in brief, the discourse of guilt and the "apologetic literature" (*Bewältigungsliteratur*) that arose in response to it in the early postwar period both served to exculpate and construct a new identity, which, mediated through literature, was intended to extinguish memories of the traumatic experiences of the war. It was not until 1968 that the patriarchal complacency of this approach to the past was disrupted by the questions and demands from the postwar generation of daughters and sons. Building from the initial thesis, a second thesis proposes that the process of repression and forgetting was bound up with a revival of conventional sex roles and, in yet a third thesis, with a return to images from ancient mythology. Archaic and burdened images of the sexes predating fascism, with its cult of motherhood and heroization of soldierly masculinity, were reactivated with gender imagery taken from ancient mythology—as much a fixture in fascist ideology as in the iconography of Teutonic mythology—in order to detract from personal responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism, as well as to legitimate a national discourse of regeneration and renewal.

The early postwar texts by Hans Erich Nossack (1901–1977) exemplify the connection between the apocalyptic imagery of antiquity, the myth of national rejuvenation (*Grundungsmythos*), and the return to regressive gender models. In his postwar writings, Nossack achieved a belated literary breakthrough denied him during the Third Reich, when he had been banned from writing. Nossack had studied law and philosophy in Jena, and in the early 1920s had been enthusiastic about the Russian Revolution, breaking away from his wealthy bourgeois family to become a factory worker and a German Communist Party member. After the Nazis came to power, however, Nossack returned to the protective environment that his family provided, assumed the helm of his father's business, and wrote secretly in his free time. Nossack belongs to the class of writers that cultivated the image of the critical protester and radical nonconformist and enjoyed tremendous popularity in the West Germany of the 1960s and 1970s. Nossack's popularity and stance are evidenced by the awards bestowed upon him: the Büchner prize, the Pourlemérite award, and the German Grand Cross of Merit.

The damage to masculine identity as a result of the "German catas-

trophe" is a theme that runs through Nossack's writings. In the texts to be discussed here, Nossack's depictions of masculinity reveal him to be neither the proud individualist nor the radical outsider he professed to be in public. Rather, his texts show him to be an author who both ideologically and aesthetically bore close resemblance to those writers whose works are representative of the repression and forgetting that characterized much of early postwar literature. Nossack's early postwar writings do not contain anything remotely rebellious or transgressive but are rather the notes of someone debilitated by trauma, someone who experienced Germany's political breakdown as the breakdown of masculine identity. Nossack reacted to this perceived collapse of masculine identity with arguments combining Otto Weininger's antifeminism in *Geschlecht und Charakter* (*Sex und Character*, 1903) and Johann Jakob Bachofen's plea for the restoration of patriarchy in *Das Mutterrecht* (*Mother Right*, 1927). In this context, the story of the Trojan War served as the background against which personal traumatic experiences could be played out, glorified, and mythologized. Nossack's texts can be read as representative of a category of early postwar literature (by authors such as Langgässer, Kaschnitz, Jünger, and others), in which mythological references also served to distract from questions of guilt and responsibility through flight into conservative sex/gender typologies.[2] All of these texts both anticipated and laid the groundwork for subsequent political restoration. At the same time, these works grew precariously out of the mythological reception prevalent during the Third Reich and, in an equally problematic fashion, linked the discourse of nationalism with a reactionary discourse on the sexes.

II

In his 1948 narrative "Kassandra," Nossack used the Trojan War as a point of reference in order to stage both German history and his own. Nossack posed the question, "Of what relevance is Cassandra to us?" appropriating a doomsday vision for his own purposes at a time when the seer had become a controversial figure (after a checkered and contradictory reception history spanning more than 2,000 years) for various political camps in their evaluations of fascism, the Holocaust, World War II, and the postwar period. Thomas Epple and Solvejg Müller[3] brought together a wealth of examples in their Cassandra studies, *Der Aufstieg der Untergangsseherin Kassandra* (The rise of the doomsday seer Cassandra, 1993) and *Kein Brautfest zwischen Menschen und Göttern.*

Kassandra-Mythologie im Lichte von Sexualität und Wahrheit (No bridal feast between men and gods: Cassandra mythology in the context of sexuality and truth, 1994) respectively, demonstrating that Cassandra, as seer, protester, and admonisher, had become a symbolic character,[4] functionalized either as a figure of resistance or as a cipher of legitimation[5] by authors of all political stripes.

