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1 Anselm Kiefer, quoted in Michèle Crone, 'Suspicious "Unheimlich" and ambivalence in the appropriation strategy of Anselm Kiefer,' *Art Criticism*, vol. 6, 1990, p. 15

2 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Figures of authority, ciphers of regression. Notes on the return of representation in European painting', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art after Modernism. Rethinking Representation* (New York, 1984), p. 131.

3 Arthur Danto, *The State of the Art*, (New York, 1987), p. 209.

4 Donald Kuspit, 'The new (?) expressionism: art as damaged goods', in Donald Kuspit, *The New Subjectivism Art in the 1980s* (New York, 1993), p. 30. For a concise overview of the critical reception of German Neo-Expressionism see Thomas Krens, 'German painting paradox and paradigm in late twentieth-century art' in Thomas Krens et al. (eds.), *Refigured Painting. The German Image 1960–1988* (Munich, 1989).

5 See Inboden's exhibition catalogue article 'Exodus from Historical Time', Paul Maenz and Gerd de Vries (eds.), *Anselm Kiefer* (Cologne, 1986).

Ambivalence is the central theme of all my work.¹

Introduction

At first sight it might seem unnecessary to write once more on the topic of Anselm Kiefer's history paintings. The volume of critical literature on Kiefer has become so extensive that it might seem impossible, at least for the time being, to add anything of substance to current interpretations of his oeuvre. As perhaps the most provocative exemplar of the (now no longer) 'new' German painting, Kiefer has attracted more attention than almost any other artist of his generation. In particular, Kiefer's repetitive use of icons of the Third Reich, including Albert Speer's Chancellery building, his inclusion of Wagnerian themes, his melancholic mourning for the devastated landscape of Germany, coupled with the wider prominence of figurative painting in the 1970s and 1980s, made him the focus of considerable hostility. Benjamin Buchloh still stands, perhaps, as the most prominent critic of the return of figurative painting, most notably in his assertion that 'In the pathetic farce of their repetition-compulsion, we can still recognise the tragic failure of the original forms of the protest of expressionism. In the mockery and mimicry of contemporary neo-expressionism we see the afterimage of that anarchic and subversive, but ultimately apolitical, radicalism doomed to failure, to be appropriated by the very forces that it had set out to oppose.'² Although it appropriates the language of Expressionist painting and sculpture, neo-expressionism is, for Buchloh, a reactionary phenomenon that relies on a mythification of notions of German identity; indeed its very appropriation of Expressionism as a reified style constitutes its regressive nature. Buchloh may seem to be particularly harsh, but his hostility is shared by others. Arthur Danto has dismissed the 'new' figurative painting with the confident assertion that 'Neo-Expressionism raised, as art, no philosophical question at all',³ while even Donald Kuspit, often regarded as its defender, voices a concern when he notes that 'There is something wrong in the paradise of its plenty and, more crucially, with its "reconstitution" of the past in the context of the present.'⁴

The criticism that neo-expressionist painting, and Kiefer in particular, is guilty of a regressive mythologization of the question of German history is paradoxically encouraged by those supportive of Kiefer's work, such as Gudrun Inboden, whose emphasis on the cosmic, mythic concern in his landscapes seems deliberately to underplay the political dimension of such a semantic investment in landscape.⁵ Indeed, by endowing his works with a trans-historical meaning, Inboden ultimately links Kiefer all the more closely to the reactionary ideologies that provided the breeding ground for Nazism, with its politico-metaphysical skewing of the notions of place, home and nature.

