It's hard to tell if Kurt von Hammerstein, the protagonist of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's recently published experimental history of the Weimar Republic, is ultimately a hero or a villain. The last commander of the Reichswehr before the Nazi takeover, he evidently despises Hitler and follows his rise with contempt: "I can sleep easily again now, since I know that, if need be, I can order the troops to fire on the Nazis," he says in 1932, but when the Führer annexes the army a year later, Hammerstein doesn't lift a finger. After his retirement, he liaises with the circle of conspirators around von Stauffenberg, even feeds them important information, but still hasn't committed to their plotting by the time he dies of cancer in 1943.

Maybe the best you could say about Hammerstein is that he was a contrarian. The English title of the book, The Silences of Hammerstein, has a more negative ring to it than the German, which hints at some sort of unique, if not quite redeeming, quality: Hammerstein, oder der Eigensinn. "Eigensinn is a word that doesn't translate very well into English," Enzensberger explains while finishing off a third cup of coffee in his flat overlooking Munich's English Gardens. "It's not selfishness. It's not obstinacy. It's not intransigence. You might say it's a sense of having your own value system. That's a quality that I find very interesting, because it's almost beyond a person's control. When I first came to England after the war, people used to speak of someone being a 'man of character': that might be a good translation. In spite of the pressures within his milieu, Hammerstein somehow didn't budge. He couldn't. It saved him from the opportunism of the other generals. Of course, they would have killed him off if he hadn't died in '43."

There are few biographies in which the great man or woman at the centre doesn't give away something of the biographer's own character and, as you read The Silences of Hammerstein, you start to guess that there might be more than a trace of Hammerstein in Enzensberger. Now 80, he has been a member of the elite cadre of German public intellectuals since his first collection of poems appeared in 1957 – despite being, or maybe because he is, frustratingly difficult to categorise. In the 1950s, when Germans were cheering on the revival of their economy, he was writing angry attacks on his country's inability to deal with the Nazi past: the notorious anti-bourgeois Kommune 1 collective set up its first camp in his Berlin flat, and he was the founding editor of the journal Kursbuch, something of a New Testament for the radical left. In 1968, by the time the anti-establishment was congealing into a formal political opposition, he was off living in Cuba, for a "best-case analysis of socialism and Marxism", and concluded that "they had botched it completely. Cuba was a one-man show. For me, this experiment was over then." It was around the same time that he wrote an essay entitled "Am I a German?" in Encounter, in which he confidently declared: "As a form of organisation, the nation has become obsolete," which helped to establish him as one of the intellectual founding fathers of European integration. It was announced last year that he would be the next recipient of the prestigious Sonning Prize, awarded by the University of Copenhagen for "commendable work that benefits European culture". But when he collected the prize this February, he lived up to his reputation for biting the hand that feeds him, accusing the EU of "limitless megalomania".

Critics have been divided about the motivation behind his free-spiritedness. Peter O Chotjewitz has called him "a political dandy": "He's the kind of person who shouts 'All aboard!]', only to then hop on the train in the opposite direction because it's nice and empty." Florian Illies, literary editor of Die Zeit, on the other hand, thinks his contrarian spirit is simply second nature: "Whenever Germany has started dreaming, Enzensberger has already woken up again. He took part in all the great German illusions and utopias, but he was quicker than anyone else to recognise their limitations. Of course, there will always be some who prefer to keep on dreaming and won't forgive him his talent for grasping reality."
Born in 1929 in small-town Swabia, the eldest of four boys, Enzensberger is part of the last generation of intellectuals whose writing was shaped by first-hand experience of the Third Reich. Contemporaries include Günter Grass (born in 1927), Martin Walser (1927) and Jürgen Habermas (1929). The Enzensbergers moved to Nuremberg, the ceremonial birthplace of National Socialism, in 1931. Julius Streicher, the founder and publisher of Der Stürmer, was their next-door neighbour. Hans Magnus joined the Hitler Youth in his teens, but was chucked out soon afterwards. "I have always been incapable of being a good comrade. I can't stay in line. It's not in my character. It may be a defect, but I can't help it."