An overview of the reception of Cassandra texts in the 1930s and 1940s reveals the figure of the seer and protester—so engaging and powerful in Karl Hofer's painting of 1936—to be politically dubious, aesthetically bankrupt, without unique profile, and susceptible to arbitrary appropriation.[6] The prerequisites for a progressive, emancipatory conceptualization of the Cassandra figure, as for example Christa Wolf's rendering in her 1983 novel, *Kassandra,* nearly a half-century later, seemed to be completely lacking in fascist Germany. I consider it no coincidence that Ernst Bloch, in *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*), a work of the 1940s, not only portrays Cassandra in a negative light but also dismisses her as an anti-utopian figure. In a segment entitled "Unavoidable and Avoidable Fate," Bloch polemicizes against the concept of destiny derived from antiquity:

> Moira is that which is unavoidable . . . such that not only reason is paralyzed, but also the blood runs cold. It is senseless to try to act under such conditions, even if the first step is without obstacle. . . . Neither Oedipus nor Cassandra can do anything, let alone change anything.[7]

Here Bloch explicitly distances himself from the chthonic-demonic cult of fate favored by fascist Germany (illustrated, for example, in Gerhart Hauptmann's *Atrides-Tetralogy*) and attempts to create a space for a transformative, engaged mode of thinking that unfortunately found no support in the dominant discourse of the 1940s and 1950s. It was not until the 1960s that Bloch's work received any notable reception and the Cassandra image promoted by fascist writers began to change.

Against the background of the Cassandra reception of the 1930s and 1940s, the opening statement in Nossack's "Kassandra," "Of what relevance is Cassandra to us?" attains a deeper meaning than the casually stated question would seem to suggest.[8] It is a rhetorical question that appears and reappears in multiple variations throughout the text. Obviously Cassandra is of some relevance to "us"—but who is in fact this "us"? For Nossack, at least, Cassandra is important enough that he names his story after her and returns to her frequently in other texts.

This "us" in the opening question reveals itself at first to be of a familial nature. Odysseus, the veteran who returned home late from the Trojan War, uses this question to deflect the question his son Telemachus asks about Cassandra. Telemachus acts on behalf of his mother, Penelope, who was hoping that the question would provoke Odysseus—disturbed and silent as the result of his experiences—into speaking. That Penelope was not only acting out of the therapeutic intentions her son attributed to her ("she thought it would be better, if we could get him to speak more about his experiences") becomes clear during the conversation that ensues.[9] The question posed by the son and instigated by the mother sets off a laborious and hesitating conversation further complicated by narrative interjections of Telemachus's recollections and enormous temporal leaps. The domestic scene in which the conversation about Cassandra is embedded is recalled more than fifty years later by the now aging son.

Before the narrator returns to the son's question and the father's counterquestion, two recollections of Telemachus are interjected. First, Telemachus recalls an encounter with a nameless youth from Asia Minor, who compares Cassandra to a "slim, bluish gray column of smoke" rising from the plain and merging with the brilliant sky.[10] This image is so strongly imprinted upon Telemachus's memory that it is still present more than fifty years later when he recalls the event. In company with this poetic image there also are numerous details from the Trojan War that do not relate directly to Cassandra but that Telemachus has gathered from Orestes's friend Pylades. Through Telemachus's recollections of Pylades's stories, the transmitted myth undergoes three interesting alterations. First, it was not Clytemnestra who murdered Agamemnon, but rather her lover Aegisthus. Second, it was not Orestes who murdered his mother, Clytemnestra; rather she was "regrettably" killed in a skirmish.[11] And third, Orestes was not driven from the country and pursued by the Erinyes for matricide, but rather he decided for unknown reasons to embark on a journey, leaving his friend Pylades in charge of the kingdom in his absence.

What do these images, recollections, and alterations in the mythological narrative have to do with the initial question, and why are they presented by the narrator in such an elaborate manner? In my opinion, the hesitating narrative flow indicates that the recollections revolve around taboos. The association of Cassandra with a column of smoke swimming into the ether can be read as an erotic image, while the recollection of the relationship between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra reveals a marriage in which the partners have become strangers to each

other. Unfaithful husbands, unchaste wives, and murderous lovers cast shadows over monogamy as the ideal for relationships between the sexes.