Despite the fact that the debate concerning Kiefer's work is well rehearsed and extensive, I shall nevertheless be proposing an alternative reading which

focuses on its political ambiguity. Specifically I shall be exploring the ways in which his work, though heavily imbued with a melancholy mourning of the disaster of German history, also consists of an investigation into the intertwining of German history and culture, in which the political ambiguities of modernism are painfully exposed. In one sense I shall be conducting an investigation similar to that of Andreas Huyssen, who has recently placed the painter within the context of the so-called 'Historikerstreit' or 'Historians' Debate' of the mid-1980s in Germany.⁶ Specifically, a number of conservative German historians, of whom the most prominent were Martin Broszat and Ernst Nolte, attempted to 'normalize' the Nazi period, both treating it as a 'normal' historical phenomenon and also equating the Holocaust with the expulsion of the Germans from the Sudetenland and Poland at the end of the war.⁷ Hence Kiefer's work has to be placed against the background of this intellectual debate over the meaning of the Nazi period; in particular, it interrogates the nature of its fascination. Indeed the fascination with fascism makes Kiefer's own work deeply ambiguous; as Huyssen notes, 'Here then is the dilemma: whether to read these paintings as a melancholy fixation on the dreamlike ruins of fascism that locks the viewer into complicity, or, instead, as a critique of the spectator, who is caught up in a complex web of melancholy, fascination, and repression.'⁸ However, my own reading differs slightly from Huyssen's. Although Kiefer's oeuvre seems to inhabit an ambiguous space of fascination and repulsion, as Huyssen points out, I shall be arguing that it is provocative because it confronts the viewer with the extent to which the 'aberration' of the Third Reich drew its iconic and ideological support from the early twentieth-century German culture. I am arguing that Kiefer's interrogation of a particular view of 'Germanness' and German history should be understood as a sustained commentary on the intertwining of modern culture and Nazism, a making explicit of this connection. This dimension to Kiefer's work has been remarked on before,⁹ but it has not really been followed through fully, being seen instead as an exploration of the character of 'Germanness' or instead as a meditation on German history *in abstracto*. In place of this, I wish to examine how Kiefer draws out the relation between the catastrophic events of the years 1933–45 and the history of German culture within which they must be located. In this sense, then, Kiefer's work 'normalizes' the Nazi era, but in the opposite manner to the normalization attempted by Broszat or Nolte. Whereas the conservative revision of Holocaust inserts it into a system of historical equivalencies, thus denying its unique meaning, in Kiefer there is the suggestion that terror, myth and violence have always been latent possibilities in German culture. Kiefer's revisiting of the recent German past therefore consists less of a regressive appropriation, as Buchloh claims, and more a necessary repetition of a trauma in order to overcome it. Of central importance in this regard are the questions Kiefer's work raises about the relation between Nazism and what has come to be termed 'romantic anti-capitalism.' Consequently, I shall turn first to the notion of 'romantic anti-capitalism' before returning to Kiefer's work itself.

Capitalism, Romanticism, Modernism

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home . . .¹⁰

The notion of romantic anti-capitalism was first articulated by Georg Lukács in his studies on Dostoyevski, initially to describe the cultural critique in his

6. Andreas Huyssen, 'Anselm Kiefer: The Terror of History, the Temptation of Myth', *October*, vol. 48, 1989, pp. 25–45.

7. The *Historikerstreit* was the subject of a special issue in *New German Critique*, vol. 44, 1988. See in particular, Hans-Georg Betz, 'Deutschlandpolitik on the margins: on the evolution of contemporary new right nationalism in the Federal Republic,' *New German Critique*, vol. 44, 1988, pp. 127–57.

8. Huyssen, 'Anselm Kiefer', p. 39.

9. See, for example, Kuspit's essay 'Transmuting externalisation in Anselm Kiefer' in Kuspit, *The New Subjectivism. Art*, pp. 107–115.

10. Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bostock, (London, 1978), p. 29.

11. Georg Lukács, 'Dostojewski', in Lukács, *Werke, Vol. V, 'Probleme des Realismus II'* (Berlin, 1964), p. 174.

12. Lukács, 'Dostojewski', p. 176.

13. See Michael Löwy, 'Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and Romantic Anti-Capitalism', *New German Critique*, vol. 42, 1987, pp. 17–31.

