Chapter 3

An Unexpected Detour on the Way to the Pantheon: Strauß, Handke, and the Vagaries of High Culture in Germany

The German “Literature Debate” of 1990–1991 was not what the name implies. Although its initial phase centered around the publication of Christa Wolf’s prose piece *What Remains*, its real focus was an attempt to discredit leftist intellectuals and their attempts to use cultural discourse to have an impact on politics and society. East German authors who had criticized the GDR system from within, offering critical solidarity in the hope that “socialism with a human face” might still be developed, were characterized as “failures” or “demi-heroes” (“halbe Helden”) who had shifted constantly between “hope and fear, doubt and cynicism.” Using the epithet “totalitarian” the way leftist critics had long used the term “fascist” (or at least “protofascist”) against conservative writers, Frank Schirrmacher of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* condemned German intellectuals—a term seldom applied to conservatives in the postwar period—as corruptible and selectively blind:

Fond legends, including that of West German identity, have been destroyed. According to the postwar legend of many German writers, artists, and scholars, the writer, in light of National Socialism, has at his disposal a stable, anti-authoritarian, critical ethos that proves itself when tested. The exemplary case of Christa Wolf teaches us not only that the [totalitarian] model was never overcome, but also how perfectly the intellectual can deceive himself about reality. . . . There is some evidence that many do not wish to hear of the second totalitarian fall from grace in the twentieth century. They appear, as the fate of Christa Wolf demonstrates, not even to comprehend that it has occurred.

This citation is taken from the concluding paragraph of Schirrmacher’s controversial and much-discussed essay, one which ends with incriminations
against West German intellectuals. The subtext is that the end of the so-called socialist experiment in East Germany entails the end of the alleged cultural hegemony of the left in the Western part of the country. As has been elucidated above, said hegemony is a thorn in the side of right-wing intellectuals, some of whom, like Ulrich Schacht and Siegmar Faust, found their intellectual identity in opposition to the East German state. Schirrmacher and his allies were criticized, to be sure, for distortions and bias, but the “Literature Debate” was in the end a cultural debacle for the left. The leftist intellectuals were faced with two choices: to repent, lick their wounds, and disappear from the public sphere, or to wait for an opportunity to retaliate. This opportunity came first in the form of a reaction to the xenophobic violence that flared up in Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall (the venerable antifascist project could once again be revived), and then in the innumerable critical rejoinders to Botho Strauß’s 1993 essay “Impending Tragedy.” It is conceivable that the campaign against Strauß might have been less polemical and strident if the crusade against Christa Wolf and others had not preceded it.

Writing in Die Zeit in response to the publication of both Die selbstbewusste Nation and “Impending Tragedy,” Robert Leicht proclaimed in a front-page editorial that “whoever constantly calls for a German normalcy must be told: It can only be had within the norms of European civilization.” Just what are these norms, however? Leicht, although not uncritical of the Enlightenment, was speaking as a liberal, and his perspective on what comprises civilization and how it should be assessed was not shared by his intellectual opponents. In 1993, it seemed as if old certainties had disappeared overnight. The normally left-liberal Der Spiegel commissioned three well-known writers with hitherto liberal, if not leftist credentials, namely, Martin Walser (b. 1927), Hans Magnus Enzensberger (b. 1929), and Botho Strauß, to plumb the depths of the new national mood. The three essays produced for the occasion, “Impending Tragedy” (Anschwellender Bocksgefang) by Botho Strauß, “Views of Civil War” (Ausblicke auf den Bürgerkrieg) by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and “German Concerns” (Deutsche Sorgen) by Martin Walser, had a dual function. On the one hand, they were meant to stimulate debate about the future direction of culture in united Germany. On the other hand, they were clearly to serve notice that Der Spiegel aspired to be a major player in the drama of cultural reassessment and renewal. The magazine was faced with the two-pronged task of attract-
ing new readers from the former GDR and maintaining its market share in
the face of the founding of the competing conservative weekly Focus in
1993. In the announcement “Concerning Intellectuals” at the beginning of
issue no. 26, 1993, a kind of contextualizing afterword to the three essays,
one finds phrases like “outrageous utterances” and “a number of taboo vi-
lations by German intellectuals.” Anticipating the key question, the Spiegel
editors go on to ask it and provide an answer of sorts:

Has the Spiegel lost its leftist, left-liberal grounding too? As much or as little as
the entire critical intelligentsia, which has been seeking new values and orien-
tation since the abrupt end of the well-ordered bipolar world divided into East
and West.6

In this context, “critical” is a synonym for any variety of leftism. Such ter-
minology would of course be rejected by right-wing intellectuals like Schacht
and Schwilk, who see themselves as the true critical spirits, whereas the pre-
1989 leftists were, in their view, hypercritical of the West and by nature in-
capable of—or unwilling to—gain insight into the dictatorial nature of state
socialism in the Eastern bloc.7 As far as the “well-ordered bipolar world” is
concerned, the dichotomy had been long since undermined by the presence
of exiled GDR dissidents in the West and the reformist adherents of the
Gorbachev line in the East. To what extent did Enzensberger and Walser, liter-
ary mentors of the generation of 1968, and Strauß, who began writing in
the late 1960s, discover new fault lines and potentialities?

There are basically two schools of thought regarding Hans Magnus En-
zensberger’s role as a writer and social commentator in postwar Germany.
Some see him as the former enfant terrible of the stifling Adenauer years who
became one of the driving forces behind the student movement of the
1960s, only to turn his back on it all, becoming ever more conservative or
at least apolitical in the course of the 1970s and 1980s. One could express
this in shorthand by referring to the titles of his various projects: from the
Kursbuch and the project boldly termed “the political alphabetization of
Germany”8 to the slippery TransAtlantik and the bibliophile Andere Biblio-
thek.9 Others argue that one can discern a basic continuity from the 1950s
to the 1990s. This has been characterized as “the freedom of carefree, inde-
pendent reflection”10 or a “humanistic basic conviction in thinking and
writing.”11 What can we glean from the essay “Views of Civil War”?

Most of the German readers of this essay, which is part of the 1993 book
Prospects of Civil War (Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg),12 probably remembered
another rather famous *Spiegel* essay by the same author, namely the 1991 piece equating Saddam Hussein with Hitler. Enzensberger spoke at that time of the doomsday program of each of these “enemies of humanity”: “His death wish is his motive, his mode of rule is destruction” (26). Ideology is irrelevant to the author’s “anthropological” analysis. If the fanatical leader can find followers who wish to die themselves, anything is possible. According to Enzensberger, this is what happened in Germany in the 1930s, and this constellation was duplicated in Iraq in the 1980s. Normal political maneuvering was thus useless, making war an inevitability. This conclusion transformed Enzensberger into one of the despicable warmongers (“Bellizisten”) in the eyes of the German left. The essay on civil war takes up many of the same themes, placing more emphasis on the global situation. The “New World Order” is one characterized primarily by civil wars in every corner of the planet, according to Enzensberger. In contrast to the Cold War era, he goes on to assert, none of the participants in these conflicts is motivated by ideals, ideology, or a *Weltanschauung* of any kind. In fact, they have absolutely no convictions at all. One even reads that they are “autistic” and incapable of distinguishing between destruction and self-destruction (171). The actual goal is none other than “collective self-mutilation” (172). In such a climate, none of the political thinkers—from Aristotle to Max Weber—have anything to tell us. Only Hobbes’s *bellum omnium contra omnes* remains an accurate, if depressing description of the situation.

Of particular interest is Enzensberger’s assessment of the contemporary German scene in the context of his scenario. He refuses to call the perpetrators of violence against foreigners “right-wing radicals” or “neo-Nazis”:

He knows nothing about National Socialism. History does not interest him. The swastika and Hitler salute are mere props. His clothing, music, and video culture are thoroughly American. “Germanness” is a slogan devoid of meaning that only serves to cover up the empty spaces in his brain. (172)

This does not, however, imply that he fails to take these people seriously. On the contrary: He calls for action (without going into specifics) to eliminate the antisocial violence from German society. If the Germans were to refrain from doing so, he says, they would lose every right to criticize conditions in other countries: “It does not befit the Germans to act like guarantors of peace and world champions of human rights as long as gangs of German thugs and arsonists are spreading fear and terror day and night” (175). This
is hardly the voice of a conservative. If anything, it is an example of leftist melancholy stemming from the grudging admission that the universalist morality of the Enlightenment is not realizable on any grand scale. It is not stated triumphantly, but rather in a tone of deep sadness. Enzensberger quotes approvingly from Hannah Arendt’s totalitarianism theory, but hastens to add that it does not apply to our world. The cultural pessimism we find here is not coupled with a call to return to traditional values, and there is absolutely nothing in the language of the essay which indicates a turn to the right. Since 1993, Enzensberger has expressed his great respect for Denis Diderot, the quintessential representative of the Enlightenment,\textsuperscript{15} and in a recent interview, he praised the student movement of the 1960s for finally making West Germany “suitable for habitation.”\textsuperscript{16}

Martin Walser has been dissecting the old Bundesrepublik since the 1950s, and until the mid-1980s, he was also viewed as a founding member of the left-liberal literary phalanx. Of late, he has complained of isolation and the loss of old friends. This is directly attributable to his changed attitude vis-à-vis German history and national identity. The general public first became aware of the change in 1986, when \textit{Die Welt} published an interview with the writer (September 29). One could venture to say that it was less the content of the interview than the fact that it appeared in the flagship paper of media czar Axel Springer which caused an uproar. Beyond this, a full-page advertisement hyping the interview appeared in \textit{Der Spiegel} (no. 40, 1986) with a photo of Walser and the following quotation in bold type: “I will not become accustomed to the division of Germany.” One was not a little surprised to hear such pronouncements from the author of the antifascist plays \textit{The Rabbit Race} (\textit{Eiche und Angora}) and \textit{The Black Swan}, who had been politicized by the Vietnam War, felt affinity with the West German Communist Party (DKP—Deutsche Kommunistische Partei) for a time (cf. the controversial work \textit{Gallistl’s Illness}), and even signed an open letter to Erich Honecker “With socialist greetings.”\textsuperscript{17} The first literary manifestation of Walser’s preoccupation with the German nation was the 1986 novella \textit{Dorle and Wolf}, whose main character makes the following oft-quoted observation at the Bonn train station: “Halved people were hustling back and forth. The other halves were running back and forth in Leipzig.”\textsuperscript{18} In actuality, Walser had been ruminating about the division of Germany for quite some time, but this had somehow gone unnoticed. In his provocative speech “Speaking about Germany,” given in November 1988 as part of the series “Speaking
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about our Country,” he made a point of quoting from remarks which he had made in Bergen-Enkheim in 1977:

The existence of these two countries is the product of a catastrophe whose causes can be known. I find it unbearable to let German history—as badly as it went in recent times—end as a product of catastrophe. I refuse to participate in the liquidation of history. Within me, another Germany still has a chance.19

Walser was not only criticized by Günter Grass and others for relying on a very vague “historical feeling” rather than rational analysis,20 but also for accepting CSU politician Theo Waigel’s invitation to discuss his speech with Waigel’s Bavarian party comrades at Franz Josef Strauß’s old stomping ground, Wildbad Kreuth.21 All this had happened before he published the essay “German Concerns” in Der Spiegel. Can one discover an even more pronounced turn toward conservative and patriotic positions in this essay?

This text, like so many of Walser’s fictional and nonfictional writings, is an attempt at therapy, including self-therapy. It came about as a reaction to his appearance in Lea Rosh’s talk show in February 1989, in the course of which the author was verbally assaulted by Günter Gaus and Klaus Wagenbach, who called his “Speaking about Germany” superficial and no better than “barroom bluster” (“Stammtischreden”) (40). The next day, Walser barricaded himself in a Paris hotel room and wondered whether he was still a leftist, since he had just been attacked “in the name of such glorious positions as internationalism, rationality, and enlightenment” (ibid.). He had hoped, he writes, that his call for reunification would not affect his location on the political spectrum (“Links-Rechts-Skala”) (47), since his attitude toward the various contradictions and problems in German society had not changed. This turned out to be an illusion, and his ostracism led to a scathing critique of the German left: “Left—now I see that as an assortment of credos put together according to changing fashions that I cannot go along with. [It is] a chic and scurrilous fundamentalism” (ibid.). Having said this, he explains why he considers it to be so important to come to terms with German nationalism. It turns out that, in his opinion, the success of right-wing extremists is directly attributable to both the exclusion of nationalism from societal discourse since 1945 (“for the best of reasons,” he hastens to add [41]) and the refusal to engage in dialogue with those who cannot tolerate this exclusion.22 Instead of the demonization of skinheads and their ilk, Walser calls for a kind of national conversation about German history and identity. This is not, however, because he himself is a nationalist: “If some-
one has nothing to be proud of but his nationality, he is truly in dire straits [especially] as a German. The nation—that is no one’s major concern. And it hasn’t been for a long while. And it will never be again” (41–42). Such utterances bear little resemblance to conservative or nationalist rhetoric. Walser may not call himself a leftist anymore, but he still sounds like one more often than not. For example, he still views National Socialism as the worst catastrophe in German history (no trace of Ernst Nolte here), and he castigates the West Germans for profiting from the labor of the Gastarbeiter, only to turn against them in times of economic decline. Words like “community,” “morality,” or “national pride” are absent from his essay, and his critique of the Enlightenment project stems—as does Enzensberger’s—from disappointment rather than ideological opposition (47). As a final note, one could point out that Walser has been a vocal supporter of exiled Bangladeshi author Tamila Nasreen, who is anything but a darling of the right.23

Walser’s 1990 essay “A Writer’s Morning” reads like a practice run for “German Concerns.” In it, he refers to two writers whose works provide him with great consolation. The two are Peter Handke and Botho Strauß,24 who are portrayed as transcending the superfluous “opinionated style” (“Meinungsstil”) that Walser abhors. As an example of poetic profundity, Walser quotes from the 1985 Strauß poem “This Memory of One Who Was a Guest for Only One Day”: “Knew no Germany all my life / Only two foreign states who kept me from / Ever being the German in the name of the people. / So much history, only to end like this?”25 This is more than a random citation. It is meant to illustrate the fact that most of the thoughts and many of the images in “Impending Tragedy” can be found in other works by the same author, such as the 1985 poem, the prose volumes Rumor (1980), Pairs, Passersby (1981), The Young Man (1984), Fragments of Indistinctness (1989), No Beginning (1992), and Living, Glimmering, Lying (1994), as well as in the plays Choral Finale (1991) and Equilibrium (1993).26

What has made “Impending Tragedy” perhaps the most controversial essay written by a German author since the 1950s (Wolf Biermann’s “Agitation for War / Agitation for Peace” (Kriegshetze Friedenshetze), Enzensberger’s “Hitler Reincarnate,” and Heinrich Boll’s “Safe Conduct for Ulrike Meinhof” also come to mind)27 is the fact that Strauß made a conscious choice not to utilize fictional characters or the institution of the theater to transmit his assessment of the contemporary malaise in both Germany and
the Western world in general. Until 1993, only a small segment of the population was aware of the direction of his thinking, and this thinking of course took on added significance after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In addition, he was surrounded by a rather mysterious aura, given that he had kept himself out of the public eye as much as possible and refused to participate in the “democratic public sphere” as defined by the visual media. He was vaguely associated with the left, but most people could not point to any concrete actions in this regard. (The anecdote that one sometimes hears about Strauß collecting for the Viet Cong at the Berlin Schaubühne in the early 1970s might well be apocryphal.)