He remembers "listening to the BBC in secret, with the bedsheets over our heads so our neighbours couldn't hear" and, when British bombers started tearing the city to pieces in August 1944, it appeared to him a liberation rather than a catastrophe: "You have a very cold-blooded attitude to these things when you are young. To see dead people in the streets is just a fact of life. I wasn't particularly traumatised. The chaos of postwar times was quite enjoyable for a 15-year-old kid. There was an anarchy that appealed . . . No government, no old authority figures who could shout at you . . . wonderful!" Immediately after the war, he worked for the RAF at a base outside the city, first as a translator, then as a dealer on the black market ("a crash course in the principles of capitalism") and finally as a barman in the officers' mess, where he was fascinated by the "almost Chinese" class codes of the staff's drinking habits ("port in the afternoon was a definite no-no"). Anglophilia runs through the family — his late brother Christian was a professor of English at Munich University — and he speaks to me in fluent English. At the start of his career, Enzensberger was frequently compared to Britain's "angry young men", Osborne and Pinter — misleadingly so, because playwriting was never a particular strong point. He was always more convincing when he channelled his anger into poetry. His first two collections, *verteidigung der wölfe gegen die lämmer* (Defence of the Wolves Against the Lambs) and *landessprache* (Native Language), railed against Germans' instinctive submission to authorities ("you'd love / to be torn limb from limb. you / won't change the world"), and wrestled violently with the language he had inherited.

Looking back on his early poems now, Enzensberger admits they sound "shrill". "But when you are 18 or 19, you can't stomach silence. Immediately after the war, there was one priority for us: we had to get rid of the bastards. And that was a great nuisance, because you can't change an entire population. Fifty per cent were followers of Hitler, 35% were opportunists and a few others didn't agree. You had all these professors, judges and chiefs of police who were old Nazis, and you had to get rid of them, and a certain violence was necessary to clear up the mess. For a few years we worked in an intellectual sanitation department."

Part of a generation of writers bent on rebelling against father figures, Enzensberger, it's interesting to note, spent surprisingly little time rebelling against his actual father. Andreas Enzensberger's professional interests — he was a telecommunications engineer specialising in telephone and radio technology, and Bavaria's first radio presenter — hover over his son's career in a positive way. Many of Enzensberger's poems read like news broadcasts with a bad interference ("Caribbean crisis . . . washes whiter / and whiter and whiter . . . troops ready to fly out", he writes in "remote house"), and when he got his first proper job in 1955, it was as an editor for the radio station Süddeutscher Rundfunk.

The essays he broadcast in this period, later collected in various print anthologies, are easily as remarkable as his early poetry; still only 28 years of age, he took a critical sledgehammer to what he called the "consciousness industry". In one essay, he analysed to the minutest detail the language of Der Spiegel, then and now the ultimate opinion former for Germany's educated middle classes, concluding in four damning points that it "obscures rather than illuminates the subject it talks about", that "the 'German news magazine' is not a news magazine", that it "doesn't practice criticism, but surrogate criticism", and that it "works to disorientate rather than orientate the reader". In another essay, he compared the front page of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung for nine consecutive days to 12 international newspapers, exposing its wilful ignoring of the trial against Adolf Eichmann, which was coming to a conclusion at the time. He's not bashful about it: "That too was part of the clean-up job. It was all contaminated. You had to watch them. There was no self-reflection in the media for a long time in postwar Germany. They might have criticised each other politically, but the whole method of the media wasn't being questioned."
Nowadays, there's no major newspaper that doesn't have a science page or a media page. Even the Frankfurter now has a corrections column, something the Germans have been extremely slow to pick up."