14. Although Lukács was Hungarian by birth, he belongs firmly within the sphere of German culture in this regard. Apart from the fact that his mother, Adele Wertheimer, was Viennese and never managed to speak Hungarian fluently, Lukács's intellectual development was completely dependent on German thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Emil Lask and Georg Simmel, not to mention the later dominance of Hegel and Marx. Lukács studied in Heidelberg from 1912–1917, as a student of Max Weber, and during this period developed important intellectual bonds with contemporaries such as Ernst Bloch, Paul Ernst, Martin Buber, as well as enjoying a sustained correspondence with Thomas Mann.

15. See, for example, Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, 'Figures of Romantic Anti-Capitalism', *New German Critique*, vol. 32, 1984, pp. 42–92. See, too, Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism. Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1984).

16. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Association*, trans. C. Loomis (London, 1955), p. 37.

17. Tönnies, *Community and Association*, p. 79.

18. Tönnies, *Community and Association*, p. 41.

19. Georg Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby (London, 1990), p. 442.

20. On the theme of 'Life' see Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933*, trans. E. Matthews (Cambridge, 1984), p. 139 ff.

novels. In his 1943 essay on Dostoyevski he writes; 'Dostoyevski's questioning . . . is a revolt against that moral und spiritual denigration of humans which capitalist development has produced.'¹¹ For Lukács the key to understanding Dostoyevski is furthermore the fact that while his novels may be founded on a fundamental disenchantment with modernity, their yearning for the pre-modern remains unsatisfied. The return to the pre-lapsarian golden age is not possible, though Dostoyevski's heroes still hanker after it all the same:

The 'Golden Age'. authentic and harmonious relations between authentic and harmonious humans. Dostoyevski's figures know that in their present time this is a dream, but they cannot and will not let this dream go.¹²

Originally, Lukács's notion of a romantic anti-capitalist cultural critique had a narrow frame of reference, namely the novels of Dostoyevski. However, it can be, and has been, employed not merely to describe an aesthetic of literary practice, but also, as Michael Löwy points out, 'a broad cultural configuration, present in politics, philosophy, sociology, political economy and religion as well as in art and literature'.¹³ While the term identifies a central strand in the writing of a notable nineteenth-century Russian author, it is in Germany that its extension to include an entire cultural system of belief is most noticeable. For although Romanticism and its accompanying critique of the emerging urban life of modernity maintained an influential presence throughout European and North American culture of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it can be argued that in the latter years of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries it became the hegemonic world view within German culture. Indeed the passage from Lukács's early *Theory of the Novel* which I cited above provides a typical example of such a romantic nostalgia pervading the intellectual climate of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century culture in Germany.¹⁴

I do not intend to give a history of romantic anti-capitalism; the space here is hardly sufficient and the task has moreover been completed elsewhere.¹⁵ Its general contours, however, are worth outlining, and this can be done by reference to some of the more prominent figures in German intellectual life of this period. It can be seen, for example, in the work of the founding fathers of sociology. In particular one might think of Ferdinand Tönnies, whose widely read *Community and Society* of 1887 draws a distinction between the 'real and organic life'¹⁶ of the pre-modern 'community' ('Gemeinschaft') and the abstract rationalization of the modern 'society' ('Gesellschaft'), where individual qualities are 'considered equal in so far as each object . . . stands merely for a certain quantity of necessary labour'.¹⁷ In other words, for Tönnies modernity entails the loss of an organic sense of community, a biological metaphor continued in his claim that modern science 'reduces the living to the dead, in order to grasp its relations'.¹⁸ Such anti-modern regret informed likewise the work of Max Weber, whose notion of 'disenchantment' parallels Tönnies' belief in the auratic-magic quality of the pre-modern or, indeed, Georg Simmel's analysis of modernity in his *Philosophy of Money*, where 'law, intellectuality and money are characterised by their complete indifference to individual qualities' such that 'all three extract from the concrete totality of the streams of life one abstract, general factor'.¹⁹

