

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.

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## MAIA SNOW

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



courtesy the artist