Enzensberger's reflections on the power of radio still sound fresh decades later. "In principle," he wrote in 1970, "electronic technology doesn't differentiate between sender and recipient. Every transistor radio is built in such a way that it could become a potential transmitter." It's more than an accidental glimpse of the Twitter-sphere. Der Spiegel, despite being one of Enzensberger's targets, printed his damning critiques a week after they were broadcast. He has been an extremely active broadcaster ever since, with a steady stream of essays appearing across international media. Having founded and edited two magazines – Kursbuch and TransAtlantik – and edited a series of forgotten masterpieces called The Other Library for the publisher Eichborn, he certainly understands how different media function or can be made to function.

If Enzensberger is the one of the holy trinity of German postwar literature (alongside Grass and Walser) whose voice has been most audible in public, some cynics will point out that not that many people actually read him in private. His most popular work is a book for children he wrote in 1997: The Number Devil, an enchanting story about a young boy's struggle with mathematics, has sold more than 1m copies in 22 different languages. But he never wrote that state-of-the-nation novel to match Grass's Tin Drum. "An interesting German novel is much rarer than an interesting English-language novel," he says. "Unlike the Russians, the French and the English, we don't have a very great novel tradition. We've had a number of interesting writers in the 20th century – Musil, Roth, Kafka, Sebald – but they are all one-offs. Our mainstream novels are like German cars. There is a certain core competence and diligence, but you couldn't say that they are particularly exciting or surprising or interesting."

The situation is different when it comes to poetry: "In Germany we do have a strong tradition of prosody in poetry, going back to Bertolt Brecht or Gottfried Benn." If readers sometimes take a while to get used to Enzensberger's verses, it's because rhyme is rare and rhythm a secondary concern to creating dense collages of images and phrases. In Charles Simic's view, what makes Enzensberger "the best German poet since the second world war" is that "he has the largest range of subject matter, employs a variety of styles and conveys better than any other poet of that period the experience of someone who came of age during the war. Almost every one of his poems, be they lyric, dramatic or narrative, has a polemical quality. That is to say, he neither takes poetry, nor the subject matter he writes about for granted."

In his most recent collection, A History of Clouds, he brings a scientific eye to a traditional subject, jumbling the pastoral language of "gigantic nomads" with technical phrases such as "rotational symmetry". "One of the advantages of poetry is that it is an omnivore. It can absorb anything within the human experience. Sometimes I am confused by why fellow poets limit themselves to one subject: they are astonished when you talk, say, about mathematics within a poem."

When I am about to leave his flat, he thrusts a limited-edition pamphlet into my hands: Adam Zagajewski from the Polish, Alberto Blanco and Rafael Courtoisie from the Spanish, Lars Gustafsson from the Swedish, WH Auden and Bob Dylan from the English. Cosmopolitan to the point of self-parody, he has spent time living in the US, in Italy and on a small island on a Norwegian fjord, as well as in Cuba. The story goes that his Russian so impressed Nikita Khrushchev that the First Secretary of the Communist party offered to lend him his swimming trunks for a dip in the Black Sea.

Europe, Europe (1989), still his best non-fiction book, is a series of investigative travelogues about seven European countries and their political cultures: Hungary, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Poland, Portugal, Norway – Britain, Germany and France are deliberately excluded. "Europe is the best place to be in the world. But it is not an office or an institution: it's a real thing. It has a much richer future than the codified language of
treaties." For a moment, he is the angry young man again. "Europe is a great achievement, but they are messing it up. They mess about with something that there is no reason for doing. It is superfluous. It is anti-European, because they antagonise people without any reason for doing so. Constitutionally speaking, this is rolling back on liberties which we have acquired. You have to watch these people." I ask him whether he realises that he sounds like an editorial in a British tabloid. "Of course, there is a tactical problem that comes up when you speak your mind. It's not nice to have the wrong people cheering you on. But you can't make yourself reliant on anyone. Sometimes even the bastards might be right."

*Philip Oltermann
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