At the root of such an opposition is an obsession with 'Life', which became part of the lingua franca of philosophical theorizing in Germany and beyond at this time.²⁰ One might think here most immediately of the vitalism of Nietzsche, Ludwig Klages or in France, the work of Bergson. Simmel, for example, describes a recurrent pattern of post-medieval culture as involving

the 'dissolution of original unities and affinities into differentiated autonomous entities',²¹ a view that echoes Tönnies's distinction between the organic character of the pre-modern and the disintegration characteristic of modernity. The intellectual ancestry of this concern with life and unity can be traced back to early Romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel and Hölderlin, who sought to overcome the subject-object dichotomy in the name of a pre-conceptual intuitive immediacy.²² While late nineteenth-century vitalism represents the most crude form of such neo-romantic interest in the immediate and the pre-reflective, it became a widespread modernist topos. It appears, for example, in the earliest philosophical writings of Walter Benjamin, which criticize neo-Kantian thought for its inability to account for empathy or the identification of the subject with the object common amongst 'primitives'.²³ The notion of empathy also plays a significant role in such early modern fascination with the pre-reflective and the pre-modern, and it is important to mention in this context the work of Wilhelm Worringer, whose historical aesthetics, first articulated in his doctoral dissertation of 1906 (published 1908) on *Abstraction and Empathy* revolves around the very same polarity of distance and proximity in the relation of cognizing subject and the object of experience and its resolution in the visual arts. Significantly, too, Worringer's thesis occupied a central place in the intellectual landscape of both Expressionist art and criticism, allowing one to draw out the community of interests binding certain modernist artistic practices to the philosophical and sociological theories outlined above.

Common to all such positions is an attention not only to some form of pre-reflective experience of the world, an openness, as it were, to pure, unmediated being before the disruption of such primordial unity by the mediation of conceptual language, but also to the role of modernity (and its capitalist economic formations) in hastening the process of rationalization. In *Theory of the Novel* Lukács distinguishes between a pre-modern sense of familiarity with the world, marked by hidden affinities between subject and world, and the transcendental homelessness of the modern subject, for whom all is uncanny, or *unheimlich*.²⁴

In discussing the romantic anti-capitalism so prominent in German culture from the late nineteenth century onwards I have cast the net as wide as possible in order to include figures belonging to an enormous variety of political persuasions. Under the term 'romantic anti-capitalism' one could, following the definition offered above, include not only the reactionary thinking of, say, Ernst Jünger and proto-fascists such as Georg Brandes, Paul Ernst or Expressionists such as Johst or Emil Nolde, but also Marxist thinkers including not only Lukács but also figures such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contrasts the immediacy of the pre-modern name with the growth of alienating abstraction characteristic of modernity.²⁵

It has been suggested that the reason for such a wide range of political positions within the Romantic movement derives from its two-fold origins in Henri Rousseau and Edmund Burke.²⁶ Such an explanation overlooks, however, the capacity for radical romanticism to transform into extreme conservatism, as happened, for example, in the case of Paul Ernst. More importantly, however, it also fails to account for the ease with which Nazism appropriated the rhetoric of romanticism. The capacity of the modernist romantic anti-capitalism discussed here to produce both the messianic Marxism of Bloch and the reactionary thinking of Ernst Jünger requires explanation, and the feature which can be drawn on to account for this is its

21. Georg Simmel, 'Philosophie der Landschaft', in Georg Simmel, *Brücke und Tür* (Stuttgart, 1957), p. 143.

22. Here one might think of Hölderlin's much quoted philosophical fragment on 'Judgement and Being', where Hölderlin argues that 'Judgement is the original division of the subject and the object which, in intellectual intuition, are most intimately connected, the division whereby object and subject are first made possible.' See Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, ed. G. Mieth (Darmstadt, 1970), vol. 1, p. 840.

23. See Walter Benjamin, 'On the programme of the coming philosophy', in M. Bullock and M. Jennings (eds.), *Benjamin, Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1996), vol. 1: 1913–1926, pp. 100–110.

24. Much of the literature on the loss of the sense of home, the loss of an intimate affinity with the world, was also informed by anthropological theories of the primitive, which stressed the fundamental role of the mimetic as formative of the primitive mentality. For a concise survey of the subject see Jeremy Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge, 1990).