These wish fantasies and, above all, horror fantasies, form the narrative background for the conversation about Cassandra that finally evolves between father, mother, and son—a conversation that develops more and more into an argument between the estranged couple, Odysseus and Penelope. Telemachus is confused and embarrassed by his father's counterquestion, and his mother comes to his aid with an odd and unexpected question: "She can't possibly have been that young anymore. Why wasn't she married?"[12] It is this question that points to the actual theme of the story, a theme for which Telemachus's recollections served as a prelude: the "riddle" of attraction and repulsion between the sexes.[13]

If Nossack makes the question of the relationship between the sexes and the role of sexuality the center of his Cassandra portrayal, then he does so at a point in history when one would be more likely to expect a political reinterpretation of the figure. The discursive connection between sexuality and truth that forms the basis for Solvejg Müller's reading of Cassandra has been apparent at least since Schiller's poem by the same name and has led, depending on the political climate, to either the sexualization or desexualization of the figure. In Nossack's rendering, Cassandra's political potential is sacrificed by reducing the connection between sexuality and truth to the question of why Cassandra resisted the affections of the god Phoebus. This is a question that appears strange even to Telemachus and seems as out of joint with his image of his father as does the interpretation of Odysseus in the myth and the scholarship that followed. If one follows Herfried Münkler's argument in his study *Odysseus und Kassandra* (1990), Odysseus—already portrayed by Homer as the wily politician par excellence—and Cassandra together represent the "politics in myth":

> Cassandra is the prototype of the intellectual. Yet Odysseus is no less of an intellectual than she, and both together mark the end-points of a spectrum of positions that intellectuals have moved through since Odysseus and Cassandra. Cassandra, the extreme of powerlessness, reduced to the role of the ignored and unheard warner, is a subversive subject whose proclamations no one wants to hear and whose knowledge no one wants to use, even when it could be useful. Odysseus, in contrast, is the intellectual in complete possession of power, his commands are always followed, the heros dance to his drum. He is the man behind the scenes, the great director. Odysseus can be silent,

> Cassandra must speak: power and powerlessness. It is hardly a coincidence that both stepped onto the stage of world history together.[14]

It is certainly also no coincidence that Odysseus and Cassandra are brought into close connection with each other in Nossack's story. Of course Nossack activates very different aspects of the constellation than Münkler brings to light in his political reading of the two figures, and of course the concept of the political is multivalent. We have accustomed ourselves at least since 1968 to conceive of the private as political, while Foucault's work on the politics of the body has made us sensitive to the relationship between sexuality and politics. With a bit of effort, but not without justification, the question of sexual refusal that Nossack makes the focus of his story can here be interpreted politically.

A look at Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of *The Odyssey* makes clear, however, that in their civilization's critical interpretation of Odysseus the two authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) were situating the concept of the political in an explicitly antifascist context, precisely at the time when Nossack was at work on his Cassandra–Odysseus configuration. Once again, such comparisons make apparent both how great the divide was that separated the exile authors from those of the "Inner Emigration" and how different the meaning of myth's appeal was to them. Nossack's Cassandra–Odysseus configuration, with its pointed question concerning the origins of sexual refusal, appears even stranger against this background than it does to the son of Odysseus in the story: "What surprised me the most was that my father of all people seemed especially interested in the story of Phoebus."[15]

For Odysseus, in any case, this question seems so important that he not only poses it to his wife but also formulates it in a series of insistent queries during a conversation with Cassandra, which he reports to his wife and son in detail. Despite protestations to the contrary, Cassandra's response that she had been "afraid" does not completely satisfy him, as the subsequent return to the question in his conversation with his wife reveals.[16] Cassandra's refusal of the affections of a god remains in the end just as inexplicable as Agamemnon's attraction to Cassandra, who compared to Helena was plain: "For what reason did Agamemnon seek out this Cassandra? Her hips are much too slim."[17]

This question is posed in ever-changing formulations by various figures in the text. The shy, fine-boned Cassandra becomes the foil to Helena's voluptuous, seductive femininity. In contrast to Helena, sexuality appears as repellent to Cassandra as the company of other women.

By her own admission, she can "no longer stand the smell of other women," and for her, the worst are "the huge, shimmering flies that . . . engage in their games in the sun."[18]

If one contemporizes the story Odysseus tells surrounded by his family with Pylades's report, from which the aging Telemachus attempts to glean a retrospective impression of Cassandra, an image arises of a woman trying to escape the sexual advances coming from her environment, whether out of fear, disgust, or the elitist consciousness that is the sign of the chosen. A passage from the text offers support for this last thesis. Agamemnon, whom Odysseus respects as the "most human"[19] of all of the Trojan warriors, recognizes a kindred spirit in Cassandra:

> But for us the usual division into friend and foe does not apply. We have to engage with each other in a different manner. I always believe that it is necessary for those select few of us to interact outside of the accepted mores when we encounter each other, and that we openly reveal to each other those things that we keep secret from others. Because if one of us errs, then it is much worse than the minor damage that results from the errors of others. Perhaps I too have once met a god.[20]