The reliability of apocrypha is questionable, but publications in a major journal are valuable in documenting the evolution of a writer’s thinking about culture and politics. Botho Strauß was an active theater critic before he began his own writing career, and his collected essays from *Contemporary Theater (Theater heute*, the leading German periodical in the field) have been published in book form as *An Attempt to Think Together Esthetic and Political Events: Texts on the Theater 1967–1986.*\(^{28}\) The second part of the title is misleading, because with one exception the volume contains pieces originally written between 1967 and 1971. This was the “1968 decade,” a time when everything was in flux, so one learns much about the genesis of Strauß’s literary and political identity by reading prose composed during the heyday of the student movement. After perusing the volume, one must conclude that Strauß was not a leftist or a rightist, but rather both simultaneously and at times a juxtaposition of the two. That is, his conception of cultural creativity often clashed with his views on history and politics. In the 1970s, this clash led to a new German literary movement, usually termed the “New Subjectivity.”

The first two paragraphs of the book reflect the contradiction that puts its stamp on the entire enterprise. Strauß begins by criticizing the Christian Democrats and their “reactionary use of language” but then goes on to warn that the opponents of the system construct alternative models in such a way that they “become binding for everyone else” \(^{(9)}\).\(^{29}\) This was written in 1969, when leftist radicals had already begun to turn toward rigid orthodoxy. Although Strauß did sympathize with them to a certain extent, the inchoate artist in him instinctively rebelled against prescriptive norms—be they esthetic, political, or about the merging of the two. At the time, however, he still used the jargon of the day. Words like “bourgeois consumers,”
“(late) capitalist,” “protofascist,” “reactionary sentimentality,” “counterrevolution,” “revolutionary struggles,” etc. abound. He does not hesitate to paraphrase Marx (225) or refer to Lenin, “a theoretician and philosopher of no little status” (183). He even criticizes the production of a Russian drama from the 1920s because it does not avoid the danger of presenting a “reactionary anti-Soviet play” (229). Although Brecht is clearly not his favorite playwright, he does agree that his theater esthetics contains “insights from the science of Marxism-Leninism” (71). He affirms—sounding more like a bourgeois pacifist than a Leninist—that all power is “evil” and all wars are “dreadful” (199), a position that would change radically in the 1990s. In opposition to his later disdain for the masses, he attacks esthetic practices that do not help raise them to a higher level (“volksverdummende Methode” [203]). Despite such rhetoric, there is another, quite different undercurrent in many of the theater reviews. Rationality is seen as an insufficient tool for dealing with the myriad dimensions of human existence, and the power of myth is praised. Strauß’s comments on the American Bread and Puppet Theater, normally viewed as a leftist group, are a prefiguration of positions that would come to the fore in “Impending Tragedy”:

We don’t like to admit it, but in the near future, our theater will also change to the extent that we succeed in developing a somewhat more enlightened relationship to the irrational structures of our thinking. . . . [T]he Living Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Theatre maintain a very direct contact with irrationality. The theater of the collectives does not take a stand in order to erect the rule of irrationality, but against the dictatorship of technocratic thinking, against the self-alienation of rationality as exploitable (“verwertbare”) intelligence. (28–29)

Strauß sensed even at the time that any creative artist in Germany who espoused such views would be excoriated, since (political) irrationality is as a rule equated with fascism in the post-Hitler era. (Much of the New Right project entails rehabilitating irrationality in the cultural sphere. It remains to be seen if such a rehabilitation could be limited to that sphere.) Strauß’s enthusiasm for the early plays of Peter Handke was clearly based upon an inner affinity, and he must have cringed when describing the attacks on the already established dramatist: “the purist! the formalist! the fascist!” (176). Two names, each mentioned twice in An Attempt, can now be seen as harbingers of things to come: Novalis and Heidegger.

According to the Spiegel editorial staff, the three 1993 essays were meant to demonstrate “the deep irritation of the German left.”30 Walser’s essay was
placed in the section “Germany,” whereas the texts by Enzensberger and Strauß were printed under the rubric “Culture.” In the table of contents of issue no. 6, “Impending Tragedy” is called a “polemic” as well as a “sombre vision.” The short summary of the essay emphasizes that the reader will encounter something completely new: “In the theater, Botho Strauß has made a name for himself as a cultural critic. Now he reveals his pessimistic credo: The onslaught of foreigners is overtaxing our political culture, and history is becoming a tragedy.” The allegedly sensational nature of this “revelation” is thematized in another editorial note, in which Strauß is portrayed as a mystery man who “consistently avoids appearing in public” and writes plays “from a distance” (202). Even those familiar with and fond of the author of the essay are promised that they will encounter a very different Strauß. (In the world of the media, the curiosity of the reader—even the interested reader—must be piqued by the use of hyperbole.) The essay’s layout includes not only a photo of the author, but also some disturbing images. In order to lend credibility to Strauß’s theses or at least promote a certain reading, the editors chose pictures of prisoners of war in Tajikistan, a foreign female beggar (wearing a head scarf and sneakers) in Frankfurt am Main, “hooligans” in Dresden, and the mind-numbing TV show “Dream Wedding” from cable giant RTL. In order to attract the nonpolitical fans of Strauß’s plays, a photo showing a scene from the play Choral Finale (Schlußchor) was also added. The presentation of the essay aimed to make it a true media event, something that would have been unthinkable if it had only appeared in the obscure conservative journal Der Pfahl.31

This “event” does not, however, begin with a fanfare. Strauß introduces himself—following the irritating practice of American media personalities and politicians—in the third person as a shy person who admires “the grandiose and delicate organism of social interaction” (Miteinander). His shyness does not, as one might otherwise expect, derive from an inferiority complex, for one reads that “not even the most universal artist or the most divinely gifted ruler” could “come close to inventing or directing” this organism (19). The two equally exalted representatives of the elite look down upon all others. One of the two is of course not—or no longer—present, for a “ruler” is not a politician, but rather a monarch invested with divine right, and monarchs in possession of full royal powers and prerogatives have long since disappeared from Europe. The initial paragraph of the essay thus has a certain prophetic aura about it, because it is now only the artist who stands
at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. The self-appointed prophet surveys the scene and discovers nothing but disaster. His warnings are not, however, contained in a fire-and-brimstone sermon utilizing all of the rhetorical tools at his disposal. Instead, certain themes are touched upon and revisited several times. Since some critics of the essay have accused Strauß of flirting with fascism, attention should be directed to one important detail of the apocalyptic vision found at the end of the second paragraph. It is a phrase that was not included in the *Spiegel* version of the essay: “Even [the ripping apart] of solidarity and marching columns” (19). It is more than likely that any contemporary German readers of these words would see in their mind’s eye either neo-Nazi skinheads or masked ultra-leftists. The paragraph that contains this formulation is constructed in such a way that the author simply describes things that have made an impression on him without taking sides. The danger emanating from a resurrection of fascism or from some form of left-wing terror is perceived, but at this point, Strauß fails to tell us how he might react to either alternative. His apparent passivity or indifference is not what one would expect in a political essay.

After the introductory section, Strauß turns to a discussion of democracy and prosperity—without mentioning capitalism. He speaks of a “system of structured freedoms” in which “economism stands at the center of all motives” (21). (This is of course close to the German view of Anglo-American civilization at the time of World War I.) In the context of “mass democracy,” he predicts that the wealth of the people will lead to a corrosion of the cultural “substance” (20). Strauß is hardly the first critic of the superficiality of consumer society, but the manner in which he formulates his criticism is supposed to create the impression that his view is unique. His description of a small street “debased by wealth and ostentation” (20) was not an appropriate metaphor for German society as a whole in 1993, and five years later, after strikes, protest, and endless debates about the crisis of “Germany, Inc.” (Standort Deutschland), it is even more off the mark. It is also not the “ignorance” (Nicht-Ahnen) of the masses that makes possible the influence of the “few” who inhabit the “nest of guiding, attracting forces” (20) but rather the lack of a societal alternative after the disappearance of the socialist bloc. An expansion or universal realization of democracy is not, from Strauß’s perspective, an alternative worth striving for either: “It remains to be seen if that [the present system] is still democracy or not already democratism: a cybernetic model, a scientific discourse, or a society for the political-technical surveillance of the
people by the people” (21). Are these words an expression of indifference or of cultural pessimism? There can be no doubt that Strauß, normally a distanced observer, admires premodern societies that—at least from his perspective—are still based upon old traditions, norms, and customs. Should conflicts arise, such societies might well be superior, he believes, due to their “built-in restrictions on material needs undergirded by religious beliefs” (21). Such views were not unusual in the West before the outbreak of the Gulf War, and even the skeptical Enzensberger made them his own for a time. Strauß is not dismayed by the appearance of “nationalistic currents” in the era after the Cold War (21), because he believes that nationalism can unite a people by means of “moral law” and “ritual sacrifice” (Blutopfer)—something that we Westerners, “in our liberal-libertarian egocentrism,” cannot comprehend (21). In this context, Tajikistan is mentioned, although no details are provided. That is unfortunately characteristic of the vagueness of the entire essay. Why does Strauß refrain from depicting, for example, the status of women in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan or in Saudi Arabia? He seems more dedicated to cultivating a feeling for the “tragic dispositions of history” (22) than to upholding human rights.

Given the elusiveness of the text, this assessment could be flawed, however. A quite different interpretation is conceivable, one that discovers in Strauß’s praise of the premodern a challenge to the West to revoke the banishment of the tragic from our hyperrationally organized everyday lives and to initiate a search for the primordial forces within us. The justification for such an exercise would be to strengthen our civilization, in order to better defend it against others. This reading assumes, however, that Strauß views the Western model of society as one worth preserving, and there is little evidence of that in the text. Instead of occidental self-respect, Strauß proclaims a doctrine of entropy in which all forms of political action become meaningless: “One can do what one likes, murder or pray, make revolution, or elect free parliaments—at some point, every form falls apart, the vessels fall apart, and time comes to an end” (20). This dictum—which also was not printed in Der Spiegel—encompasses criminal behavior, religious fundamentalism, political upheaval, and the practice of democracy. The author apparently believes, like German writer and philosopher Theodor Lessing (1872–1933), that history is the attempt to make sense out of that which is senseless. For Strauß, history is not, however, the only sphere of life where one might search for meaning. For that reason, the artistic (taken to mean
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all areas of creative cultural production) becomes the focus of his continuing ruminations. He does not limit himself to paeans to art; rather, he mercilessly attacks the enemies of art. In the framework of this attack, he also elucidates the essence of the “foreign” and discusses the ways in which Germans, especially (leftist) intellectuals, react to that which is not German.

The enemies of art, according to Strauß, make up the “cultural majority,” and this majority is situated on the “left” (25). If one were to accept this viewpoint, then a true artist would have to gravitate toward the right. Strauß is not thinking of “right” in a political sense, however. He sees politics itself as a mortal enemy of art, because art is “by nature a profound remembering and as such a religious or protopolitical initiation” (25). The main characteristic of his kind of art is less the esthetic than the (retrospectively) visionary, the “fantasy” of the writer (25). The artist’s refusal to live in the contemporary world can be traced back to an absolute rejection of the Enlightenment, for it is the Enlightenment that is responsible for the “total hegemony of the present” (24). At this juncture, one must of course interject that the concept of the Enlightenment as it is used here hardly corresponds to the self-image of its adherents. Instead, it refers—whether Strauß realizes it or not—to certain excesses and unexpected collateral effects of technological development, a development that began long before the Enlightenment and went on to become the driving force behind social transformation in the capitalist era. Strauß’s critique implies a totalitarian root of the Enlightenment, and if one accepts it, it is clear that modern Western civilization holds little attraction. Unfortunately, the ahistoricity and alienation from “historical evolution” (geschichtlichem Gewordensein [24]) for which Strauß reproaches the left are at the core of his own image of the Enlightenment. One cannot demonstrate one’s historical consciousness by characterizing everything that has occurred since the eighteenth century as a deviation from a “long, static time” (25).

Strauß is especially averse to the left’s battle against “magical and sacred authority” (25), a battle that inevitably has brought about a “hypocrisy of public morality” that has “always tolerated (if not promoted) the mocking of eros, the ridicule of the soldier, [and] the derision of the church, tradition, and authority” (22). Before proceeding to other themes, it must be determined exactly which left Strauß is castigating. The “mocking of eros” can hardly be considered a main goal of the ’68ers (unless one is thinking of the endangered nuclear family, which is rarely praised as an institution worth
preserving in Strauß's own works), but if that were in fact the case, then the left would have to be in control of the mass media. (The presence of the financially shaky *tageszeitung* is anything but an expression of such control.) As far as the military is concerned, most postwar German leftists have, it is true, been less than enthusiastic—the parliamentary debate about “out-of-area” forays by the Bundeswehr was a harbinger of change, and German troops are now in Kosovo (cf. the epilogue below)—but that is more than understandable given the German military history of the last one hundred and fifty years. The church is not a leftist domain, although there are a number of “progressive pastors” involved in social activism. Most Germans do not often enter churches anyway, except when sightseeing or learning about architectural history. The left’s relation to tradition is more complicated. Although the ’68ers prided themselves on breaking taboos (mainly in the area of lifestyle), many of them felt attracted to the traditions of the labor movement. This is a variant of traditionalism that holds no attraction for Strauß. Regarding authority, it cannot be denied that the members of so-called “antiauthoritarian” communes attempted—with questionable results—to dismantle hierarchies, but Strauß seems to forget that the failure of the student movement was followed by a “long march through the institutions” that necessitated compromises with authoritarian structures. At first, these compromises were made grudgingly, but later, they became second nature.39 These things could be debated endlessly, but that would not be fruitful. It is the vagueness of “Impending Tragedy” that is behind the confusion. Is the leftist adversary crucified in the essay a media czar, a professional politician with pangs of conscience, an unemployed commune member with a worn-out leather jacket, or an intellectual with a civil service job? This question would be of little relevance if the text in question were a story or poem, but Strauß’s intentionally public political intervention should be based upon a conceptually and historically solid foundation.