25. See Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (London, 1989).

26. Michael Löwy, 'Marxism and Revolutionary Romanticism', in Michael Löwy, *On Changing the World. Essays in Political Philosophy from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin* (Atlantic Highlands, 1993), pp. 1–15.

27. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Romantik* (Munich, 1919) While Schmitt went on to become a Nazi sympathiser it is significant that his book, when first published, was favourably reviewed by Lukács. See Lukács, 'Rezension: Carl Schmitt, Politische Romantik' [1928] in Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Neuwied, 1968), pp. 695–6.

28. In one of his later essays, entitled 'Was nun?' or 'What now?' Ernst writes, 'The life of the peasant is an ancient form of human life. There has occurred in it an almost complete harmony of inner and outer worlds.' This assertion would not have looked out of place in the work of Tönnies or the young Lukács. See Ernst, 'Was nun?', in Karl August Kutzbach (ed.), *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács Dokumente einer Freundschaft* (Düsseldorf, 1974), p. 190.

29. E. Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*, trans. A. Bostock (Harmondsworth, 1978), p. 55.

30. See, too, Worringer's slightly later book *Formal Problems of Gothic* (New York, 1920) In this work Worringer refers to Art History as 'The psychology of humanity' and reduces humanity to three psychological 'types', namely, the primitive, the classical and the oriental.

31. For a more detailed discussion of Hausenstein see Charles Haxthausen, 'A critical illusion: "Expressionism" in the writings of Wilhelm Hausenstein', in Rainer Rumold and Otto Karl Werckmeister (eds.), *The Ideological Crisis of Expressionism* (Columbia, 1990), pp. 169–191.

32. See Joan Weinstein, 'The End of Expressionism', in Joan Weinstein, *The End of Expressionism. Art and the November Revolution in Germany 1918–19*, (Chicago, 1990), pp. 219–44.

conceptual and political under-determination. What I mean with this assertion is the idea that romantic anti-capitalism, deriving its energy from an ill-defined critique of European capitalism, suffers from a massive ambiguity in the political motivation of its critique, an ambiguity that accounts for why its essentially pastoral orientation could equally well be transformed into a political strategy of the Left or of the Right. The indeterminate nature of this romantic modernist critique of capitalism had already been noted by the right-wing political thinker Carl Schmitt as early as 1919,²⁷ but its full significance has since been largely ignored.

The crux of the issue stems from the problem that the appeal to non-capitalist social and cultural values is open to appropriation by diverse political tendencies, since what a non-capitalist society *means* is open to interpretation. It may be the pre-capitalist *Gemeinschaft*, itself both a left and right-wing vision, or the liberated revolutionary society envisaged by Marx. This ambiguity underlying the idealist-utopian vision of romantic anti-capitalism explains the fact that while Expressionism remained allied broadly to the Left it at the same time produced such right-wing figures of Nolde, Bann or Johst. One need only recall, in this context, that Lukács, who would later become a leading Marxist, enjoyed a close personal friendship with Paul Ernst, whose romanticism evolved into a conservative neo-classical aesthetic.²⁸ This is not to imply, therefore, that romantic anti-capitalism was intrinsically proto-fascist; rather, its utopian vision frequently lacked the essential *determinate* negativity that might have rendered it either explicitly left-wing or right-wing. This explains, too, its dialectical character. The comment of the Marxist critic Ernst Fischer that 'the Romantics had . . . an antipathy to capitalism (some . . . from an aristocratic angle, others from a plebeian)',²⁹ while noting Romanticism's capacity to include both reactionary *and* revolutionary anti-capitalism fails to investigate the origin of this combined aristocratic disdain and plebeian revolt.