This passage lays the groundwork for the later fusion of the two figures in which, however, the gender-specific pattern remains inscribed: Cassandra becomes the "shadow" of Agamemnon.[21] The elitist camaraderie between Agamemnon and Cassandra rests on a kind of asceticism that normal people do not understand and find suspect because of their own false assumptions. In contrast to the "blessed pair," Menelaus and Helena, who remain behind as victors in the war and of whom Odysseus speaks only with contempt, Agamemnon and Cassandra form the "other pair" who go to their death together.[22] The third pair, Odysseus and Penelope, never find their way back to each other over the course of the narrative and finally separate from each other permanently. The next generation gives rise to no couples at all: Telemachus remains unmarried, as does Pylades and the wandering Orestes, for whom, according to Pylades, only Cassandra would have made a suitable partner, "not as man and wife, she was older, but rather . . . hmm, how should I say it? They would have understood each other immediately."[23] Here Orestes and Cassandra are made into a dream couple—a constellation that I will return to later. The friendship between the surviving sons was limited to a kind of placeholdership in the case of Orestes and Pylades, and in the case of Telemachus and Pylades to the exchange of greetings and small

gifts passed on by "mutual hosts."[24] It is here that the solitary masculine position of the narrative "I" manifests itself, a position that Nossack retroactively raised to the level of an aesthetic program in his Büchner prize acceptance speech of 1961, and one that he would return to again and again until the end of his life. Cassandra, because she is an exception to the conventional norms in a number of ways, is the only figure who comes under consideration as a possible partner for the solitary heroes. She does not conform to the traditional images of women. As the "younger brother,"[25] she is simultaneously "the untouchable one" who remains "pure" in every aspect, and she is a visionary, who sees the "gift" bestowed upon her by Phoebus not as a reward but as a "punishment."[26] In this perception of her task, Cassandra converges with Nossack, for whom writing always represented a burden, the cross he must bear, as the gift of clairvoyance was for Cassandra.

In the text "Ich habe nur dich, Kassandra" (I have only you, Cassandra) of 1952, Nossack takes a humorous approach to this connection between the masculine authorial "I" and Cassandra, a connection Christa Wolf later imagined as one between the feminine authorial "I" and Cassandra. After a reading, an author is confronted, as on so many previous occasions, with the ignorance of his audience. In this particular instance, it is a "commanding lady," a woman from Hamburg who irritates him with her query of whether he actually experienced what he writes about. The writer is only able to save himself from the attack of "sadness" that befalls him by retreating into his hotel room, where Cassandra is already waiting for him:

> As the elevator door closed behind me, I saw immediately that Cassandra was waiting for me. The same Cassandra who was murdered with me some three thousand years ago. The one with hips that were "too slim," an attribute that arose out of some remark the beautiful Helena made. There is only one Cassandra and I have experienced her.
>
> She crouched in one of the armchairs that were standing in the hallway in front of the elevators; next to her was a round table with a vase of white tulips. Hanging on the wall was an old etching. A bunch of people in old-fashioned clothes looking at the sea.
>
> I kneeled in front of Cassandra—yes, excuse me, because now I am describing the real and not just how one conducts oneself down below in the dining room. I did it because I wanted to see her eyes. You see, I thought that she was crying,

but naturally a girl who has turned down the love of a god does not cry so easily. "I thought you were lost," she said.

"It almost came to that. For three hours I tried to deny you. It was terrible."

"Did you have to drink a lot?"

"Oh, come on, it was okay. Will it ever be different with us? Again and again there is a Clytemnestra standing there with an ax in her hand waiting to murder us. Will we always only be allowed to die together?"

"If we resist that, we will lose each other completely."

"I have only you, Cassandra."

"I know," she said, and smiled. "But now go to your room, do you hear. The elevator is humming again. Otherwise they'll think you are drunk again."

I went down the darkened corridor to the rooms, past all the shoes that were standing in front of the doors. Was Cassandra following me? But why would she! We have each other, in order to die together, again and again.[27]

In this passage, the author and Cassandra merge into one, albeit one inscribed with pessimism and melancholy. Both are loners, forsaken admonishers, voices crying in the wilderness, who remain unrewarded by any hoped-for resonance from the public. It is here that the identification between the author and Cassandra occurs, an identification that Wolfgang Koeppen, in his Büchner prize acceptance speech of 1962, although with a very different purpose than Nossack, raised to the level of a credo for a whole generation of authors refusing to conform to the "tenor of the times": "The author is no party member and he does not celebrate with the victors. He is a man, alone, frequently in the same situation as Cassandra among the Trojans."[28]

III

Let us now return to the 1946 version of the "Kassandra" story, which, in contrast to the ironic sketch of 1952, is still very much bound up with the meaning of the original myth. The "us" we identified as a familial one in the first interpretive reading not only refers back to a mythical "primordial situation" but simultaneously refers to the present shared by the author and the reader, who have been brought together through the figure of Cassandra. Cassandra, the author's alter ego, be-

comes a provocation to the reader as well as a clarification of her significance for him and his time.