The intellectuals are the key figures (or rather, culprits) in Strauß’s comments on xenophobia and xenophilia. They are “the critically enlightened ones who have no sense of fate” (26), and when they are friendly toward foreigners, it is only “because they are furious about existing conditions” and welcome everything that might destroy them” (23). If this were true, then self-hatred would have to be factor, and Strauß does believe that he has discovered a “self-conscious German self-hatred” as the source of modern German “tolerance” (23). Since the term “hatred of the father” (26) is also found
in the essay, we retrace the steps of the psychological critics of the '68ers: On many occasions, the political activities of the "protest generation" have been described as the expression of inner conflicts (e.g., between "Nazi fathers" and their sons). In the meantime, most observers are capable of differentiation, that is, it is possible to take the psychological factors into account without disregarding other motivations (as the author of "Impending Tragedy" appears to do). Beyond psychology, it is even more problematic when Strauß portrays the intellectuals as isolated from the people, since that brings to mind the infamous Nazi equation “intellectual = Jew.” This association, however, is perhaps not appropriate with respect to the essay, because the image of the average German that is conjured up is anything but flattering. Although we have seen that Strauß seeks to preserve “our” civilization (see note 40), the “German type as representative of the majority of the people” (23 et passim) is depicted as the archetype of the ugly German. Using attributes like “deformed,” “boisterous” (vergnügungslärmig), or “ostentatious” in combination with the epithet “outrageous in their demands” (24), the author makes it abundantly clear that he despises the masses of the affluent society. If that is so, why does it disturb Strauß when “hordes” of the unshelterable, the unfeedable are unsuspectingly allowed to enter the country (34)? Given that the aggressive reaction (by skinheads and others) to these “hordes” is a prerational one, Strauß should actually be in favor of their admission, because it calls up dimensions of human existence for which he otherwise searches in vain in the modern world. Utilizing the theories of anthropologist René Girard, he does in fact assert that “racism and xenophobia” are “fallen’ cult passions” that “originally had a sacred, order-promoting significance” (39). It would be counterproductive to ban the discussion of such theories, but Strauß deserves censure when he plays down xenophobic acts of violence perpetrated by youths wearing Nazi insignias as “initiation by means of the smashing of taboos” (35). The author attempts to avoid sharing responsibility for violent acts by claiming that the “rightist” (“Rechte”) that one should emulate is “as far removed from the neo-Nazi as the soccer fan is from the hooligan” (25). This strategy fails, however, because Strauß never really draws clear distinctions between the two groups. If the hazardous intellectual balancing act in this essay is a typical manifestation of the so-called normalization of German cultural discourse after reunification (and after the “Historians’ and Literature Debates”), one can almost understand why some observers long for the old “abnormal” state of affairs.
Can one discern a clear agenda in “Impending Tragedy”? Many issues of current interest are touched upon, only to be quickly cast aside. Typical examples would be the limits of growth (Strauß praises “ecologists” without discussing their concrete activities [27]), the character of nationalism, the relationship between native-born citizens and both immigrants and refugees, and the stultification of the masses in the new media age. (Regarding the latter, it is possible to speak of the “intelligence of the masses” without lamenting the fact that “10 million RTL viewers” [31] could probably never be transformed into avid readers of Heidegger!) The real thrust of the essay leads in a different direction. It involves an appeal to an elite group to preserve true living and thinking for a future age. Strauß leaves no doubt that only a select few deserve admission to this exclusive circle: “The minority! Ha! That is by far too many! There is only the little band of scattered individuals. Their only medium is the exclusion of the many” (33). This “exclusion” is different from the “isolation” of the intellectuals that was criticized above, because it is a voluntary one. Even the term “elite” is rejected by Strauß, since it is not exclusive enough: “[S]urvival [is] only possible in the most narrow literary-ecological enclaves, in thinking and feeling preserves” (33). One could of course ask to what extent the alternative model of human existence cultivated by the residents of such enclaves would be of interest to the “dull, enlightened mass” (31). Strauß has clearly thought about this question, because he seems to have difficulty coming to terms with the distance between him and the public (33). The cause of his malaise does not, however, lie in the lack of contact and interchange with the masses. Rather, he longs for the times when literature “had real power far beyond the confines of the few, when it ordered [my emphasis] the world and the powerful to train their capacity to listen and to strengthen wishing, thinking, and remembering” (32–33). Here we have, following the tradition described in chapter 1, not only the conception of the poet as seer, but also the vision of the poet as priest. This is a dream that certain poets have kept alive since the days of Plato, but it is difficult to dispute that the dream has been fading faster in the past fifty years than ever before. One is also justified in asking if the realization of this dream would have been beneficial for mankind. It is highly unlikely that a majority of Strauß’s contemporaries would be inclined to follow his bidding after reading his characterization of the human subelite: “The subsoil has always been the same muck” (33). Before joining the intellectual lynch mob that has, in the face of such arro-
Strauß, Handke, and the Vagaries of High Culture in Germany

gance, mounted a campaign against Strauß (the author’s supporters have not been inactive either), one should determine whether such pronouncements are more than mere language games. To determine that, one must return to the question of cultural pessimism. In his self-portrait as a rightist, Strauß disputes any connection with this worldview: “The cultural pessimist considers destruction to be unavoidable. The rightist, however, hopes for a profound change in mentality born in the face of dangers” (27). A few paragraphs after this statement, the reader learns what the prospects are for such a change: “The paradigm shift (Leitbild-Wechsel) that is long overdue will never take place” (28). Summa summarum: “Impending Tragedy” may be an expression of the author’s state of mind in 1993, but it is more of a series of diary entries than a political tract. The structure of the text appears to be purely fortuitous (in the two versions, Strauß put together the many textual building blocks in different configurations), and neither conceptual nor political clarity can have been his goal. The fact that the editors of Die selbstbewußte Nation chose to reprint “Impending Tragedy” as a sort of credo of the New Right is quite astonishing. Their action can only be explained in one of two ways: Either they were so mesmerized by Strauß’s dark labyrinth that their powers of analysis and criticism were benumbed, or they hoped to bask in the glare of publicity attracted by the political coming-out of a prominent writer. Beyond this, one wonders why Strauß himself provided the Spiegel—from his perspective an influential representative of detrimental rationalism—with an opportunity for a media coup. Was this nothing but an unabashed publicity stunt? Can the author have believed that the allure of his words would restore the vision of the blinded rationalists, or did German self-hatred claim yet another victim? Similar questions can be put with regard to the political intervention undertaken by Peter Handke two years after the controversy surrounding “Impending Tragedy.”

When scholars attempt to describe the nature of various literary periods or movements, they sometimes use pairs of writers as emblems. The chosen figures can represent unity or diversity: Dante and Petrarch, Lope and Calderón, Corneille and Racine, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Twain and Whitman, Joyce and Woolf, etc. In German literature, one might think of Goethe and Schiller, Fontane and Keller, Brecht and Mann, or Böll and Grass. With respect to the contemporary period, it has been the names Handke and Strauß that have been often mentioned in the same breath. In most cases, observers point to similarities and parallels between the two writers. If divergencies are
discussed, they involve mainly nuances in the esthetic sphere, not the fundamental orientation of the œuvre. Here is a characteristic formulation (that also refers to the novelist Nicolas Born):

The attempted narrative treatment of the loss of self and the gradual disappearance of the personality is something that they have in common. They differ in the narrative strategies of coming to terms with this and in the use of language to portray it.49

Speaking of Handke and Strauß, Lothar Pikulik discusses the “texts of two of the main representatives of the mythical trend” and calls the two authors “the most intelligent and linguistically gifted, though also most controversial representatives of contemporary German literature.” He adds that Strauß is close to Handke but writes “very differently.”50 Pia Janke, who begins her voluminous study with a polemic against “journalistic modes of interpretation,” focuses on the “path” of the pair “from the absence of meaning to an esthetically grounded meaningfulness.”51 In her book on myth and literature, Susanne Marschall believes that she has discovered “separate paths” that in the end “lead in the same direction,” because, she asserts: “The goal of both authors is the reconstruction of the commitment (Verbindlichkeit) of the literary work, the placing of a higher value on the ontological aspect of art, [and] a fine sensitivity for the expressive power of the word.”52

Most of the scholarly publications on Handke and Strauß revolve around esthetic strategies and the search for identity. Of interest in the present study is the recent shift from predominantly existential themes to overtly political concerns. In the course of their careers, Handke and Strauß have reacted to societal trends and political developments from time to time, but until the 1990s, they generally did so indirectly, i.e., within the framework of their literary works.53 This sets them apart from the older generation of writers like Enzensberger, Grass, and Walser as well as from ‘68 era activist and author Peter Schneider (b. 1940). In 1989, critic Bernhard Sorg published an article entitled “Remembrance of Duration: The Poeticization of the World in [the works of] Botho Strauß and Peter Handke.” Sorg unearthed in the works of both authors “a disgust with the commercialization and media-friendly packaging of art,” emphasizing, however, that such disgust “is in itself not a creative act and also no guarantee of esthetic relevance.”54 In the same vein, one could warn that a disgust with the often pedestrian course of democratic practice and with the banalities uttered by professional politicians in no way guarantees that the writer who feels said
disgust will be capable of providing alternatives worthy of consideration.\textsuperscript{55} As has been demonstrated in the case of Strauß, the ability to observe and a sensitive nature may or may not be sufficient tools for confronting nonliterary phenomena. They may even act as filters, distorting social and political reality. To what extent does a comparable constellation obtain in Peter Handke’s lengthy essays on Bosnia, Serbia, and the West?

At the beginning of 1996, the \textit{Süddeutsche Zeitung}, a newspaper that had not played a major role in the debate about “Impending Tragedy,” made a bid for the attention of the culturally and politically interested reader by publishing Handke’s “Justice for Serbia” (Gerechtigkeit für Serben).\textsuperscript{56} When Handke began touring Germany, reading the essay to large audiences, the \textit{Spiegel} tried to share the limelight, dubbing the controversy surrounding Handke’s essay “the most spectacular battle in the cultural supplements about the poetry and truth of a literary pamphlet since Botho Strauß’s ‘Impending Tragedy.’”\textsuperscript{57} The publication of the Strauß piece had been termed the “media coup of the year,” and the \textit{Süddeutsche} was obviously hoping for more of the same.\textsuperscript{58} At first, Handke emphasized that he had wanted to take on the media on their home ground rather than publishing another “little book.”\textsuperscript{59} This plan was later cast aside twice over when two “little books” went to press, namely the \textit{Winter Journey to the Rivers Danube, Sava, Morava and Drina or Justice for Serbia} and, about six months later, the \textit{Summer Supplement to a Winter Journey}. Just as in 1993, neither the marketing nor the reception of the respective writings were left to chance. Despite the similar publishing histories, the actual texts, both of which made headlines, are in actuality quite different.

In the short introduction to “Justice for Serbia,” the readers of the \textit{Süddeutsche Zeitung} were informed that they should not expect an objective political analysis by a specialist: “Peter Handke’s relationship with Yugoslavia [!] began in his childhood.” If Handke had written an essay about Tajikistan, for example, the result would surely have been different. As a travel writer who is always on a voyage of self-discovery (this aspect is sometimes peripheral, sometimes crucial), Handke modulates his narrative tone according to the goal of his journey. Like many European writers, he is very familiar with the U.S., but when he is closer to home, his subjectivity and (childhood) memories are more intensely juxtaposed.\textsuperscript{60} In the present instance, he does want to familiarize himself with a foreign culture, but the motivation is less curiosity or wanderlust than defiance: “Primarily because of the wars, I
wanted to go to Serbia, to the country of the so-called ‘aggressors’” (WR, 12–13). The images in the media did not fit in with his 1960s memories of Belgrade and the island Krk, where his first book, The Hornets, was written.61 In addition, Handke’s mother was of Slovenian descent. Growing up in Carinthia, he was influenced by the prejudice against the Slovenian minority, but later, the relatively large and exotic region south of the border became for him a refuge from the oppressive atmosphere of postwar Austria:

If I had the right to call myself a Yugoslavian—a right I can’t have, since I am an Austrian citizen—I would gladly characterize myself with respect to my consciousness, intellect, reasoning, soul, and even my sense of space as a Yugoslavian.62

In the course of “Justice for Serbia,” it becomes clear what Handke means by this and also how he perceives this country. He wants the reader to accompany him on his journey, but not just any reader. Only those who are willing to completely accept his highly personalized kind of “eyewitnessing” (Augenzeugenschaft) are welcome: “And those who now think ‘Aha, a pro-Serbian!’ or ‘Aha, a Yugophile!’ need not continue to read” (WR, 13).63 Handke thus integrates not only his own history and identity,64 but also his resentment against the “wrong” type of reader directly into the text. Nothing comparable can be found in “Impending Tragedy.”

The Winter Journey is divided into four chapters, namely “Before the Journey” (11–50), “The First Part of the Journey” (51–86), “The Second Part of the Journey” (87–116), and “Epilogue” (117–135). Background and commentary thus take up almost half of the book. One cannot assume, however, that the reader learns how Handke went about his journey or at least how he planned to do it. His remarks on Emir Kusturica’s film Underground do serve a similar function, though. According to Handke, Kusturica’s earlier films did bear the stamp of a “freely flying fantasy,” but they lacked “an attachment to the earth, a country, or even the world.” That changed in Underground, where a “talent for dreaming” allied itself with “a tangible piece of the world and of history” (WR, 22–23). The ideal is thus the merging of the imagination and knowledge, whereas knowledge itself exhibits a strong visual component: “What does one know, when one has—connected to networks and online—merely possession of knowledge without that true knowledge that can only come about through learning, looking, and learning?” (WR, 30). An author who provides the reader with such a definition should not be surprised if he is asked by what criteria one decides where to look. Although Handke castigates “the mobs of [journalists] wildly
gesticulating from afar who mistake their writing profession for that of the judge or even confuse it with the role of the demagogue” (WR, 123), he refrains from providing “intentionally contrasting images” to counter the many “prepunched peep-holes” looking in the direction of Serbia. Hoping to transcend this dichotomy, he wants (following in the footsteps of Hermann Lenz and Edmund Husserl) to illuminate the “third factor” (WR, 51).

In the end, this entails attempting to show the reader that the Serbs are people like you and me. In and of itself, this is a praiseworthy endeavor, but Handke unfortunately forgets that he is undertaking it in the midst of a war. With no little justification, the world is, under such circumstances, mainly interested in the behavior of the Serbs, as well as the Croats and the Bosnians, as war participants, not as human beings per se. On the one hand, Handke affirms that he “hardly ever found himself so continually drawn in?, tied in?, integrated into the world or world events” as he did on this journey (WR, 102–103), but on the other hand, he never remotely considered the possibility of writing as a journalist. In the “Epilogue,” he gives us a declaration of his writer’s creed that deserves to be cited at some length:

My task is a different one. Noting down the evil facts is fine. To make peace, something else is necessary that is not less important than the facts. Are you dragging out the poetic now? Yes, if it is understood as the exact opposite of the nebulous. Or let’s say instead of the poetic the binding, the encompassing, the impetus for common memory as the only path to reconciliation for a second mutual childhood. . . . based upon the experience that common memory can be awakened in a much more lasting manner through the detour of retaining certain unimportant details rather than by pounding in the major facts. (WR, 133–134)

At the end of the same passage, one finds a paean to art that could have been written by Botho Strauß. Art, the “essential diversion,” has the power to spirit us away from “our . . . imprisonment in the babbling (“Gerede”) about history and current affairs into an incomparably more fruitful present” (WR, 134). If one accepts the term “babbling,” then this declaration is worthy of support. Unfortunately, Handke overlooks the fact that the people in the former Yugoslavia whom he wishes to help are not caught up in “babbling” about history but rather in history itself, a history that they are shaping themselves. The key event in this history is the war, and peace and reconciliation will not be feasible until those who have—beyond “normal” participation in the war—committed crimes have been brought to justice. The writer is not a judge, but he can be a witness. That is exactly what Handke does not do in his essay.
Among the “unimportant details” (see above) reported by Handke are the renaming of a Langenscheidt dictionary (from Serbo-Croatian to Croatian), the unfinished new buildings, the “black market gasoline peddlers with their plastic canisters” (WR, 54–55), the absence of Serbian slivovitz drinkers one evening in Belgrade, old men (“well shaven for Balkan conditions”), the meeting with a Serbian woman who cannot speak Serbian (or can no longer do so), the shape of loaves of bread, homemade wine, eating palacinke in an unheated inn, a storm in the mountains, buying winter clothing, a view of the Drina river (“broad, winter-green, constantly fast mountain water” [WR, 99]), the connection between the Serbian heroic sagas and the Homeric tradition, a bus station from which it is no longer possible to travel to Srebrenica or Tuzla, and a child’s sandal floating in the Drina. Such snapshots can be telling or insignificant, and when pieced together, they form a mosaic of an everyday life tinged with sadness. As justification for the journey of a Western European writer to a war zone (or at least near one), they are hardly sufficient, however. After Handke’s polemic against the Western media (especially the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel, and Le Monde) in the first part of the essay, these details are not at all what one might have expected. While it is true that Handke questions the accuracy and objectivity of Western reports about the Balkan conflict, he does not do any investigating of his own, and he refrains from presenting counterexamples to back up his accusations. This contradiction inevitably leads to a discontinuity in the text, in both content and style. A rather picturesque, somewhat melancholy, at times very poetic travel journal is framed by a bitter polemic. At times, it even seems as if the essay were written by two different authors. Handke’s odyssey in search of a life that is “less blinded by the quotidian and more poetic” (WR, 109), although laudable in itself, leads in this instance to a (self-imposed?) blindness to the res publica. This problematic distortion of the poetic quest has a long history in the German cultural tradition.