One can see an example of such indeterminacy in the work of the critic Wilhelm Hausenstein, who occupied as important a critical position immediately prior to World War I as Wilhelm Worringer. In his book *The Nude in the Art of all Ages and Cultures*, first published in 1913, Hausenstein drew on Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, in particular, Worringer's treatment of artistic styles as symptoms of broad quasi-historical mental types.³⁰ However, criticizing the reliance on lofty abstractions, Hausenstein gave Worringer's socio-psychological types a specifically materialist inflection. The left-wing leanings of such an approach were fortified by Hausenstein's optimistic anticipation of the future socialist, collective society. Yet by 1918, in *On Expressionism in Painting*, Hausenstein had abandoned his former allegiance to Expressionism as the augur of such a society. Indeed a year later, in an article published in *Die Neue Merkur* entitled 'Art and Revolution', Hausenstein seems to see revolution as desirable *only* inasmuch as it would achieve a breakthrough for art, thus engaging in an aestheticization of politics more usually associated with Benjamin's theory of fascism.³¹ Such a shift from radical materialism to a post-war conservative repudiation of any socialist utopian theory has to be interpreted within the problematics of indeterminacy, rather than by resorting to any personal explanation. Of course Hausenstein's disenchantment with Expressionism can be seen against the background of a wider post-war turn away from Expressionism.³² The nature of his *volte-face*, however, has a political dimension unaccounted for in this larger context. Specifically, in a book of 1920 entitled *The Art of the Moment*, he criticized both Expressionism and the political left, seeking in art a spiritual redemption of modernity.

This theoretical problem of ambivalence can be mobilized, too, to provide an historical explanation of how romanticism, as a largely anti-authoritarian critique of modernity, could become implicated in the rise of Nazism, without resorting to the crass generalizations of Lukács' analysis, most notoriously in his late work *The Destruction of Reason*, which labels romanticism simply as an irrationalist prelude to fascism.³³ There is a particular irony here, for one can see in Lukács himself an example of such ambivalence; while he was the first to formulate the notion of a romantic anti-capitalism, he oscillated in his evaluations of the tendency. His first essay on Dostoyevski of 1931 was strongly critical of such romanticism,³⁴ and one can recall his agreement with Carl Schmitt's critique of 'political romanticism'. Yet his later essay of 1943, cited earlier, displays a marked sympathy for the hankering in Dostoyevski's novels for the golden age.

The romantic cultural critique so dominant in the early decades of this century was therefore not *implicitly* proto-fascist. Rather, it could become a critique of modernity from either the left or the right, inasmuch as the indeterminacy of its critique laid it open to a wide spectrum of interpretation. As has been discussed by Ferenc Fehér,³⁵ the crucial historical catalyst compelling anti-capitalists to give their opposition a more determinate conceptual content was the First World War, which polarized positions either to the left or the right. Fehér notes, 'Romantic anti-capitalism, which could function undisturbed only as mere cultural criticism, had to abandon its disguise and show its true colours. It had to unequivocally show how seriously it took its anti-capitalist stance.'³⁶ Hence only when romantic anti-capitalism was in some sense put to the test, compelled to take a concrete political position, did there emerge definably reactionary and revolutionary modes of anti-capitalism on the basis of a previously politically underdetermined form of cultural critique. A parallel can be seen in the modernist appropriation of the figure of Friedrich Nietzsche during the same period, where Nietzsche served as an inspirational figure to left-radical movements (Expressionism, Dada) as well as to cultural conservatives such as Stefan George and the members of the George-Kreis.³⁷

This outline analysis produces a more complex understanding of the role of romanticism and anti-capitalism in the emergence of fascism in Germany than that of Lukács, and also one which diverges from the popular idea of a fascist 'perversion' of romanticism. In one sense of course Hitler's régime *did* undertake a perverse appropriation of established forms of German culture in the service of its own propaganda machine. However, it did so with such consummate ease that one has to consider the internal links *between* Nazi ideology and the cultural configurations out of which it grew, rather than merely dismissing all mention of any connection other than one of misappropriation. One might think, for example, of the ease with which the conservative pastoralism of much nineteenth-century genre painting was transformed into the approved 'völkisch' art, as a bulwark against the degeneracy of modernism.³⁸ Alternatively, this might also explain how the pre-war *Freikörperkultur*, or naturist cult, for which the Expressionists felt great affinity, became so easily transformed into the Nazi obsession with the Olympian body. Buchloh, whom I cited earlier, notes that the Expressionist revolt was 'apolitical', and therefore 'doomed to failure', and he quotes Lukács's own analysis, according to which Expressionism, because it criticized capitalism in mythical terms, formed 'one of the many bourgeois ideological currents eventually leading to fascism'.³⁹ Furthermore, he draws a parallel between the failure of Expressionism and the 'mock avant-garde' of