In another story published along with "Kassandra" in the 1948 volume, "Interview mit dem Tode" (Interview with death), Nossack makes the connection between the mythical figure of Cassandra and the present explicitly obvious. The story "Dorothea," written between 1946 and 1947, is not set during the Trojan War but rather in the bombed-out city of Hamburg in 1943 and during the "hunger winter" of 1946–1947. A fictive first-person narrator attempts in vain to tell a comrade of his experiences in the form of a Cassandra story:

> I will simply begin as follows: "Once upon a time there was a young girl named Cassandra."
> "Why Cassandra?" he will ask in astonishment.
> "She was a Trojan princess. Her hips were too small."
> "How do you know that?"
> "Helena, I mean the famous Helena, made fun of her."
> "Were you there?"
> Then I will simply continue the story, with what I know.
> One has to fill in the gaps with figures. There is enough room there.
> But if he now gets angry and shouts: "Of what relevance is Cassandra to me? I thought her name was Dorothea?"
> What do I do then?[29]

Dorothea, the "gift from God," is thus only a cover for Cassandra.[30] The experiences in the Hamburg firestorm and the encounters that follow are nevertheless so traumatic and so unusual that they cannot be pressed into the old, mythical Cassandra narrative: "Yes, of what relevance is Cassandra to me? It would be a twisted lie to speak of her. I will tell my comrade the story of Dorothea."[31] Dorothea's separation from the mythical parallelism succeeds only to be bound up immediately in a new relationship: Dorothea appears as the reincarnation of a woman whom the narrator has seen in a painting by Karl Hofer. Even if the detailed description of the painting reveals that it is not Hofer's Cassandra painting, the connection to Hofer, a persona non grata in fascist Germany, still remains noteworthy.[32]

More decisive than the question of which Hofer painting the narrator was actually referring to is the fact that Nossack as narrator cannot keep himself from having his characters meet without mystifications. Dorothea seems to have sprung from a painting by Hofer and is ban-

ished back to the painting in the narrator's memory, while the narrator is seen by Dorothea as the alter ego of the man who had rescued her during the Hamburg firestorm. As in "Kassandra," the coming together of man and woman as a couple also fails in "Dorothea." Both texts tell of unsuccessful relationships between the sexes and, in the process and in very different ways, both make references to the figure of Cassandra.

Cassandra is here neither "arbitrary," as Epple implies,[33] nor is she the "harmless" figure that Müller suggests.[34] While in the context of studies that, because of the volume of material they present, treat individual works only briefly, and in light of the unsatisfactory state of Nossack scholarship such evaluations are understandable and even excusable, they nevertheless underestimate the figure in Nossack's postwar writings in a most striking manner.[35] Worse still they distort the perception of the problematic connection between Nossack's interpretation of Cassandra and the controversial interpretive patterns developed simultaneously by exile writers, authors of the "Inner Emigration," and National Socialist writers. In my opinion, Nossack's Cassandra texts show that he did instrumentalize Cassandra offensively as an "apologetic figure."[36] The parallels between the Trojan War and the Hamburg firestorm may well be subjectively plausible, but from a political perspective they are extremely dubious, because the question of responsibility for the horrors of the war disappears behind such parallels.

The sex/gender discourse in which Nossack situates his figuration of Cassandra is no less problematic than the political discourse. Nossack outlines the image of an ascetic heroine who is like a brother to Agamemnon and who can therefore be admitted to the circle of heroic loners. Apart from the latent *Männerbund*-like orientation present in such a portrayal, the massive discrimination against women, and the denial of female sexuality and corporeality it conceals, such a Cassandra fantasy paralyzes exactly those manifestations of the political that Christa Wolf later foregrounds in her Cassandra project. Moreover, political paralysis as a contemporary phenomenon is the real scandal at a time when the confrontation of the crimes of National Socialism would have been expected.