It would be an exaggeration to characterize the Winter Journey as an antimodern tract (Handke does, after all, express enthusiasm for the joys of shopping at a supermarket [WR, 110]), but the underlying mood does reflect a certain longing for life in an earlier, simpler age. For example, Belgrade appears at first glance to be a typical southern European metropolis, but the citizens seem to be somehow “more taciturn . . . , more aware . . . , more attentive” (WR, 57). The “numerous street vendors” do not praise their wares in stentorian tones, choosing instead to wait “quietly” for their
customers (WR, 58). The relatively “primitive” exchange of goods holds a
unique charm for the visitor from abroad, and this charm makes it into a
contrasting model vis-à-vis the consumer societies of Western Europe:

[There was] something like an ancient and, yes, folksy pleasure in trade . . .
that rubbed off on us as participants in it . . . Let trade be praised—could you
ever have imagined yourself saying something like that (and without being
paid to say it)? And I even caught myself wishing that the isolation of the
country—no, not the war—would endure; and that the inaccessibility of the
Western (or other) world of products and monopolies would also continue.
(WR, 72)
The person who wrote these lines enjoyed—as a prosperous foreigner—the
benefits of this idyll without suffering from its disadvantages. He was able to
move about freely and use hard currency to obtain anything that he needed.
He also did not have to fear expulsion as an enemy or at least as a member
of the “wrong” ethnic group, and he was able to return home knowing that
his own four walls were still intact. If it was justified to speak of “revolution
tourism” in past years, we have before us a case of “restoration tourism.” Is
the Summer Supplement a further illustration of retrospective fantasies?

In the period between the publication of the Winter Journey and its se-
quel, Handke found himself at the center of a media whirlwind. Sharp criti-
cism of his political essays was disseminated by the mass media, and when he
embarked on a long reading tour, he was often confronted with both angry
demonstrators and reverential listeners. (One can only speculate about
whether Strauß would have caused a tumult by reading “Impending Trag-
dy” in major cities. In contrast to Handke, he chose not to appear in public.)
In the face of protests, Handke could not help but rethink the entire Balkan
project. Already in the Winter Journey, there were a few instances of self-
criticism or at least second thoughts. “It could be,” admitted the author, “yes,
I am mistaken, the parasite is in my eye” (WR, 42). “Take notice: this is not
at all a matter of ‘I accuse.’ I am just driven to find justice. Or perhaps merely
doubting, contemplation” (WR, 124). In the second volume, very little is re-
tracted. The opening statement, namely that a supplement is “perhaps” nec-
essary (SN, 9) is not very promising, and one of the listed motivations for the
planned journey to Bosnia is expressed in such a flippant manner (“simply be-
cause”) that one must view it as an example of the “authorial indignation”
(WR, 11) typical of the young Handke. The author of the Summer Supplement
toys with the reader in the area least suited for coquettishness, i.e., in matters
of conscience. After hearing “these and those reactions” to the first volume,
Handke asks himself if he might have “done something incorrect, false, even unjust” (SN, 18–19) in writing that book. After playing around with some insignificant details, he only admits to having erred in one particular instance. (He should have “fictionalized” the statement made by a woman whom he encountered [SN, 21].) After this extremely perfunctory bit of introspection, the journey can continue.

Once again, the entire report is based upon the memories of the traveler, since there is—for no apparent reason—no written record (WR, 134–135; SN, 10) in the form of a journal or at least jottings on the back of envelopes. Everything seems to be preprogrammed anyway. Handke picks up his travel documents in the Belgrade office of the “Serbian Republic” (SN, 13; the name is not set off by quotation marks in the text) and notices that the walls are decorated not with portraits of “Radovan K. or Ratko M.” but rather with a landscape painting depicting “a typically steep Bosnian pasture.” The desks are not manned by overweight, sweating bureaucrats, either: “Two women dressed in summer clothes” with an elegance “characteristic of all of Yugoslavia” sit at the office desks. (Bosnian-) Serbian society is thus not represented by men and the military, but by women and pristine nature. The two women also immediately trust the three travelers from the outside world, because they see in them sympathetic figures who do not want to visit their “outlawed country” (i.e., the territory held by the Bosnian Serbs) as “enemies or malevolent people” (SN, 13–14). The construction of this friend-foe dichotomy is actually a step backward compared to the Winter Journey, where Handke had at least mentioned that a third perspective was conceivable:

[I have] nothing against some of these journalists who are on the scene (or to express it more clearly: who are involved with the scene and the people on the scene) not to uncover but to discover. Three cheers for these field investigators! (WR, 122)

In this second volume, it is Handke himself who represents a “third perspective” (SN, 85), but this one has little to do with field investigation in the sense of gathering facts and information. Instead, it is identified with “presentiment” (Ahnung), a capacity which “in my experience points ahead in a very different way than any [mere] knowledge,” proclaims Handke. This is the author’s esthetic program in a nutshell, but what relevance does it have for a political essay? This question is perhaps misplaced, because in the Summer Supplement, the Winter Journey is renamed “Winter Story” (SN, 30; this new title is also found on the back cover). Nomen est omen: As in the case of
the retrospective reframing of the political essays from the 1960s (see above), Handke appears to be retreating from the political arena after having been—in his view—misunderstood.

The text of the *Summer Supplement* sometimes resembles a film script (“The border guards, like us, three in number, under the big Western sky, like in Wyoming or Oregon” [29]), a poem (see the image of the wooden boxes originally meant to hold flowers: “filled with earth turned to rubble” [33]), and even the cultural criticism found in “Impending Tragedy.” One example of the latter would be the description of the “main street bars” in Bajina Basta: “[It was] stifling to sit there, as it is everywhere in the newly-ordered nondescript Europe” (*SN*, 18). The description of a visit to an Orthodox church with a “war casualty cemetery” (*SN*, 46–51) reads like a short story inserted into the travel journal. There is one experience that resists transformation into literature, however, and that is Handke’s trip to the destroyed city of Srebrenica. This is the only occasion where the author betrays a degree of inner turmoil. Confronting the aftermath of war—which threatens to “overwhelm the total picture”—firsthand, the author must solve the “problem of how to continue the narrative” (*SN*, 65). This problem proves to be insoluble (no attempt is made to depict the “places where the massacres allegedly occurred” [*SN*, 77]), and it is with a sense of relief that the traveler returns to a Serbia that is “suddenly blossoming, profoundly peaceful, stretching out like a global empire” (*SN*, 79). The observer’s inability to deal with the horrors of Srebrenica does leave its mark, however. Upon returning home, Handke is struck by “the intactness here and its opposite there” (*SN*, 88). In his mind’s eye, “clouds of soot and sheets of plastic” appear in the tranquil Paris suburbs. Such nightmares soon dissipate, however. To the very end, Handke maintains that he has written “a story without enemies of humanity, without the image of an enemy” (*SN*, 91). This is rather strange, given that the Bosnian Serbs are portrayed as freedom fighters in the tradition of the Native Americans (*SN*, 92). It is difficult not to come away with the impression that the two books on the Balkans are, in the context of Handke’s ongoing journey of self-discovery, chapters that went very wrong. Politics and personal concerns do mix, but here the proportions are skewed.67

The critical reactions to Strauß’s “Impending Tragedy” and Handke’s essays on the Balkans in some measure constitute a second “Literature Debate.” There were echoes of the past in this event, but not everyone noticed
them. Some of the participants even ritually repeated earlier statements without mentioning that they were doing so. One example of this practice can be found in an article by Gerhard Stadelmaier from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Both this article and one that responded to it have the following subtitle: "What is Botho Strauß guilty of?" Stadelmaier intends to defend Strauß from his critics, but his manner of doing so is hardly flattering to the writer’s ego. In contrast to the “prophet” (Seher und Kündner) Handke, Strauß is supposedly incapable of leading anyone down an intellectual path: “He is too indecisive for that, too unclear to himself. He does not precede. . . . He always follows along behind.” What could possibly motivate a person to read his texts or attend his plays? The answer is a familiar one: “He is their [i.e., his characters’] seismograph. The seismograph does not cause earthquakes. He registers them.” These are of course the words from Ernst Jünger’s diaries as quoted above. It is misleading to apply such a characterization to Strauß, because Jünger—despite his protestations to the contrary—was long part and parcel of the earthquakes before deciding to retire to the position of seismographer. Strauß is a purely intellectual phenomenon, and Gustav Seibt, who responded to Stadelmaier, sees this quite clearly. Although Seibt admits that the “reawakening of German traditions” could play a minor role in the populist movement against European integration, he is not overly concerned. After assuring his readers that the controversy surrounding “Impending Tragedy” is nothing radically new, he concludes laconically: “Democracy has withstood it so far.” Although Seibt errs egregiously in attempting to effect a total separation between cultural convulsions and sociopolitical trends, his even temper is a welcome exception to the high emotions that at times reigned during the debate.

The question of “guilt” brought up in the Frankfurter Allgemeine would in all likelihood never have been articulated if the reactions to “Impending Tragedy” had emanated exclusively from the cultural sphere. The only commentator who was able to move Strauß to make a statement about the reception of his essay was Ignatz Bubis, the prominent spokesman for German Jews. When Bubis asserted in an interview with the Berlin Tagesspiegel that Strauß was part of the “phenomenon of right-wing radicalism,” and that this phenomenon was at least partially responsible for a climate in which hate crimes (against Jews and others) were perpetrated, Strauß could not help but respond. In the brief text “The Real Scandal” published in Der Spiegel, the author claimed that there was no free speech in Germany, especially regard-
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ing “the psychopathology of German political biases,” and he railed against his critics:

Whoever even remotely connects the author of “Impending Tragedy,” the author of a number of plays and prose volumes, with anti-Semitism and abominable neo-Nazi acts is someone who can no longer bear difference. Thus he is either an idiot, a barbarian, or a political denouncer. Or simply someone who, almost without a will of his own, lets public babbling rush through his own mouth.71

It is not the rage behind these words that is surprising, but rather that they were not uttered until a year after the appearance of “Impending Tragedy,” after a long period when many provocative formulations were launched against the author. Although Strauß never fails to emphasize that culture is everything to him, that nothing outside the cultural sphere is worthy of notice, he was able to disregard the harsh words spoken by representatives of that sphere. This contradiction can be attributed to the fact that Strauß himself is by no means free of the psychopathology of postwar German life. The liberal entrepreneur Bubis demonstrated that he, at least, did have a “will of his own,” and the way in which he reformulated his original criticism of Strauß (and Enzensberger72) became part of the assessment of Die selbstbewußte Nation. In an interview with Der Spiegel, he did not retreat from his belief that there is “a new intellectual right-wing radicalism in Germany,” but he offered more differentiation. He included writers in the “general climate change,” but no longer associated them with two other, more dangerous groups, i.e., the “intellectual arsonists” like Gerhard Frey of the Deutsche Volksunion or Franz Schönhuber of the Republikaner and the “intellectual trailblazers of intellectual right-wing radicalism” such as Ernst Nolte and Rainer Zitelmann.73 In this view, the intellectual New Right is placed in the same camp with right-wing politicians (vest-pocket Le Pens, as it were), but the literati are granted the freedom of the court jester. (Bubis later tried to revoke this freedom. See the epilogue below.) These jesters fit Strauß’s definition of a tiny elite, but their status is surely not what he had in mind.74

The responses of the cultural community ignored by Strauß fall into two major categories, namely critical crusades against “Impeding Tragedy” and a variety of counterattacks. The first category was given so much publicity that the second was not given due attention. The title of one early article—“Is Botho Strauß a Fascist?”—became a mantra for those who had
“always known” that Strauß was a closet rightist. More damaging was the short article by Peter Glotz, a prominent Social Democrat who later served briefly as president of the new University of Erfurt. Glotz called Strauß a “dangerous muddle-headed fellow” (Wirrkopf) with disturbing views on nationalism, anti-authoritarian child-rearing and xenophobia, but he made it clear that, for him at least, the appearance of Strauß’s essay was most important as a symptom of a general reorientation of the German intellectuals: “Take note of the date, friends, it was the Spiegel edition of February 8, 1993. It’s getting serious.” Despite the publication of Die selbstbewußte Nation, this warning has proved to be somewhat premature. In Die Zeit, Andreas Kilb attacked Strauß as a clone of Oswald Spengler, an opportunist (one who cultivates his art in enclaves provided by the system itself), and a “precentor” (Vorsänger) of a general “moroseness,” an “emaciation of feeling and thinking” plaguing German intellectual life in the post-utopian era. The general diagnosis is accurate, but Strauß is the wrong target, since he never seriously sought after any utopias that lay beyond the personal—unlike the ’68ers. Other critics turned their wrath toward Strauß’s impenetrable style, lambasting him for a “cryptically confusing” use of language. This style was of course characteristic of many of the pre-essay fictional works as well, but it was apparently less of an issue with regard to imaginative writings. Probably the most devastating critique was offered (in the wake of the “Bubis affair”) by literary scholar and media critic Klaus Kreimeier. In his polemic, the essayist Strauß is portrayed as someone without a single original idea who limits himself to turning the “prayer wheel” of the pre-1933 “conservative revolutionaries.” Like them, asserts Kreimeier, Strauß is not a trailblazer but rather an “indicator.” After he has dismissed the author of “Impending Tragedy” as a “low-brow political writer” (Trivialschriftsteller) whose terminology is derived almost exclusively from the “crypto-fascist popular literature between 1920 and 1932,” he delivers a backhanded compliment: “All this can be found in Gottfried Benn—clearer, more historically based, ‘less capable of being misunderstood,’ and, above all: more brilliantly formulated in terms of language.” It is not difficult to imagine that this one piece would have been enough to drive the normally withdrawn Strauß out of the political arena for good. Several months after the appearance of Kreimeier’s analysis, he did in fact inform Schacht and Schwilk that he continued to be “interested” in their political strategy, but was no longer “personally involved.”
Strauß’s retreat was no doubt a welcome event in the eyes of many who did not want to believe that “their” author would really associate himself with the figures behind Die selbstbewußte Nation. A number of observers did try to effect a separation. Using Leninist jargon, Strauß could be dubbed a “useful idiot” of the real rightists behind the volume, or it could be emphasized that he stands head and shoulders above most of the other contributors (who would probably not be capable of truly comprehending him!). Yet another tactic is to make the entire project seem absolutely harmless by pointing out that none of the essays contains an open appeal to racial hatred, a call to drive foreigners out of Germany, or a return to the borders of 1937. Such attempts were problematic at best, and it is not surprising that most of those who sought to defend Strauß realized that it would be counterproductive to put the New Right in the spotlight. Tilman Krause, for example, insisted that Strauß was “never a partisan,” and that he is being misunderstood by “overpoliticized literary criticism” (emanating from the left and the right). Fellow writer Bodo Kirchhoff said that no one had the right to add Strauß’s face to the “wanted poster” for Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt, whereas Eckhard Nordhofen rejected Kilb’s attempt to connect Strauß with Spengler: the latter was an “affirmative prophet of doom,” but the former is a “contesting” (bestreitend) prophet. Nordhofen is right about Spengler, but he is conveying a false impression of Strauß if one takes him to mean that “Impending Tragedy” was written in the hope that disaster could be prevented.