33 Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. P. Palmer, (London, 1980).

34. Lukács, 'Über den Dostojewski Nachlaß', *Moskauer Rundschau*, (March, 1931).

35. Fehér, 'The Last Phase of Romantic Anti-Capitalism: Lukács' Response to the War', *New German Critique*, vol. 10, 1977, pp. 139–54.

36. Fehér, 'The Last Phase of Romantic Anti-Capitalism', p. 146.

37. See Heinz Raschel, *Das Nietzsche-Bild im George Kreis* (Berlin, 1984); Seth Taylor, *Left-Wing Nietzscheans. The Politics of German Expressionism 1910–1920* (Berlin, 1990), and, more recently, Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany* (Los Angeles, 1994).

38. Berthold Hinz, *Art in the Third Reich*, trans. R. Kimber (Oxford, 1980).

39. Lukács, quoted in Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', p. 131

40. Buchloh, 'Figures of Authority', p. 132.

41. See the exchange of letters between Marcuse and Heidegger in Richard Wolin (ed.), *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge, MA), 1993, pp. 160–164.

42. See Karl-Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, trans. J. Steinberg (Harmondsworth, 1989); George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology. Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (London, 1966).

43. Quoted in Crone, 'Suspicious "Unheimlich" and ambivalence in the appropriation strategy of Anselm Kiefer', as in n. 1.

contemporary painting, which 'now benefits from the ignorance and arrogance of a racket of cultural parvenus who perceive it as their mission to reaffirm the politics of a rigid conservatism . . .'⁴⁰ In contrast, I am arguing that the evolution into a conservative politics was by no means inevitable, even though it was always a possibility. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is also highly problematic to regard Neo-expressionism as a political *mis*-appropriation, since Expressionism was itself originally underdetermined.

Nazism is not *reducible* to conservative romantic anti-capitalism; Lukács recognized that it was informed by a range of ideological positions. Moreover, as Jeffrey Herf has shown, Hitler's régime achieved the peculiar conjuring trick of perpetuating the pastoral discourse of anti-capitalism while at the same time reaching a certain accommodation with the major German industrialists. Nor did Jünger, Nolde or Heidegger, to name but a few, anticipate, will, or later mount an apology for the atrocities perpetrated in the name of the German 'Volk', even though Heidegger exasperated his former student Marcuse by his attempt to 'normalize' the Holocaust.⁴¹ Such reservations aside, undoubtedly without the conservative revolution of the post-war years German fascism would not have taken such a strong hold on the popular imagination, much less achieve the respectability it enjoyed among the right-wing German intellectual establishment. This is a fairly obvious claim to make, and one which has been given much more thorough treatment by historians such as Bracher and Mosse,⁴² but it foregrounds the fact that the distinction between Nazism and non-Nazism was not as clear-cut as many wished to make it. Moreover it suggests that while romanticism was not *necessarily* a prelude to fascism, the indeterminate nature of its critique of modernity allowed both the left and the right to draw on its traditions. It is in this sense, then, that romanticism, or more specifically the romantic anti-capitalism explored above, became implicated in the rise of Nazism.