From this perspective, the image of the bluish gray, slender column of smoke read as a representation of Cassandra in the first interpretative analysis becomes readable as a compulsory recollection of the columns of smoke that rose from Germany's crematoria under fascism. Cassandra's "ashes" provoke the memory of those whose ashes are not commemorated in the text.[37] The turn to myth is a flight from the confrontation with the crimes of one's own country. In the process, Cassandra becomes

a problematic accomplice to repression. Through this appropriation of the myth, Nossack does not find himself in good company but rather situated within a larger society of authors who sought and sometimes found consolation and sanctuary in Greek mythology, both under fascism and during the early postwar years. One has only to recall the *Griechischen Mythen* (Greek myths) of Kaschnitz and Jünger, Langgässer's *Märkische Argonautenfahrt* (Voyage of the Argonauts in the Mark Brandenburg), and the Iphigenia dramas by Rutenborn, Langner, Schwarz, and Vietta, all of which avail themselves of a more or less ahistorical discourse of fate and seek to flee from a confrontation with personal complicity in fascist politics by escaping into myth. With his mythic texts written during the early postwar period—including in addition to "Kassandra" the stories "Orpheus und . . . ," "Daedalus," and, above all, *Nekyia: Bericht eines Überlebenden* (*An Offering for the Dead*) and "Der Untergang" (The apocalypse)—Nossack belongs to the circle of these post-fascist writers who were more strongly marked by fascism than they themselves were aware and than we as subsequent critics may find appealing.

IV

A brief look at the stories "Der Untergang" (1943) and *Nekyia* (1946) should once again suffice to illustrate Nossack's problematic appropriation of the Cassandra figure from another perspective. "Der Untergang" and *Nekyia* are not Cassandra texts in the sense that "Kassandra," "Dorothea," or even "I have only you, Cassandra" are. These two stories are not about Cassandra, but rather Nossack assumes Cassandra's role as the "clairvoyant of catastrophe."

Both works belong to the context of modern apocalypses.[38] They reflect the traumatic experiences of the "Hamburg catastrophe," the term Nossack used in a letter of September 18, 1946, to Hermann Kasack to describe the destruction of Hamburg.[39] "Der Untergang," which Nossack introduced to his correspondent as a "very intimate report" about "the time from July 24th until approximately August 15th" 1943, and then referred to in the same breath as a confession, is inscribed with a mythologizing perspective on historical events.[40] The image of the dead city that is conjured in both texts reactivates mythical and magical memories.

In "Der Untergang," it is above all the fantasy of matricide that binds the text to archaic contexts. The guilt for the destruction of the city, at least this is *one* reading that the text offers, is assumed by the

authorial "I" who, like a murderer, must return again and again to the "murder site."[41] The mythic parallels to the mother-killer Orestes—whom Nossack will absolve from guilt in his "Kassandra" story and bid farewell to as a "model"[42] in his later sketch "Orestes" (1971) in order to have him resurrected as an "older brother"[43]—serve as the archaizing background for the story. The author's Cassandra vision is, however, not directed at a distant future with an air of prophetic warning but rather looks backward fatalistically at a "primordial situation" doomed to repeat itself as an endless cycle of "dying and becoming" in the history of both individuals and peoples.

The "dream couple" Orestes and Cassandra, already familiar to us from the "Kassandra" story, reappears as a phantasmatic configuration in "Der Untergang." As a mother killer, Orestes fulfills a destiny that Nossack as Cassandra can only prove retroactively. On different levels, Orestes and Cassandra function as the author's mythic alter egos. From this perspective, it is not surprising that Nossack originally toyed with the idea of entitling his "Kassandra" story "Orestes." The choice of one figure over the other is not based on principle but is rather aesthetic and strategic. In "Der Untergang," Nossack dispenses with an introduction to the mythic figures in the narrative plot but reclaims them as "apologetic figures" with no less intensity than in the texts where, as title characters, they are portrayed as identificatory figures in a heavy-handed fashion. Nossack takes a more subtle approach in "Der Untergang" and keeps the mythic references concealed, if for no other reason than that he was convinced that only a chosen few would be able to comprehend the "truth." In the letter to Hermann Kasack already mentioned above, Nossack emphasized that, in comparison to other people who had the same experiences, he had "more sensitive ears,"[44] above all, because his "will to consciousness"[45] set him apart from the rest: "I hear exactly how cautiously people speak of those things that lie behind them, and one must respect this caution. One cannot force anyone to turn around; not yet, the danger is too great."[46] Without examining all of the text's complexities and contradictions, it is nevertheless possible—in relation to our topic—to say that in this story, Nossack shifts the question of guilt to one of the existential meaning of horror, stylizes himself as one of the elite endowed with greater powers of perception, and contributes through his appropriation of the Cassandra position to the mythification of history.