All of the critics cited above, whether amicable or aggressive toward Strauß, were writing, in the midst of a controversy, for newspapers or magazines with ironclad deadlines. If one turns to responses of more length and depth, one finds that the Strauß supporters are quite well represented. The collected essays found in the 1994 special issue of the literary journal Wei marer Beiträge are illustrative of this phenomenon. Moray McGowan concentrates on Strauß’s 1989 “Büchner Prize Speech” rather than “Impending Tragedy,” because he believes that one can discuss many of the same themes without being distracted by “misleading accusations of fascism” (190). The bulk of his article is, however, devoted to demonstrating that Strauß’s image of the writer as hermit—one ultimately derived from Romanticism—is not appropriate for a society that is achieving normalization as a Western democracy. The farewell from the “belated nation” (H. Plessner) must, he believes, but accompanied by a transformation of the writer’s role from a premodern one to a modern one (194). It is difficult not to agree with
McGowan that the vision of art as a “higher form of life” still had positive aspects during the Romantic era, but now is too closely associated with a dis- taste for democracy (200). Harald Weilnböck, who begins his study with a quotation in French from Ernst Jünger, cannot accept the fact that Strauß does not include himself and his activities when analyzing narcissism, “almost the dominating theme of his œuvre” (211). Like Stefan George before him, Strauß is allegedly incapable of direct human contact in “normal” society and at the same time consumed by a longing for such contact. Although Weilnböck does see Strauß as an example of “German masochism,” (216), his critical perspective is in the end not fruitful, because he reduces the societal context to a mere stage setting. Some critics basically favorable to Strauß, like Bernd Graff, Bernhard Greiner, Helga Kaußen, or Marieke Krajenbrink, choose to assess his importance by shifting the emphasis away from “Impending Tragedy.” It is not clear that this change of focus does service to the author. (It is almost as if Strauß had to be protected against himself.) Krajenbrink admits that some interpretations of “Impending Tragedy” are accurate, but most of them, she claims, are based upon “an inaccurate or even malicious reading” (297). The one point about which there is much disagreement is Strauß’s relationship to the Enlightenment. Lutz Hagestedt can state categorically that Strauß has long been an anti-Enlightenment, antidemocratic author who is a model for the intellectual right (266, 279), but Henriette Herwig maintains that Strauß is a representative of the “self-criticism of the Enlightenment.” According to Herwig, all German intellectuals stand on the foundation of the Enlightenment (286). Anyone who has read Gerd Bergfleth et al. will recognize that this is simply wishful thinking. Herwig’s thesis also contrasts with Helga Kaußen’s assertion that Strauß already believed in the early 1980s that the Enlightenment had “irreversibly failed” (289). Even Strauß’s supporters must admit that it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand his proclamations. These supporters would obviously rather wrestle with the writer’s fictional texts than with his attempt at political journalism.

One other piece in the Weimarer Beiträge issue must be presented, and its significance lies in its use of the critic as medium. Volker Hage’s “The Writer after the Battle,” reprinted from Der Spiegel, conjures up images of the proselyte sitting at the feet of the master, hanging on his every syllable. This is how it must have been in the “George Circle” at the turn of the century. Since Strauß “hates and fears every public appearance” (140), the critic
must convey his thoughts via a sympathetic observer like Hage, who tells us that we might not comprehend everything in Strauß’s works because the author has a “greater recall of language” and a larger vocabulary (141). (There is no pause to consider that words can be utilized to hinder communication.) According to Hage, the strength of “Impending Tragedy” lies in the fact that the author does not offer “opinions,” but rather “bewilderment” (Verstörung [143]). Lest one disagree, he argues that it is impossible to “contextualize” the essay or the 1993 play *Equilibrium* (Das Gleichgewicht) without a knowledge of the prose works. One has the impression that Strauß never imagined that the reaction to a “journalistic” text (not his métier, he admits [143]) would be different from that of an audience in a theater or the solitary reader of a novel. Is such naiveté conceivable on the part of a prominent author approaching fifty? A rare interview given by Strauß in the summer of 1997 shows that it was the critics who were naïve. The interviewer, Tilman Krause (cf. *Die selbstbewusste Nation*) hopes to demonstrate that the author has been misunderstood. To Krause, Strauß is actually more of a ’68er (indeed, one who overestimates the impact of that generation than anything else. The author is allowed to hold forth on this point:

> I would endorse a rightist or new rightist movement? What an absurd idea! As soon as it is a matter of models, I pull back. Thus it is also ridiculous to accuse me of wanting to rise up to be a *Vater*, a seer. . . . Of course I am fascinated by George. I am fascinated by thought processes beyond or above the critical. I am also fascinated by the Catholic Church, which has an attraction due to its deep rooting in authority. But that fascinates me because it is foreign to me, not because I could reflect myself in it in an identificatory manner. I will remain a Protestant mystic. As a Catholic, I would have to confess, communicate.

Was “Impending Tragedy” perhaps written by someone else? Strauß reports in the interview that the first version was “much more moderate, unaggressive.” It was only the offer from *Der Spiegel* that caused him to transform it into “a manifesto, a pamphlet.” In other words, he played the media game in order to attract more publicity. He now admits that much of the essay was mere fireworks (“Theaterdonner”) and also that he also enjoys “irritating” people. (Krause adds that these people were the “model pupils of political-esthetic correctness.”) After having read this interview, one is left with two possibilities: either Strauß is a “holy fool” who knows little about the world, or he is a cold, calculating manipulator of the public sphere and cultural institutions that are so repugnant to him. (The latter would be incomparably more disturbing than the former.)
One can discern comparable mechanisms and themes in the critical response to Handke’s books on the Balkans. There are significant differences between the two “literary scandals,” however. First of all, Handke is much less reticent about speaking with the media than Strauß. A number of lengthy interviews are available for perusal, so the interpreter need not rely on conjecture as often as in the case of “Impending Tragedy.” Secondly, as has already been mentioned, Handke decided to go on tour with the first volume soon after it was published. His reactions to his audiences and to the protesters who often brought their placards to his readings are a matter of public record. Thirdly, the entire controversy was much more political, because Handke was not engaging in dark musings about a coming apocalypse but rather involving himself in a debate about a contemporary military and political conflict. Finally, the discussion of his image of the Balkans had an international dimension, since observers from abroad offered their viewpoints in the media. (In retrospect, it is remarkable how provincial the “Strauß affair” really was.93) Handke, who lives outside Paris, is much more of a known quantity beyond the German-speaking world than Strauß.

In December 1994, Handke was interviewed by Der Spiegel about his new novel My Year in the No-Man’s Bay (Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht) and about his views on literature and politics.94 About a year before his journey to Serbia, Handke announces the end of littérature engagée: “The epoch in which literature always had to be factual, honest, enlightening or political is coming to an end” (170). This is the position of the initiators of the “Literature Debate” from the early 1990s. Handke believes that the end of ideologies has come, and he rejects constant categorization and conceptualization as a “German disease” (171). He tells the interviewers that he was never a “’68er,” portraying himself as an early target of that generation. When asked a follow-up question about Botho Strauß, Handke makes it clear that although he admires the “subtle” Strauß, he cannot understand how the latter could gravitate toward the “rightists” (171). This is because a writer identifies himself with any one position at his peril: “In any case, he [the writer] is no rightist. And also not a conservative. The writer is everything: conservative and anarchistic” (171). Of even more interest is the way in which Handke describes his relationship with the mass media:

In the morning, I read Libération, in the afternoon, Le Monde. You can’t escape that. If I ignore the media, the world seems even more oppressive to me, because I know nothing of it. When I see the television news, I am overcome with a feel-
A year later, the person who made this statement was to launch bitter polemics against Le Monde. Perhaps this was merely an example of the capriciousness of the writer who must be everything and nothing, seeking the public eye in whatever manifestation might suit him at the moment.

Two major interviews granted by Handke in early 1996 provided the writer with an opportunity to react to the criticism of the way in which he was “taking part” in his age by demanding “justice for Serbia.” In February, he was interviewed for Die Zeit by Willi Winkler, who had three years earlier asked the question: “Is Botho Strauß a Fascist?” The journalist was much more obliging on this occasion, letting the writer state his case without having to deal with troublesome questions. Handke dismissed his critics apodictically: “These people cannot be people of peace. My text is word for word a peace text. Whoever does not see that can’t read.” Winkler does not ask for clarification, and he simply changes the subject when Handke accuses the Frankfurter Allgemeine, Der Spiegel, and Le Monde of “criminal,” even “war-criminal” reporting about Serbia. Later, Handke describes Austria as a country devoid of “self-confidence” (Selbstbewußtsein), much as Schacht and Schwilk speak of Germany. (In 1992, he had described the Germans as being “brutal, inscrutable . . . totally sick.”) At the end of the interview, he complains that he is being branded a “nonpolitical author,” although he published political texts in the 1960s. One remembers that these essays were intentionally depoliticized in the author’s preface to their publication in book form. Winkler has nothing to say about this, either. About a month later, the Austrian journal profil provided another forum for the author’s ramblings. After claiming—unconvincingly, to this observer—that the Austrian government could have stopped the Yugoslavian tragedy from happening, Handke portrays Germany as a hegemonial power promoting the founding of small states (like the segments of the former Yugoslavia) “capable of being enslaved” in the interests of the German economy (80). Given this mind-set, it is not surprising that he calls the leader of a group of anti-Handke demonstrators a “Capo” (81). (This is an example of the “fascism club” often wielded in German political debates.) In the course of this interview, it becomes clear that the fragmentation of Yugoslavia was a personal
trauma for Handke, because he had hoped that the citizens of that country would accomplish what no others in Eastern Europe have done (or wanted to do), namely, to negotiate a third (or “special”) path. Ironically, many ’68ers (a group to which Handke does not belong, one recalls) may well have had similar hopes and dreams. Perhaps one should not take Handke’s political pronouncements too seriously, however. In the profil interview, he compares the Winter Journey to the ballads of Bruce Springsteen (81) and reveals that the profits gleaned from his reading tour with the book will not be used for “humanitarian purposes,” but rather to establish—in the former war zone—a bar “with a jukebox, slot machine, and perhaps even better things” (83). At the end of the Zeit interview, Handke asserted that he wanted absolutely nothing to do with political power. Given his pubescent fantasies and lack of any capacity for self-criticism, one can only hope that he will not change that position in the future.

Before turning to the numerous commentators who criticized Handke’s unexpected exercise in political intervention, one should examine the statements of support that were also launched. An unawareness of such statements would make Handke’s at times harsh reactions to his critics seem justified, or at least understandable. Even Peter Schneider, an early and sharp critic of the Winter Journey, praises the “descriptions of landscapes and people” in the more literary section of the book as examples of “great density of perception and exotic beauty.” Schneider’s main criticism is that Handke lashes out at the “horde” of foreign correspondents without doing any investigation of his own or providing a single new fact (163). Andreas Kilb, who savaged Strauß’s Impending Tragedy, is impressed with Handke’s crusade against the dominant media, and when he expresses his respect for the author’s independence, he refers to him as an “extremely dangerous opinion anarch.” The final word makes the connection to Ernst Jünger, one that Handke would hardly have made himself. Michael Thumannn defends Handke against Schneider’s “one-dimensional perspective,” but he is mainly interested in castigating the Germans for the crimes against the Serbs. (In this he is close to Handke’s own motivation for writing.) Willi Winkler, once again demonstrating the sympathy found in his interview with Handke, speaks of Winter Journey as a “thorough critique of the media” with “philological” accuracy. Winkler’s own objectivity comes into question when he denies the right of intellectuals to criticize Handke by pointing out that they have not “bled” (i.e., on a battlefield). The most characteristic position taken
by Handke’s allies is to separate the literary sections of *Winter Journey* from the journalistic ones. Writer Michael Scharang defends Handke’s use of the “anarchy” of narrative as an appropriate method of countering mere “information,” which for him is—except for a command—“the most abbreviated form of reality.”

In a similar vein, Peter Vujica calls Handke’s text “a significant piece of a visionary other-world” that has been misunderstood as “reality.”

It was of course the author himself who caused such misunderstanding by mixing two distinct modes of perception. Even Serbian author Aleksandar Tisma, who does not believe that the *Winter Journey* can help the reader to comprehend the Yugoslavian tragedy, sees nothing objectionable in the book as a literary work:

Handke did not utilize political argumentation in his book. He did not view Serbia from the perspective of its rulers, but rather with the eyes of a dreaming writer. In my view, Handke is one of the few truly decent writers. Let’s let him dream a bit.

It was apparently the age-old French fascination with “German dreaming” (see chapter 1) that led Luc Rosenzweig, despite his rejection of Handke's politics, to see the author's Balkan travels as partly a “German journey of education,” one of self-discovery, in which an “empathy for landscapes and people” is deeply felt. Defending Handke was, given the author’s fulminant temperament, a difficult task. Austrian writer Peter Turrini, participating in a discussion that followed Handke's reading of *Winter Journey* at the Viennese Akademietheater, called his colleague’s prose “a peace text” and “a rational offer to journalists” to rethink their methods. He must have been taken aback when Handke, speaking later in the discussion, referred to the international media as “the Fourth Reich.”

Some of Handke’s epithets were more personal than that. Audience members who wished to ask questions were dismissed as “assholes” or even “fascist assholes.” Continuing to cultivate the Germanic tradition of anal imagery, he told one would-be discussant: “Why don't you stick your dismay (Betroffenheit) up your ass?” The author did resort to more moderate tones during a reading in the hallowed halls of the Austrian parliament. When a Green MP asked him how he would assess a report about Nazi Germany written in “a similarly naive manner,” Handke replied: “I hereby sentence you to shame for comparing Serbia with Nazi Germany.”

Fascism did in fact rear its head at various times during the debate about *Winter Journey*. Gustav Seibt of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* announced that Handke had
“conquered the province of ideological trash” and was an organ for a “mania of blood and soil” (Blut und Boden).111 A journalist who had worked in Bosnia characterized Handke’s prose as “Schreibtischräuber,” i.e., the perpetration of a crime without leaving one’s desk (as in the case of Adolf Eichmann).112 Such extreme formulations were little more than sensationalism. Another critical perspective, one which linked Handke to the tradition described in chapter 1 of this study, was potentially much more damaging. Terming Handke’s resentment against the media “predemocratic,” philosopher Wolfgang Müller-Funk accused Austrian intellectuals of not accepting the concept of human rights. He also saw in Handke’s idealization of supposedly premodern Yugoslavia a “leftist version” of the “Habsburg nostalgia.”113 This is a link to Hofmannsthal’s visions of a timeless cultural realm, and one could view “Habsburg” as an Austrian variant of the Middle Ages glorified in Novalis’s Christendom or Europe. Reinhard Mohr, who called Handke’s book tour a “reading procession,” believed that he had witnessed the birth of a new “protopolitical atmosphere of awe” (Weihestimmung) in which reality is denied and the audience wishes to be enchanted by the words of the literary prophet.114 (As has been delineated above, such an atmosphere is hardly “new.”) In an ever more complicated world, all too many people seek out a “guru” who will lead them to a “new anti-intellectual bliss or harmony” (217).115 This is the role that Strauß played in Die selbstbewusste Nation, although it could be argued that he was eased into it by his handlers from the New Right rather than selecting it himself. Generally, one has the impression that Handke is a more conscious orchestrator and socio-cultural choreographer than Strauß. It is possible to imagine the Austrian as the main character in Thomas Mann’s prophetic novella Mario and the Magician, but not the anchoritic German.

In late 1996, after the publication of Handke’s Summer Supplement, critic Gustav Seibt was interviewed about his tenure as chief literary editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine. On that occasion, he declared that the role of literary “guru” was no longer relevant in contemporary German society:

There is an authorial self-image—that is primarily characteristic of Botho Strauß and Peter Handke—that even now comes down to the conception of the writer as seer or at least as the better perceiver. The striving for better perception should indeed be maintained. In the case of Grass, it’s something else. There we have the representational role, the wish to inherit the ermine mantle of Thomas Mann in order to give the nation direction in a political-moral sense.
Both roles, though, entail a prominent public position for authors, one that goes beyond their argumentative potential, and I of course have never been able to believe in that. . . . I don’t believe that today any dangers for democracy can arise out of the utterances of a Botho Strauß. Those are hysterical fears. Seibt spoke in the same interview of a younger generation of authors who “take into account that we have a functioning democratic public sphere,” and who are thus “less moralistic, less didactic (präzeptoral).” This was the gist of the “Literature Debate,” only this time, Seibt was leading an offensive against authors perceived as being representatives of the right. The problematic nature of both of these campaigns will be addressed at the end of this study.

