

The Wall and the Books

In 1833, Carlyle observed that the history of the universe is an infinite sacred book that all men write and read and try to understand, and in which they are also written.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

This story is, as one can easily see, the strict reverse of the previous one.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths*

Recently, in Germany, an enormous wall has been demolished and the extensive, almost infinite files of the East German secret police, the Stasi, have been opened to the public. A correspondence suggests itself — if nothing else, both events are mirror images of the traditional acts of government: erecting walls and censoring or burning books. This correspondence is disturbing, even as it seems somehow appropriate; to investigate its nature is the purpose of these few paragraphs.

Historically speaking, there seems to be little mystery in the two events. Unlike in China, where demonstrators met bullets, or in Romania where the televised revolution never actually took place, in East Germany a peaceful revolution successfully toppled the former regime. The government was already collapsing, economically and otherwise, when a faceless bureaucrat on TV rendered the Berlin Wall obsolete, at which point souvenir hunters rendered it non-existent; East German citizens continued (and continue) to battle the hydra of bureaucracy and save the Stasi files, the record of their oppression, from destruction by the authorities. Further historical clarification seems unlikely, however. The architects and leaders of the Stasi, and of the East German regime as a whole, ensured that their own files were destroyed, in effect erasing authorial intent and explanatory power from the historical record. The first citizens' committees responsible for the dismantling of the Stasi decided to destroy other key material, such as all the data in

the Stasi computers; these measures were probably pushed through by Stasi agents or collaborators who secretly infiltrated the citizens' committees, though such shadowy theories cannot be proved, indeed entail the impossibility of their ever being proved. Conspiracies are perhaps afoot even today. At least one famous victim of the Stasi, Vera Wollenberger — a politician whose husband, the father of her two children and her long-time partner in the leadership of the oppositional East German peace movement, turned out to have been working for the Stasi, informing on her, and actively manipulating her throughout their relationship — has had mysterious hit-and-run car accidents on the way to her last several speaking engagements...

In any case, the correspondence between the Wall and the Stasi is more than merely historical. The demonstration that ended with thousands of citizens storming and securing the central Stasi buildings in Berlin was planned as a mere protest; participants were to bring bricks in order to symbolically wall in the complex. The Stasi files, too enormous in scope to be measured in pages or volumes, are measured by the number of kilometers of shelf space they take up — each kilometer with around ten million pages and thirty tons of paper — and they total the same number of kilometers (165) as the former length of the concrete and barbed-wire Berlin Wall itself. Almost immediately after the Wall's construction, it had transmuted into a metaphor, into literature (Peter Schneider, *Der Mauerspringer*); conversely, the trope of a wall is constantly used for the Stasi volumes: years of informing built walls of distrust, the opening of the files tears down a wall between a people and their history, the destruction of the files, which politicians are still calling for (to prevent vigilante revenge for past betrayal, and/or to let bygones be bygones), would rebuild that wall, while keeping the files available would in turn build new walls of resentment between victims and friends discovered to have been informers. The contradictions and tensions between these metaphors only prove that the relationship is still felt, still alive, not yet congealed into stiff clichés. These contradictions can also be seen as the sign of a psychological explanation (no oppositions exist in the unconscious): perhaps repressing a population with walls forces an expression somewhere else, in the books of the Stasi, like an air bubble behind badly applied wallpaper which can be flattened with your hand only to reappear somewhere else. Or perhaps tearing down walls and unveiling secret writings are expressions of the same impulse. But then who or what is the subject in this psychological account (whose impulse, whose expressions)? The Wall was brought down by a nobody and then by everybody, and the files were created

by everyone and no-one. According to some estimates, more than a fifth of the entire East German population were Stasi employees, informants, or collaborators; there are countless, literally uncountable cases of two informants unwittingly writing reports on each other, either as a test set up by one or both of their supervisors or unbeknownst to all concerned. The files themselves are organized by individual person's name and then cross-referenced, not archived by type of crime or organization or political party – this appalls and stymies today's professional historians by making it impossible to get any sort of overview. By and about everyone, the Stasi books are the ultimate authorless text.

Perhaps, then, the correspondence between Wall and books is to be understood in aesthetic terms; certainly the very idea of destroying and creating on such an enormous scale is formally gripping in itself, even aside from its content. All art – literature at least – has an air of the past about it: the lyric poem relates a feeling, an *already felt* feeling; the epic novel, even a science-fiction epic of the future, is a narrative re-counting or retelling; and dramatic action plays itself out before one's eyes, but one leaves the theater or turns off the television with only the memory of that action. It is the imposition of form itself, the structure of a work of art, always excluding as it includes, which is responsible for its bygone quality. And form has long been defined as what is essential in art; it is often affirmed that all arts aspire to the state of music, which is pure form. What happens, then, when art reverses itself and aspires to pure content? When the walls of formal construction are removed, nothing is excluded, and the mirror held up to nature is on the same scale as nature itself? Reality duplicates itself – on the one side as tragedy and on the other side as farce, in this case – and the books of the Stasi, like a Borges library, overstep all bounds and become their own world. A fictional story that comes to seem true or whose characters matter, a myth in which we can find ourselves, a landscape ordered around us in which we feel we belong, the past made present; this revelation of our imminence in what does not otherwise exist is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon.

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