The connection to myth also is significant for the interpretation of *Nekyia*.[47] By choosing the title *Nekyia*, which means "death sacrifice,"

Nossack is making a direct allusion to Greek myth. At first glance, however, it is not the mythic moments that stand out but rather the multiple references to the tradition of the fairy tale and science fiction. Nossack's subtitle, *Bericht eines Überlebenden* (*Report of a Survivor*), explicitly relates it to the tradition of apocalyptic visionary literature, as represented, for example, in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). With the motto "Post amorem omne animal triste," Nossack also introduces a dream of association that is well known to us from the "Kassandra" story. The motto signals that there is a relationship between political collapse and private catastrophe. The relationship between the sexes is here also the secret point of connection from which the problem of guilt can be unfurled.

The text outlines a disconsolate scenario that is recollective of the fairy tale that the grandmother relates in Büchner's *Woyzeck*. The people, the cities, and the trees have all died. There are not even stars anymore. The moon has become a "blind mirror" and hangs in the sky like a "mushy pear."[48] The narrative "I" in the text has neither name nor reflection.[49] The world seems to be in the state of chaos that preceded Genesis. The world is a "loamy sea,"[50] and the people are "like lumps of clay"[51] awaiting their maker. Only the narrative "I" and the friend he meets in a clay crater appear to be alive. In one scene that leaves no element of the grotesque to the imagination, both men form a woman out of clay and end up in a fatal argument over the result of their work:

> "You didn't give her any navel," he shrieked and jumped up. And before I could stop him, he ran over to her. "How can she have a navel, when she was not born to any mother," I called and ran after him. But he was faster, and it was already too late. I had only made it halfway and then something terrible happened. He stood across from her and bored a navel into her belly with his extended index finger. "Get away!" I screamed, but he was not listening anymore. The woman made a step in his direction. It looked as if he were pulling her toward him by his index finger. Then she bent over him, first as if with affection and then as if unconscious. The last that I saw of my friend was how he raised his hands to protect himself from her. But the body fell on top of him and pulled the entire wall, which it was still attached to, after it.[52]

The narrative "I" of the story remains behind as the "survivor." In dream and nightmare sequences, the narrative "I" wanders aimlessly

through a deserted and empty world, searching for the mothers and a solution to the question of who bears the "guilt"[53] for the condition of the world:

> "Mother, did something awful happen," I asked her from her shoulder. "I acted the whole time as if I didn't care and as if one could simply continue living thus. But that is a lie and now it has reached the point that I want to scream. And perhaps it is too late. And perhaps I am guilty of everything. There were children playing with dolls in the sand. The girls looked happily into the morning when they shook their bedclothes out at the window.
> And youths, ringed by the blue of evening, rode their horses gracefully to the watering hole and dreamt of heroic deeds. And then the old people sitting before their house doors between the flower bushes of their front gardens. All that, mother, is no more. It went under because I had no real part in it. The people will point accusing fingers at me. And the name, that they have been only whispering secretly up to now—and I acted as if I didn't hear it—now they will call it out loud: There he is, Death! O mother, make me nameless.[54]

In response, the mother tells the son an encoded version of the story of the Trojan War. Through this long narrative, which apart from a few small differences resembles the mythic original, she gives her son his lost identity back. As in "Der Untergang," the narrative "I" in *Nekyia* is revealed to be Orestes, who is simultaneously the victim of the war and of his familial situation. As in Nossack's "Kassandra" story, here too Orestes is not a mother killer, but his mother Clytemnestra is still the murderer of his father.

Where is Cassandra in this constellation? As in "Der Untergang," she functions here as the alter ego of the author, a seer and a knower like Cassandra, whom no one believes, and who bears the weight of his knowledge heavily:

> There is no savior, except for one alone and that one is oneself. O what a burden for him, to live from one day to the next! If he can take that, then in truth he has been tested. If one would only tell it to the people, then it would have the result—assuming, of course, that they would believe it, which is unlikely—

> that the flood would begin to rise today already. Therefore one must be silent, even though that is the most difficult.[55]

Nossack definitely did not remain silent. On the contrary, in ever-new variations he attempted through his early postwar texts to offer clarification, interpretation, and meaning. In the process, the myth of the Trojan War, along with its cast of characters, above all Orestes and Cassandra, served as the precarious reference point, precarious because it transcended into a metatemporal sphere where the question of guilt and responsibility could no longer be posed in concrete political terms.

NOTES

1. For more on Friedrich Meinecke and the "old" historians' debate of 1945, see Winfried Schulz, *Deutsche Geschichtswissenschaft nach 1945* (Munich: Oldenburg Verlag, 1989). On the "new" historians' debate, see Dan Diner, *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte?* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1987).

2. Cf. Inge Stephan, *Musen & Medusen. Mythos und Geschlechterdiskurs in der Moderne* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1997).