In the context of the “Handke scandal,” attention must be turned to a group that still took literary interventions—in contradistinction to Seibt—quite seriously, so seriously in fact, that an anti-Handke book resulted. In what may well be a unique event in German literary history, Tilman Zülch, the founder, German chairman, and international president of the organization Society for Endangered Peoples (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker) collected fifteen “Responses to Peter Handke’s Winter Journey to Serbia,” added one of his own, and published the lot as the volume The Writer’s Fear of Reality. The reader has a fair idea of the thrust of the book before even opening it, because the cover shows cellist Vedran Smailovic playing in the ruins of the National Library in Sarajevo. With the exception of Zülch’s introductory piece, all of the responses had been published earlier in newspapers or magazines (one was a segment from a television program). The purpose was not to document a cultural debate for future generations—as had been done with the contributions to the “Literature Debate” or the “Historians’ Debate”—but rather to place Peter Handke before a kind of ad hoc tribunal. (After the bibliography, one finds a list of addresses and publications from the Society for Endangered Peoples, including one by Zülch about “genocidal crimes” in Srebrenica [136].) Unlike the “Russell Tribunals” of the Vietnam War era, however, the target is not a government or a military force, but an individual writer. This is tantamount to shooting at sparrows with cannons, and it brings to mind other problematic campaigns like the defamation of Brecht in the 1950s Bundestag, the Soviet measures against Solzhenitsyn, or the imprisonment of dissident writers in Eastern Europe. If the goal were a healthy debate, that would be completely in order, but Zülch presents us only with critics, leaving the Handke supporters cited above out in the cold.
Zülch's article, “Speak Finally with the Victims of ‘Greater Serbia,’ Mr. Handke,” provides many grisly details about the Bosnian conflict, including references to violations of human rights perpetrated by Croats and Bosnians. This is helpful, but it is unfortunately supplemented with unnecessary pathos. No purpose is served by asking a rhetorical question like this one: “What might the correspondent of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, Egon Scotland—one of over fifty journalists who died in Bosnia up until the beginning of 1996—have said about Handke's report?” (16). First of all, it was not a “report” at all, and secondly, Zülch's blood reckoning is too similar to the attack on Handke's critics cited above. It also makes no sense to accuse Handke of undertaking a book tour while thousands of Bosnian Serbs are being forced by Radovan Karadzic to evacuate their homes (21). This is reminiscent of a scene in Peter Schneider's 1971 novella *Lenz*, in which the title character is castigated for daring to paint his kitchen during the Vietnam War. More disturbing is Zülch's belated contribution to the “Literature Debate.” After categorizing Handke's text as mere “writing” (Schriftstellerei—a less than flattering word for literature [20]), Zülch unexpectedly broadens his scope, placing the author of the *Winter Journey* in the same boat with “many German and European writers” who have “made taboo, covered up, or ignored” the “mass exterminations of National Socialism and Stalinism” (22). His selected list—Hamsun, Hauptmann, Brecht, and Shaw—is not only skewed, it also implies that Handke is working under the same conditions and constraints as his colleagues in the 1930s and 1940s. One could debate the point, but there is no possibility of rational discussion when Zülch asks if Handke might be a “war profiteer” himself (23). One can imagine that literary figures might be “endangered people” if they worked under a régime headed by the confrontational activist.

To be fair, it should be pointed out that most of the other contributors to the volume are literary critics (there is also one filmmaker, Marcel Ophuls, and one author, Günter Kunert), and they are generally also rather harsh in their dealings with the beleaguered Handke. This can be gauged by compiling a list of pejorative terms used to describe Handke's profession and/or his person. He is an “artistic soul” (35), “highly literary nose” (36), a “pale literatus” (36), one of the fearful “poets and thinkers” (36; meant pejoratively—see the preface to this study), “snobs, poets, and fellow travelers” (39), a “modern writer” (41; meant ironically), a representative of “blood and soil literature” (49, 71), “diary of Handke's weak nerves” (50), no “poeta
doctus” (52), “intellectual lowlands of politicizing poets” (61), “arrogant sensitivity” (65), “arrogant pride in being a blind seer” (66), “poetry of simple-mindedness” (66), “missionary” (78), “monk” (79), “poet-priest” (81), “hypocrisy” (85), “self-satisfied know-it-all” (85), “exoneration poet” (105), and so forth. This compendium clearly reflects a deep resentment against high culture in general and against Handke in particular. Poet and essayist Günter Kunert (himself a renowned member of the high culture elite), who abhors any mixture of literature and politics, provides us with a sarcastic thumbnail sketch of German literary history:

The writer, in Germany usually called a “poet” (“Dichter”), even when he produces fat novels, traditionally has had a special position. Since Goethe, the author has expected adoration and subservience. The German poet is a happy coincidence (“Glücksfall”) of creation. (62)

This is poppycock, unless one interprets it to mean that not German readers, but German governments have respected and feared writers. Goethe had to flee the oppressive conditions in his homeland from time to time, and after him, many “poets” had no choice but to live as exiles (if they were fortunate enough to cross the border in time). The Pantheon is of course in Paris, not Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, or Munich. Kunert does not provide us with names, but it is clear that he is against the political “escapades” (his word) of both Grass and Handke, two writers whose approaches to politics are diametrically opposed. Kunert’s views are put in historical perspective by critic Ralf Caspary, who begins his essay with the following statement:

Peter Handke is a modern Romantic, a descendant of Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel, and the dispute about his travel report is also a dispute about the political relevance of the Romantic concept of poetry, which these days is taking on strange forms. (77)

According to Caspary, the Serbia described by Handke is the author’s own “Romantic utopia,” a “premodern idyll in which medieval conditions obtain” (78). The critic is willing to accept this in a purely literary sphere, but when the writer becomes a “missionary” bent on stylizing his texts as a “metaphysical secret code” that transports “truth,” he has gone too far. It is not at all difficult to dismantle the self-important Handke, but the subtext of the attacks on him by Caspary and many other observers is that any “truth” that literature might have is necessarily divorced from social and political reality, and that any attempt to link the two domains accomplishes
nothing more than the destruction of literature. What is ironic is that not a few of these German critics can hardly contain their enthusiasm when writers from other parts of the world—Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Oe Kenzaburo, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka, Milan Kundera, and many others—construct works based upon such links. One can debate Caspary’s assertion that the Romantic concept of literature no longer has any political relevance, but it is a crude distortion of the historical developments to cultivate the myth of a German high culture produced by an elite that consistently enjoys great respect and adulation. Instead, one might consider that the seemingly otherworldly proclamations of that elite are at least partially the result of social isolation, if not hostility or even ostracism. Self-congratulation can be a result of arrogance, but it also can be an attempt to compensate for a lack of attention and respect.

Some of the sharpest criticism of Handke’s *Winter Journey* came from abroad. Exiled Bosnian scholar and writer Dzevad Karahasan considers various readings of the text, coming to the conclusion that it is purely literary prose made up of “private gossiping.” According to Karahasan, it cannot be a travel report, because Handke knows little about the area he is visiting, and if it were meant to be a “moralistic pamphlet,” then it would be “one of the most disgraceful examples of ethical nihilism in our time” (44). Unfortunately, Karahasan disqualifies himself as a judge of moral character by immediately adding that he finds the writer Eduard Limonov less repugnant. It seems that Limonov supported the Serbian siege of Sarajevo with a gun in his hand, an act that makes it easier to see where he stands. This is either ethical nihilism or misplaced irony. Karahasan’s critique seems moderate when compared with the fulminations of Marcel Ophuls (whose father had to flee from Nazi Germany). Ophuls comes to the defense of the courageous journalists who risked their lives to report from Bosnia, but his real agenda seems to be an attack on the “political opportunism” of François Mitterand. He even wonders if Handke has enough access to the corridors of power in Paris to cause critical journalists to be transferred to other, less important assignments (37). It is troubling that Ophuls feels the need to construct a dichotomy between the “German writer” on the one hand and the journalists and activist Jewish intellectuals (e.g., Elie Wiesel and Roman Polanski) on the other. The latter are portrayed as calling for intervention against ethnic cleansing despite resistance from “the Elysée Palace, the Pentagon, and the White House” (40). In the end, Handke appears
to be a protofascist at best. This is not the term chosen by André Glucks-
mann, who speaks of the “monomaniacal terrorist” Handke. Glucksmann
believes that Handke is basically an antifascist and German (self-)hater
who is primarily interested in besmirching the reputation of the Germans
and Austrians rather than contributing to the understanding of the Balkan
conflict: “Although he is against Hitler, he is, unfortunately, for the Serbs.”
Glucksmann’s refusal to accept Handke as a “serious intellectual” is an un-
derground continuation of the dispute between Heinrich and Thomas
Mann during World War I. The “serious” intellectual from Paris (or who ad-
mires Paris, like Heinrich) relies mainly on rationality (or at least believes
that he does so), whereas the German counterpart is too engulfed in irratio-
nality, antimodernism, and a personal quest to do that. As Glucksmann
puts it in this particular case: “He [Handke] reduces the suffering of the peo-
ple in the former Yugoslavia to his own psychological drama.” Glucksmann
is capable of more differentiation than Ophuls, however. He does not portray
Handke as the German intellectual per se. The alternate, more “Parisian”
mode is, he reminds us, represented by figures like “[Günter] Grass,
he was still alive—[Karl] Popper.” It is telling that Grass is the only writer on
this list. His model of political intervention based on Enlightenment
principles has been under duress since the beginning of the “Literature
Debate.”

Cultural observers in the German-speaking countries could not help
but wonder, after following the course of the debates about Strauß and
Handke, if the postdebate literary careers of the two writers would provide
further evidence of a “veer to the right.” Would the seed of a new rightist lit-
erature germinate? Strauß’s 1994 volume, Living, Glimmering, Lying, con-
sisting of thirty-seven short prose pieces, did not offer much clarification.
Written in the style of his earlier Pairs, Passersby, it is a postmodern potpourri
of motifs and themes from earlier works as well as from “Impending Tra-
gedy.” Among these are the alienation of the writer, the violent undercurrent
and primordial impulses in human relationships, the superficiality of mass
culture, and the inadequacy of reason for plumbing the depths of human ex-
perience. This palette only partially corresponds to the concerns of the
New Right. It was not in prose, but rather in texts for the theater and in the
public performance of such texts that the future contours of Strauß’s and
Handke’s production were to come into focus. This was only fitting, since
both authors had initially come to the attention of the public as representatives of the dramatic genre. Their recognition and success as writers of prose came later and has at times overshadowed their authorial beginnings.

In late 1992, Strauß wrote a play entitled *Equilibrium* (Das Gleichgewicht). It was published in 1993 and first performed at the prestigious Salzburg Festival in July of that same year.\textsuperscript{131} It was later staged in several German cities, and it was not a center of controversy, although Strauß did state — in characteristically obscure language — that the play shared “vibrational relationships” (Vibrationsverhältnisse) with “Impending Tragedy.”\textsuperscript{132} These “vibrations” emanate primarily from the relationship between a father and his son in the post-reunification Berlin of 1992. The father (Christoph Groth), is a dynamic, successful economist who has just returned from a sabbatical in Australia, where he was initiated into both Zen and the art of archery as a therapeutic and athletic exercise. His son Markus is a product of prosperity and liberal upbringing, a rather torpid figure who is not energetic enough to really rebel. His major attempt at countering his father’s influence involves arranging a tryst between his stepmother Lilly and Jacques Le Cœur, an aging rock star whom she worships. In the context of this study, the play might be renamed *Liberalism and Its Discontents*. Christoph ponders the ongoing transformation of the world economic system and believes that Eastern Europe has tremendous potential (49). Telling Markus that he plans to open a consulting firm there, he warns his son that only those who act quickly will have a chance to survive. This leads to a heated exchange about morality and society that in all likelihood reflects the reorientation of Strauß’s own thinking in the 1990s. After arguing about Iran (Christoph had been a consultant to the shah in prerevolutionary days), the following dialogue ensues:

**Markus:** At times, people here would also like to see the hand of the blasphemer cut off. Not the hand of the small-time thieves or prostitutes, but rather the hand of the intellectual scoundrel, the liberal Moloch who is transforming our lives into a stinking garbage heap. Europe is sick. Much sicker than you think.

**Christoph:** What about you? I suppose that you yourself are not liberal?

**Markus:** (forcing a smile): Liberal? No, I’m not. My former best friend is liberal, and I see what has become of him, but I’m not.

**Christoph:** What the devil are you then?

**Markus:** Not at all liberal, more or less. One can be many things, a warrior, an ascetic, a purist, and not approve of everything that is permitted.
Christoph: Hezbollah would be just the thing for you, right?

Markus: One can also believe in Jesus Christ when he says: “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.”

Christoph: Well listen to that: my son is making militant noises! A little bug of a guy, one with stunted growth, a plant that never grew—the weaking is praising moral terror! The coward enthuses about cutting of hands! . . . I’ll tell you one thing . . . : the world will be completely liberal, or it will cease to exist. . .

Markus: . . . Without the revolt of purity, without the cleansing by voices of angels, nothing can be saved.

Christoph: . . . [I]f you hold such views, then go out and take them to the marketplace like all of the fanatics do. You’ll soon see that the market decides all by itself if there is a chance for Markus Savonarola.” (52–54)

Markus has militaristic fantasies (about Achilles and Hector, for example [62]), but it is Christoph who (accidentally?) hits Lilly with an arrow. The representative of the liberal capitalist establishment, whose egocentrism causes him to overlook the revolting underbelly and dangerous byproducts of the system he defends (criminals, drug addicts, skinheads, violence against foreigners, etc.133), is actually more dangerous than his verbally violent son. When Lilly miraculously recovers from the effects of her injury simply by meeting Jacques Le Cœur face to face, the message is clear: It is only outside the parameters of the “enlightened” system, in the realm of the irrational or mythical, that our existential wounds can be healed. In Equilibrium, Strauß depicted the contemporary world, providing only brief glimpses of an alternative sphere. In his next play, he left our world completely behind, turning to a literary mentor who portrayed Achilles, Hector, and many others.

Despite the ongoing marginalization of classical studies in the German Gymnasium, many Germans are familiar with the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. When Botho Strauß decided to attempt a theatrical adaptation of Homer’s Odyssey, he knew that he could find an audience with some previous knowledge of the text. A five-part radio play version had been broadcast by South German Radio in 1959, and in 1996, Hessian Radio offered no fewer than twenty-one readings (each forty-five minutes in length) from the epic tale.134 On that occasion, the reader was none other than the actor Dieter Mann, who was to play the main role in Strauß’s Ithaka135 in the 1997–98 production at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. The July 1996 premiere performance of Ithaka in Munich was a media event. Normally, adaptations of
classical texts would hardly attract the attention of the mass media, but this was Strauß's first new work for the theater since the controversy surrounding "Impending Tragedy." A special preopening performance was staged for an audience of approximately four hundred critics. Rumors about the play had been circulating since well-known actor Helmut Griem had turned down the role of Odysseus, apparently for political reasons. The question in the critics' minds was not whether Strauß had written a good play, but whether he had decided to amplify his essayistic turn to the right in the form of a purely literary text.

Since Strauß chose to offer an adaptation rather than an original work, one might be justified in assuming that he hoped to deflect any possible political criticism before the fact by taking on a disguise. In a short introductory text printed after the *dramatis personae*, he spoke of transporting the listener into the "childhood of the world." He also modestly described his project as "a translation of reading into a play... the long finale of Ithaka, as he [i.e., the reader] imagines it" (9). Beyond selection and rearrangement, his only original contribution was the insertion of three "fragmentary women" (each identifiable by the highlighting of a specific part of the body) as a minimalist Greek chorus. The question remains why a writer who had probably been familiar with the *Odyssey* for decades was motivated to offer his own personal visualization of it in 1996. He could have emulated Wagner by turning to Germanic legends and myths, or he could have reworked one of Goethe's plays satirizing the French Revolution. The first option would probably have brought forth accusations of fascist tendencies, whereas the second would have gone more in the direction of irony and sarcasm than toward the solemnity to which he aspired. Finally, the (re-) elevation of ancient Greece to a model for living implied a critique of the replacement of the old humanistic elite by the new bureaucratic-technological one in the course of the nineteenth century.

Strauß's adaptation of books 13–24 from the *Odyssey* is divided into five parts. The titles of the first four are references to the action on stage ("The Arrival," the "Household of the Suitors," "The Scar [of Odysseus]," and "The Bow of Odysseus"), whereas the superscription preceding part five speaks to the purpose of the enterprise: "The Recognition [of Odysseus by Penelope]. The Contract." This contract (an aspect added by Strauß) is a social one meant to determine power structures and loyalties after the return of the long-absent king. Already in 1.3, Athena decries the "horrifying in-
terregnum” and tells Odysseus that he will put an end to it (18). Throughout the play, it is not the person of the king, but rather the institution of the monarchy that is idealized. As in Novalis, it is actually the queen who symbolizes the institution. (The “Fragmentary Women” describe Penelope as “the pure, the arch-faithful one,” terming Odysseus “the often unfaithful one” [14].) Despite this, it is only the return of the king that will “expunge temporality” (13). This can be taken to mean a return to the “long, immobile time” of which Strauß spoke in “Impending Tragedy.” As opposed to the suitors, whose activities are limited in scope (they are “soldiers, researchers, merchants, philosophers, statesmen, and athletes” [13]), the king is capable of uniting all for the common good. Before he can accomplish this, however, he must endure innumerable hardships, confront tragedy, and overcome adversity. There is no doubt that Strauß wished to depict this arduous path as a contrast to the modern society that he despises, one which no longer has any appreciation for the tragic dimension of life.

This modern society is of course a democratic one dominated by “pleasure seeking, sports, and boasting,” in the words of the swineherd Eumaios (21). In 2.3, the political rhetoric of the suitors can be read as a biting indictment of (pseudo-) democratic practice. Before the audience hears the suitors’ views on the nature of government, the “Fragmentary Women” recount the “Argos episode” from the Odyssey, thus erecting a monument to faithful service (the dog Argos remains true to his master to the end). Ageláos proposes the election of the king by a council of princes (Strauß uses the word “Gaufürst” as a provocation, since “Gau” was a term from Nazi bureaucracy) and emphasizes that the king must be dependent on the directives of the noble assembly. Leiokritos sees slavery as the basis for increasing prosperity and calls for more military expeditions, and Antinoos, the preeminent suitor, holds forth like a proto–New Dealer: “The goal of all the resolutions of our assembly is the welfare and peace of our peoples.” Beyond politics, Amphimedon proclaims that festivals connected with “ancient cults” are to be forbidden and sacrificial offerings of food and drink are to be drastically reduced. Leiokritos also names the Phoenicians as the “main enemy of our trading community,” an enemy who supposedly embodies “a lack of character and an unscrupulous pursuit of profit.” He adds that the morals and customs of the suitors’ peoples are “foreign” to the Phoenicians (38–39). It is the word “foreign” and its variations that are at the center of the rest of this scene. When Odysseus appears, disguised as a beggar, Antinoos
uses the occasion as an opportunity to expound on immigration policies: Although he and the other suitors have nothing against foreigners per se, they are upset that “useful foreigners” (e.g., merchants, artisans, doctors, artists, or oracles) rarely appear (40). After Antinoos has insulted Odysseus as an “ugly glutton” (häßlicher Fresser [40]), the beggar responds with an apocalyptic parable about a “false king” (41). This and other comments cause Antinoos to throw a stool at Odysseus, striking the “foreign freak” (Mißgeburt) on the shoulder. Ageláos criticizes Antinoos for acting in this manner, because, he says, the Gods sometimes appear as “lousy foreigners” in order to put people to the test (42). Even the local beggar Iros feels confident enough to call Odysseus a “foreigner and scoundrel” (44). It is only when Odysseus defeats Iros in combat that he is accepted as a “noble foreigner” (47). Playing with language and the audience’s expectations again, Strauß has Amphíno-mos congratulate the victor with “Hail foreigner” (48). Although former Latin students (and readers of the long-running comic Asterix) might think of “Ave Caesar,” most German spectators would make another anachronistic association, i.e., “Heil Hitler!” Since the faithful swineherd Eumaios greeted the unexpected—and unrecognized—foreign visitor Odysseus with respect and hospitality (see 1.4), the suitors’ behavior suggests that the secular democrats pander to foreigners when it suits them, but, barring a fear of heavenly punishment, they will also exploit them to the hilt and discard them. Their humanistic posturing has no real ethical fundament. More apparitions from the Third Reich are conjured up when Antinoos threatens Odysseus: “You know, beggar, what we think here: that which is ugly deserves to be destroyed” (40). After witnessing such abominations, the audience might well be prepared to accept Odysseus’s prophecy of a “bloody cleansing” at the end of the scene.

But what would be “cleansed,” exactly? In part 3, suitor Eurymachos sounds like a critic of the excesses of the welfare state when he calls Odysseus a “parasite” who knows how to use the system to his advantage (55). He also complains that “vulgarity” is pushing into the upper echelons of society, threatening to submerge the noble suitors in “filth” (56). This is the same distaste for the masses articulated in “Impending Tragedy,” and Athena’s advice to her hero Odysseus is too similar to the mind-set of contemporary xenophobic hooligans to be understood solely in the (pre-)historical context: “If you do not attack and storm ahead filled with blood lust, hesitation will wreak havoc with you more than the consequences of your deeds” (66). As
so often before, Strauß avoids clarity with regard to basic issues. This holds true in part 4 as well. Before the slaughter of the suitors begins, Leokritos praises war—in this case the Trojan War—as a bringer of prosperity and new skills (70). This recalls the enthusiasm of educated German youth in 1914 and the defense of the soldier in “Impending Tragedy.” Demoptolemos spins a tale that sounds like Strauß’s view of contemporary Germany: A glutton king (“der Meistesser”) is emulated by his subjects, leading to a situation where all will starve unless they work hard, something that none of the decadent people are capable of anymore (71). Shortly afterward, Ktesippos warns his comrades that their prosperity has led them to forget that foreigners should be honored and the needy should be cared for (71–72). In contrast to such insights, Eurymachos rejects the bloody vision of the seer Theoklymenos, calling him “crazy” and a “babbler” whose stories are “foolish” (73). In short, the aristocratic suitors are not a homogenous group. Even Odysseus, who has vowed to destroy them all as revenge for the “period of disorder” (81), spares the singer Phemios and the young herald Medon after Telemachos intervenes in their behalf (85). Odysseus grudgingly admits that they are not “scoundrels,” but is still disgusted with them because they did nothing to stop others from committing injustices. They are “fellow travelers” whose ambivalence would make a German audience ponder the role of cultural figures in the Third Reich and the GDR.

Although Strauß made no attempt to eliminate the various contradictions in Ithaka, this is not the most problematic aspect of the play. The audience listens to the long political debates, but it reacts to the violent scenes in parts 4 and 5. Long spears fly through the air, swords are swung, and blood flows freely toward the proscenium. In the midst of the butchery, Athena calls upon Odysseus to become even more enraged, to be unrelenting in his “lust to kill” (83). She also advises him to trust in his own “military strength” (Wehrkraft). This word, which is associated with German militarism from Siegfried to the Nazi Wehrmacht, was cut from the text in the Munich production. There is little consolation in the fact that Odysseus must berate his faithful nanny Eurykleia for enthusing about the “glorious blood bath” (the gods would not want a warrior to rejoice in the presence of corpses [86]). In part 5, the murdered female servants (“whoring maids,” in Telemachos’s phrase [83]) hang in the background during the recognition scene with Odysseus and Penelope. What is the purpose of such tableaus? Are they little more than the high culture version of Mortal Kombat? Do
they offer a thrill to the relatively sheltered Europeans who watch reports about Bosnia or Rwandan genocide on the evening news? Could they cause the audience to consider the many incidents of xenophobic violence in Germany itself? We do not know if Strauß pondered such questions while writing *Ithaka*. We do, however, after witnessing the final scene of the play, know that he took pains to mythologize the ultrarealistic slaughter by ushering in Zeus as a *deus ex machina*. Only a god can stop the violence and reinstitute the “sacred order” (103). To do this, Zeus erases the brutality from the “memory of the people,” so that the ruler and his subjects can love each other as they had previously done. This is possible on stage, but not in reality. Neither the memory of the Holocaust nor the images of skinheads attacking foreigners or torching their homes could or should be forgotten. Perhaps *Ithaka* is above all an attempt at self-therapy on the part of the author. The healing that is granted to the ancients remains unrealizable for the contemporary Germans, whose “self-hatred” (cf. *Die selbstbewuβte Nation*) is seemingly untreatable. Only flights of fantasy offer a respite—albeit a short-lived one—from its torments.

The critics who reacted to the Munich production of *Ithaka* in 1996 differed with regard to its political significance, but praise for the literary qualities of the work was rare. One called it “not significant” in a literary sense, not worth of any “excitement.” Another dismissed the “retelling of . . . absolutely nondramatic material.” Rolf Michaelis was not only put off by the brutal murder of Antinoos, “in this Bosnia year one of the most horrifyingly inhuman scenes of the [theater] season,” but also by the audience’s reaction, applauding the murder “like a trick from Mr. David Copperfield.” If this perception is correct (and I believe that it is, given my own experiences as a spectator), then it is not the audience, but rather the “enlightened critics” so vilified by Strauß who take his writing seriously. According to wire service reports, the critics booed the performance, whereas the actual premiere audience was enthusiastic. The critics focused on the content, but the spectators were mainly interested in the star of the show, prize-winning actor Bruno Ganz. Such phenomena are symptomatic of a continuing “Americanization” of German culture, one of the bugaboos of the New Right. Critic Gerhard Stadelmaier, a defender of Strauß, saw this quite clearly when he expressed his amazement that anyone could conceive of a German theatrical production as a danger for democracy. The author of *Ithaka*, in Stadelmaier’s view, was in any case “not democratic, not reactionary, but rather simply childlike-fantastic, at
worst devour.” Richard Herzinger, who contributed the most detailed contextualization of *Ithaka*, came to a very different conclusion: “*Ithaka* renews in a poetic manner the state utopia of political Romanticism.” Herzinger depicted Strauß as a latter-day Novalis, who is reviving “cultural criticism anno 1798” and daring to envision the pinnacle of human civilization in a monarchical system. For this reason, asserted Herzinger, the appearance of *Ithaka* is a “far-reaching event in the recent cultural history of the [German] Federal Republic” (8). Another point in Herzinger’s article refers back to the traditions described in chapter 1 of this study. Originally, he says, Strauß was a “Zivilisationsliterat” like Heinrich Mann, a “highly sensitive observer of modern everyday life and its subliminal mythical structures.” In the meantime, he has supposedly become yet another German intellectual who cannot “endure the limitlessness of irony” and thus attempts to come to terms with the insecurity of modern life by putting forward a “profundity” supported by metaphysics and the philosophy of culture (10).

Herzinger’s position vis-à-vis the German revolt against liberal modernity will be examined in the Excursus below. Of interest here is a question which he asks, namely whether Strauß’s “prototype of a sublime neo-Romanticism” will succeed in spawning a new antimodern literary movement (7). At the present juncture, this question must be answered in the negative. If even the “elite” audiences that are motivated enough to see live performances of *Ithaka* have difficulty getting beyond fascinating images to confront the real substance of the play, it is unlikely that there will be sufficient interest to support antimodern *literati*. On the one hand, their choice of obscure topics may alienate potential supporters. One example is the cold reception given Strauß’s most recent play *Jeffers—Act I and II* in 1998. If the elitist, antidemocratic poet Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962) is a minor figure in American literature, he is practically unknown in Germany. His stance against modern civilization obviously appeals to Strauß, but the affinity between the two is insufficient as a foundation for literature with an appeal to others. On the other hand, in the age of media spotlights, any writer who expresses convictions loses credibility if his own personal life is not an expression of these convictions. When Strauß’s book *The Copyist’s Errors* (Die Fehler des Kopisten) appeared in 1997, critic Willi Winkler called the author “the most vain writer of our time.” This outburst was due at least in part to the way in which *Der Spiegel*—the facilitator of the “Impending Tragedy” controversy—introduced the new work to the public.
The magazine printed an article about Strauß and his newest work as well as a long excerpt. What was sensational about this was that Strauß allowed photographers to take pictures of himself, his son, and his new home in the country outside Berlin. The enemy of the media had decided, even more blatantly than before, to use the marketing mechanisms of the system for his own purposes. It is the ultimate exercise in co-optation when *Der Spiegel* prints an excerpt in which Strauß refers to those who work in the media as “the ruling class” (194). In the book itself, one discovers an absolutely amazing initial paragraph:

> On a hill in the Uckermark [an area northeast of Berlin], I built a white house, and actually there are two, a larger one with a view of a broad meadow hollow, bordering on a forest in the south, the Jakobsdorfer Forest. And a smaller one behind it for guests who never come, with a furnace room and a room for the piano. (7)

Later on, one learns:

> For twenty years I have searched for such a place, where no one lives too close to me... The battle with the beauty [of the landscape] that tries to bring one down, to silence one, is... more dignified than the one against boom boxes and neighborhood parties. (13)

From this fortress, tirades are launched against the superficiality of modern life, the ugliness of the city, the corrupting influence of prosperity, the decline of religion, etc. Here is just one key passage:

> I must introduce my little son to a society that I consider to be used up and debilitated. From which I expect nothing but a slow, perhaps, however, an accelerated hemorrhaging.

> I cannot perceive anything good or even a prospect, a plan, from any side. It is a matter of nothing but haggling in a moral as well as a strategic sense. (36)

This assessment—which hardly offers succor to the New Right—is by no means an unusual one, but the seriousness of its indictment is undercut by the simple fact that the bearer of the message can afford the luxury of a hermitage only thanks to a prosperity derived from the hated system. As if this were not enough, the packaging of autobiographical snippets to be purchased and consumed by the stultified modern masses is the height of cynicism. It is “haggling” done with an air of superiority. This is definitely not the stuff of which movements are made.

From January to September 1995, Peter Handke worked on a new play. This was the period immediately preceding his journey to Serbia. In contrast to Botho Strauß, who polemicized in essayistic form and then incorpo-
rated his viewpoints into a literary work, Handke created a utopian land for the stage and then sought out a possible manifestation of it in social reality. His play, *Preparations for Immortality: A Royal Drama* (Zurüstungen für die Unsterblichkeit. Ein Königsdrama), was published and performed in 1997, about a year after the turmoil surrounding his essays on the Balkans. The front cover of the book version is decorated with a drawing by the author’s youngest daughter (Handke’s head rests on a fanciful pedestal), and the perspective of the child is often glorified in the play. The back cover offers a passage from the play in which all of human activity is conceived of as a kind of storytelling. As in the *Winter Journey* and its sequel, the ability to see the world and its images clearly without ideological blinders and the power of narration as a counterweight to the mindless chatter of contemporary civilization are at the center of the enterprise. In this case, however, Handke is on familiar terrain: his preferred method of experiencing and describing the world is problematic as a point of departure for political reporting, but not at all unusual in the sphere of literature. It is of course only a basis from which to proceed, not a guarantee of success.