3. Thomas Epple, *Der Aufstieg der Untergangsseherin Kassandra: Zum Wandel Ihrer Interpretation vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neuman, 1993); Solvejg Müller, *Kein Brautfest zwischen Menschen und Göttern. Kassandra-Mythologie im Lichte von Sexualität und Wahrheit* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994).

4. Epple, 227.

5. Müller, 194.

6. For a reproduction of Hofer's painting, see the exhibition catalogue: *Karl Hofer. Sammlung Rolf Deyhle III*, Thomas Gädecke, ed. (Neumünster: Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landesmuseum, 1996). There are astonishing thematic parallels between Hofer's paintings and Nossack's writings.

7. Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 6th printing (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), 1313.

8. Hans Erich Nossack, "Kassandra," *Die Erzählungen*, Christof Schmid, ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987), 93–118.

9. Ibid., 94.

10. Ibid., 95.

11. Ibid., 96.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 97.

14. Herfried Münkler, *Odysseus und Kassandra* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990), 88.

15. Nossack, "Kassandra," 98.

16. Ibid., 113.

17. Ibid., 101.

18. Ibid., 102.

19. Ibid., 104.

20. Ibid., 112.

21. Ibid., 117.

22. Ibid., 118.

23. Ibid., 106.

24. Ibid., 96.

25. Hans Erich Nossack, *Der jüngere Bruder* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1958).

26. Nossack, "Kassandra," 111.

27. Hans Erich Nossack, "Ich habe nur dich, Kassandra," *Aus den Akten der Kanzlei Seiner Exzellenz des Herrn Premierministers Tod. Glossen und Miniaturen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987), 160 f.

28. Wolfgang Koeppen, "Rede zur Verleihung des Georg-Büchner-Preises 1962," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 259.

29. Hans Erich Nossack, "Dorothea," *Die Erzählungen*, 231.

30. Ibid., 224.

31. Ibid., 232.

32. In January 1947, Ingeborg and Gottfried Sello held an exhibition of Hofer's paintings in the Hamburg Gallery of Youth, where for the first time since the war thirty-six paintings and twenty other works by Hofer were exhibited. In 1953, another exhibition followed in the Hamburg Museum of Art. Cf. the Hofer exhibition catalogue (note 6), 99 f.

33. Epple, 217.

34. Müller, 196.

35. It was not until the most recent studies by Buhr and Söhling that Nossack scholarship has become more professional. See Wolfgang Michael Buhr, *Hans Erich Nossack. Die Grenzsituation als Schlüssel zum Verständnis seines Werkes* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1994); Gabriele Söhling, *Das Schweigen zum Klingen bringen. Denkstruktur, Literaturbegriff und Schreibweisen bei Hans Erich Nossack* (Mainz: Hase und Koehler, 1995). It must be noted, however, that neither of these studies addresses *Cassandra*.

36. A stronger "apologetic figure" than Cassandra under fascism as well as during the early postwar period was the figure of Antigone, who was upheld as the icon of resistance. Cf. George Steiner, *Die Antigonen. Geschichte und Gegenwart eines Mythos* (Munich: n.p., 1988); Johanna Bossinade, *Das Beispiel Antigone. Textsemiotische Untersuchungen zur Präsentation der Frauenfigur von Sophokles bis Ingeborg Bachmann* (Cologne: Bohlau, 1990).

37. Nossack, "Kassandra," 106.

38. Klaus Vondung, *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Postmoderne* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988).

39. Cited in Nossack, *Die Erzählungen*, 862.

40. On the mythologizing tendencies in Nossack's work, cf. also Inge Stephan, "'Hamburg ist für alles Künstlerische immer lähmend gewesen.' Formen der Mythologisierung Hamburgs bei Hans Erich Nossack," *Liebe, die im Abgrund Anker wirft. Autoren und literarisches Feld im Hamburg des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Inge Stephan and Hans-Gerd Winter, eds. (Hamburg: Argument, 1989), 294–316.

41. Cited in Nossack, *Die Erzählungen*, 858.

42. Hans Erich Nossack, "Orest," *Aus den Akten der Kanzlei Seiner Exzellenz des Herrn Premierministers Tod. Glossen und Miniaturen*, 26.

43. Ibid., 27.

44. Cited in Nossack, *Die Erzählungen*, 858.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Hans Erich Nossack, *Nekyia: Bericht eines Überlebenden, Die Erzählungen*, 119–217.

48. Ibid., 207.

49. Ibid., 145.

50. Ibid., 177.

51. Ibid., 119.

52. Ibid., 187.

53. Ibid., 178.

54. Ibid., 201.

55. Ibid., 148.