When Handke’s monumental (1,072 pages!) 1994 novel *My Year in No-Man’s Bay—A Fairy Tale from the New Age* appeared, critic Ulrich Greiner remarked that the author was “on the way to another literature, a Romantic one.” The attempt to revive the project of the poeticization of the world, did not, Greiner added, refer back to Novalis and the philosophical concepts of German Romanticism, but rather to the writings of Joseph von Eichendorff and the Austrians Franz Grillparzer and Adalbert Stifter, whose efforts bore the stamp of Catholicism and conservative utopia. Like this troika, Handke hoped to discover beauty and meaning not in catastrophes and violence (cf. *Ithaka!*), but instead in the constant repetitions and rituals of everyday life. *Preparations for Immortality* can be read as an extension of this project in the realm of drama. The following exchange from a 1994 *Spiegel* interview conducted by Volker Hage and Mathias Schreiber after the publication of *My Year in No-Man’s Bay* is instructive in this regard:

**Der Spiegel:** The epoch in which literature always had to be objective, honest, enlightening or political, is nearing its end. . . .

**Handke:** Yes, we are in a promising situation. . . . We have the chance to become universal without all these ideologies.

Although one might at least approximate universality in a novel of over a thousand pages, the attempt to do so on stage in a limited amount of time
(most productions of *Preparations* last about four hours) is both a prescription for disaster and an expression of authorial hubris.

The play’s intended global reach is emphasized by two quotations used as mottoes. One, about the eternal battle between light and darkness, is taken from the Babylonian *Gilgamesh* epic, whereas the other is a passage from Deuteronomy concerning the transformation of the letter of the law into actual deeds (5). The stage setting depicts an “enclave” that could be in the “mountainous region of Andalusia” but might be anywhere else. Only two of the characters—the cousins Pablo and Felipe Vega—have names; the residents of the enclave and the gang of “Space Eliminators” (Raumverdränger) who threaten them remain nameless. Although numerous allusions make it obvious that the action takes place in our time, the author speaks only of a period “from the last war until now and beyond” (6). The enclave has apparently been terrorized from outside since time immemorial, but its insignificance has allowed it to preserve its own identity. The “World War” (9) did lead to an occupation that left its mark, however. In the night of the invasion, two local women slept with foreign soldiers (“the one supposedly forced to do it, the other supposedly out of burning passion” [9]161), and nine months later gave birth to sons. Pablo, the son of the rapist, is the “star” (14) who is destined to become king, but Felipe, the love child, is a “little cripple” (15) whose physical deformities do not detract from his happy, friendly temperament. Both boys remain “fatherless,” and one of the mothers is convinced that this is for the best: “Good for the present day, good for the present peace, good for the future” (17). As in *Ithaka*, the search for a king is at times strangely antipatriarchal, and the main female figure—for Strauß, Queen Penelope, for Handke the “storyteller”—is idealized.

The nomadic storyteller (“die schöne junge Wandererzählerin”) is the key figure in the enclave residents’ search for identity and a secure future. The “idiot,” who functions as a very inadequate storyteller until the appearance of the real thing, yearns for a king who will bring not “new enslavement, but freedom—no, something for which the word will have to be found . . .” (22). The “people” (“Volk”—played by one actor) have had enough of “idiotic storytellers” and yearn for a new one who will “see and sense” how to proceed (23). The alliance of king and poet (not necessarily in that order) harks back to Novalis. As Pablo and Felipe grow up—encountering the Space Eliminators from time to time—it becomes clear that the former will find himself by leaving the enclave, but the latter will remain in his “element” at home (42).
Handke consciously uses the word “bodenständig” (i.e., rooted in the soil [39]) to characterize Felipe. German audiences who remember the Nazi’s euthanasia program will need no explanations for that—especially in a time when the disabled have often been attacked by the same youth who abuse foreigners. Xenophobia was doubtless on the dramatist’s mind when he composed the first sentence of the new constitution for the enclave (as proclaimed in the final scene): “Bear in mind that you were once enslaved—bear in mind your own foreignness when you encounter a foreigner!” (123). These are laudable sentiments, but how does one arrive at them, and can they be embellished so as to fill an evening in the theater?

The chieftain of the Space Eliminators has been told that the enclave is “the last bit of nature or naturalness,” and that its residents are “the last natural human beings” (Menschennaturen [54]). This is a global statement, but the chieftain and his gang are the only representatives of the “other” who make an appearance in the play, and they are not representative of the rest of the world. Handke may well have intended that, but his model breaks down. The gang members are, in the words of their leader, “heroes of space gulping—the space vacuums, the absorbers of the fake in-between spaces.” Our motto: Not space, but stimulus—stimulus instead of space!” (56). This is a caustic portrayal of the contemporary Western model of civilization, what the Germans call the “Erlebnisgesellschaft,” or the society that needs ever-changing diversions to keep it functioning. If Handke means that the entire world has embraced or is at least gravitating toward this Western model, then the universality of his message might pass the test. In actuality, the Space Eliminators are not just any Westerners, but clearly Germans (just as the enclave residents might be taken for Austrians—or at least idealized Habsburger). When Space Eliminator Three discusses tactics to be used against the enclave, one is transported back to the late 1930s:

The country must lose its reputation. It should not even have a name anymore. It and its residents are to be reduced to mere numbers. . . . Felipe Vega is to be renamed Franz Apfelbaum, Pablo Vega [renamed] Moses Birnstengel. . . . And the local sparrows are to be marked with a scarlet spot. (93)

Number Three begins to speak of the new “salvation” (“Heil”) to be found, but he immediately censors himself: "Pardon me, the use of this word is punished with expulsion from the gang!—, I correct myself: . . . [T]he new drive, the third wind, the unraveling of the knot, the new awakening” (95). If the gang consists of neo-Nazi skinheads (they have been made up to look like that
in some productions), then the dichotomy premodern enclave vs. Western materialism breaks down. In the furor of storytelling, the cultural and political lines of demarcation become blurred, much as in *Ithaka*. Perhaps this is less crucial in a modern fairy tale than in a drama purportedly about the “childhood of the human race.”

In the end, it is less Handke’s imprecision than his obsessive thematization of his aesthetic credo and his education—both scholarly and experiential—that submerge the intention to proclaim a humane utopia. Prefiguring the Balkan project, he has the storyteller emphasize that observation ("Anschauung") is paramount: “Who is today still capable of observing? . . . Simple observation has in the meantime become the most difficult thing. It is only through your ability to observe that you will make war impossible” (99). To observe, we must remain as children or become childlike again.164 The storyteller, who was “still a child this morning” and hopes to again be one “tomorrow morning,” fled from “storytelling schools” (46) because they almost ruined her gift. She predicts that the enclave residents will succumb to catastrophe if they do not follow her example: “Your present lack of fantasy, or narrowing of the skull, or congestion of the blood, or weakened ability to dream, or inability to perceive images (Bildunfähigkeit) is one reason for the catastrophe nearing once again” (47). Even a rejuvenated populace would not be entirely inner-directed, however: “Only the storyteller can understand people, or God” (49). German authors have been repeating this message to little avail since Romanticism, and there is hardly reason to expect that Handke’s version will be heeded any more than that of his predecessors. To undergird his legitimacy as anointed mediator between the people and the world, the author of *Preparations* literally bombards his audience with examples of his erudition and wit. When the Space Eliminators think that they smell the enclave residents, they are not content to compare the aroma to one or two other smells. Instead, they describe it in the following manner:

Like cold smoke and moldy straw. . . . Like rotten apples and greasy clothes. . . . Like rusty chains, dried-up inkwells, dried-up holy-water basins, like the farthest village. . . . Like a plugged-up exhaust pipe, trampled beehives, uterine cancer, sweat produced in fear of death, rabbit cages, lions’ dens, endless searching for meaning (“Sinnhuberei”). (53)

When the chieftain imagines how he would have destroyed cultural monuments in the past, Handke has the opportunity to demonstrate his intimate acquaintance with these monuments:
If I had been a contemporary of Pythagoras, I would have prevented the formulation of the Pythagorean theorem for all time. And in Giotto’s day, I would have stopped the painting of his human societies and thus of all human societies after him. And I would have lay in wait for Francesco Petrarca way before the peak of Mont Ventoux, so that no one after him would have said ‘I’ in his discoverer’s manner. And Goethe would have been thrown off the steeple of Strasbourg Cathedral by me, his natural mortal enemy, and no one after him would have been able to find himself as a Goethean man. (96)

There are many more examples like this in the text. They contribute little to the audience’s understanding of the play, and they do much to consign the author’s utopian longing to oblivion.

Handke’s desire for peace is manifested in the new enclave constitution recited to the people by Pablo. The aforementioned idea of tolerance is complemented by “the daily right to be far away, the daily right to see space, the right to feel the night wind in one’s face” and one “new fundamental prohibition: the prohibition of worry” (124). Pablo’s vision for the enclave is “dreaming and working” (80), a juxtaposition of Romantic urges and the program of the labor movement that came closest to realization in the Paris uprising of May 1968. Unlike Strauß, Handke does not end his play with the triumph of this new order. With the menacing figures of the Space Eliminators in the background, the storyteller informs the people that a new law and a new order are inevitable, but they might be horrifying rather than uplifting: “Be happy. Be afraid” (134). The stage directions describe the final tableau as motionless, quiet, and dark. Zeus and Athena are nowhere to be seen, and this is not the only difference between Ithaka and Preparations.

Handke’s play begins with an act of violence (a paratrooper is attacked by a crowd of “unknowns” with clubs, scythes, pitchforks, and axes [7]), but for the rest of the play, the threat of violence is more of a presence than violence itself. Ithaka ends in an orgy of bloodletting that is predicted long before it occurs. Strauß strives to sensitize his audience to the tragic aspects of human existence, whereas Handke goes to great lengths to avert tragedy. Even the chieftain plans to degrade Pablo in such a way as to avoid “even the slightest touch of tragedy” (56), and when the gang goes too far, the storyteller can simply eliminate them from the action (“wegerzählen” [103]). “Cleansing” (Reinigung) is central to Ithaka, where the cleaning agent is blood. Handke’s storyteller also uses this term (111), but since she herself will be the medium — she announces her desire to be queen — blood will give way to narration. Finally, the role of the people is very different in the two plays. In
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*Ithaka*, they are united by means of a patriarchal order favored by the gods. In the utopian enclave, the people are always hesitant to accept change and skeptical about the pronouncements of Pablo, a.k.a. he who would be king. They are not at all comfortable with the idea of human sacrifice (cf. “Impending Tragedy”), and in this, they are seconded by the Idiot, who wants to know just who would be sacrificed (131). Strauß accepts myth as a valid way of coming to terms with life, but Handke simply uses mythical motifs as one segment of his vast thematic repertory. In a word, irony is inappropriate in *Ithaka* but literally the coin of the realm in *Preparations*.

The critical reception of the Vienna and Berlin productions of *Preparations* mirrors a post-1989 German intellectual life in a state of flux. In general, Handke’s text was seen in a more positive light than *Ithaka*, possibly because its message is less offensive (New Right intellectuals would postulate that it is more politically correct). Both dramas have major shortcomings as texts for the theater, but that did not concern most observers. Thomas Assheuer, an important figure in the “Literature Debate,” admitted that it was difficult to divorce the literary works from the preceding controversy about the political essays. In *Der Spiegel*, Wolfgang Höbel dismissed *Preparations* as “esoteric kitsch” that need not be taken seriously, but the magazine’s editors chose to relativize this judgment by printing an interview with Claus Peymann, the director of Vienna’s Burgtheater. Peymann praised Handke for courageously expressing hope “in a society completely rotted out by cynicism and pragmatism.” Peymann may be one of the few Germans willing to accept neo-Romantic poets as spiritual and cultural mentors, as evidenced by a statement from the *Spiegel* interview: “We must comprehend that we have to listen to the poets again—sometimes like children [must listen to] their father. . . . Without the poets, we are nothing.” (In another interview, Peymann even characterized Handke as an “enlightener” who accepts “mystery.”) Although Benjamin Henrichs correctly discerned in the story of the enclave “the battle of Handke against Handke (singer of peace against madman),” most critics were more interested in comparing Handke with Strauß. Although one incredibly saw both plays as fairy tales, most did not overlook the gap between the two texts and authors. A Strauß partisan provided the following comparison:

Both Strauß and Peter Handke are worlds apart. . . . Strauß does not prescribe anything. Strauß does not preach. Handke asserts myths. Strauß shows them. Handke flees into morality and means an ideal present. Strauß rejects all
morality and maintains only a fairy-tale-like presence of mind, into which a story that happened before the beginning of time hurls its lightning bolts and punch lines. It is true that Handke is more of a preacher than Strauß (albeit a preacher who often undercuts his own sermons), but the latter does preach—not about morality, but (since the campaign against “Impending Tragedy”) more and more about nihilism and a retreat from the world. A more widespread assessment than the one cited above contrasts the political Strauß with the naive or “nonpolitical” Handke, who is hardly a reactionary. Another way of putting this is that Handke stands on the “fairy-tale heights,” whereas Strauß holds forth from the “marble cliffs”—a reference to the novel by Ernst Jünger. The critic of the Süddeutsche Zeitung must have had Jünger in mind when he attempted to portray Handke and Strauß on different paths leading to the same destination. After emphasizing that Strauß “thinks politically,” whereas Handke “interprets poetically,” he pointed out that both writers were “disgusted” with the present era. They are neither “presumptuous” nor “a danger for democracy,” but rather “seismographs” calling for “a new freedom of thought.” It is disconcerting that such important matters are couched in imprecise language. There was never a limit to the freedom of thought in post-1945 West Germany, although certain thoughts were less welcome as publishable manuscripts than others. (Even this was much less true in literature than in journalism, for example.) There is also nothing “new” about this freedom of thought: it is to a certain extent a return to a mode of thinking that was a powerful cultural presence from the 1870s to 1945. This is also not the first epoch of German history in which intellectuals have been disgusted with their times. (O tempora! O mores!) One can only hope that in this instance—as opposed to the 1920s—disgust will not cause a critical mass of those with education and sensitivity to conclude that the maintenance and expansion of democracy has no relevance for their lives.

Peter Handke and Botho Strauß belong to a generation that was deeply affected by the culture and politics of the 1960s. Even more so than in the U.S., this generation has had what used to be called “consciousness.” Beginning life during World War II and growing up under the shadow of the Nazi legacy, Handke, Strauß, and others have attempted to distance themselves from that legacy. Initially, this involved construction of a leftist or oppositional identity (diffuse as it may have been). The 1970s brought about varying
degrees of disillusionment and an inward turn toward self-discovery and subjectivity. After the end of the Cold War and the division of Germany, some have turned to a Weltanschauung that fascinated the intellectual elites before 1933. What has remained constant is that this generation has built an identity by utilizing various critical perspectives. The German embodiment of “Generation X”—admittedly not a precise term—has generally shied away from any fixed stance. At the moment, it is thus difficult to imagine that Handke and Strauß will be emulated by a younger generation. The established writers’ preference for the bastions of high culture and a highly stylized language laden with centuries of humanistic contemplation are effective barriers to proselytizing. Whatever one might think of the poetic projects of the two, the seemingly irreversible desiccation of traditional cultural wellsprings is not a pretty prospect. Even Schacht, Schwilk, and other New Right intellectuals will be forced to confront the reality of this phenomenon. Latterday Ernst Jüngers, should they appear upon the scene, will probably be ignored by both Enzensberger’s “autistic hooligans” and Strauß’s lobotomized media consumers. This state of affairs has to date not stopped the flow of words from the gray eminences of post-’89 literature, however. Strauß, as we have seen, continues to provide prestigious theaters with new texts and has begun to offer his readers scenes from his private life. Handke, whose self-image as a writer was apparently shaken by the “Balkan affair,” has since recovered. In 1997, he published a three-hundred-page novel with a decidedly nonhomiletic tone, and 1998 saw the appearance of the fourth volume of his journals—a book of over five hundred pages. Disgust with the present and a longing for the simplicity of earlier times may elicit many different reactions from writers, but one premodern response to inner turmoil is apparently not a viable option for them: silence.