Germany's Spiritual Heroes

An outline of the problematic relation between romantic anti-capitalism and Nazism is essential to the understanding of Kiefer's work, since I am arguing that it should be read as presenting a prolonged interrogation of this complex intertwining of Fascism and modernism. His work throws up the same kinds of questions about the ambiguities of romantic modernism which I have explored in the previous section, and it is precisely because of the way in which his painting suggests a certain complicity of romantic anti-capitalism in Nazi mythologies of German identity that it has proven more controversial than the output of contemporaries such as A. R. Penck, Georg Baselitz or Markus Lüpertz. In this regard it is of central importance that in Kiefer's work primary points of reference are Romanticism and Expressionism, the two moments in the history of German culture most replete with the ambivalence and ambiguities of anti-capitalism. Here one has also to consider Kiefer's comment, part of which I quoted at the beginning of this article, regarding the cardinal importance of ambivalence. For the notion is first introduced by reference to Heidegger. Here Kiefer tells his interviewer Donald Kuspit that 'I want to show the ambivalence of [Heidegger's] thinking – the ambivalence of all thinking. Ambivalence is the central theme of all my work.'⁴³ My argument is that Kiefer's work embodies the romantic mythology which informed Nazism and also questions it; and this dual position constitutes his own particular ambivalence.

His interrogation begins as early as 1969 in the *Besetzungen*, or *Occupations*, a

series of photographs taken on excursions in Southern France and Italy. In this series of images Kiefer photographs himself in a number of settings, for example, the colonnades of the Coliseum, the Roman Forum at Paestum, facing the sea at Sète or some other unspecified location, in each performing the Nazi salute. The initial impression is one of mockery; indeed, they seem to reveal an element of uncharacteristic humour in Kiefer, and the fact that it is Kiefer performing the salute has led to an interpretation of these images as Kiefer's attempt to come to terms personally with the burden of history.⁴⁴ This sense of an attempt to come to terms with a personal trauma is fortified by the fact that, as Eric Santner observes, the term 'Besetzung' is also central to Freud, usually being translated as 'cathexis'.⁴⁵ Hence, 'One might thus understand Kiefer's series of photographs as a self-conscious performance of an aggressive ideological gesture – the Nazi fantasy of world occupation and domination – with the intention of dislodging the libidinal attachment to this very fantasy.'⁴⁶ This is a central aspect of these photographs, but an over-emphasis on their psychoanalytic function runs the danger of underplaying their more general significance. The identity of the figure in the photographs performing the salute is irrelevant to their interpretation, since the locus of meaning resides in the relation between the gesture and its connotations on the one hand, and the location on the other.

The meaning of the gesture hardly needs elaborating, since it still stands as one of the most potent and memorable symbols of the Nazi régime. However, the juxtaposition of the gesture and specific settings, in particular those consisting of a Roman archaeological site or the sea, does require further analysis. Mark Rosenthal interprets Kiefer's use of the Colosseum ruins as a comment on the transience of political authority, a perfectly plausible explanation, yet one which fails to explain Kiefer's attempt to draw a parallel between the Nazi régime and the Roman Empire in other photographs of the series such as the statue of the Roman general at Montpellier whose gesture is exactly replicated by Kiefer's Nazi salute, or the Forum at Paestum, where the open space is surely used to echo the fondness of the Nazis for mass rallies in large open spaces. In this context the Colosseum is reminiscent of, say, the Olympic stadium in Berlin, with all the historical associations that evokes. Indeed the juxtaposition of the Nazi salute and Roman monuments seems intended not to draw out a contrast, but rather to emphasize a certain continuity, especially given Hitler's penchant for (albeit brutalized) classical monumental architecture.

This suggestion of an internal bond between the catastrophic events of 1933–1945 and the sources of Western culture is made clearer in the photographs where Kiefer performs the Hitler salute while facing the sea. Quite properly, it has been observed that there is a reference to the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, in particular Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Sea of Mist* of 1818 (Fig. 1), yet the point of this reference is crucially mis-read.⁴⁷ Rather than indicating the gulf between what is traditionally regarded as the properly German culture of Romanticism and the 'aberration' of the Third Reich, this tactic is surely stressing instead their continuity. In particular, Kiefer can be read as making explicit the parallel between the Romantic discourse of the sublime in nature and the pastoral ideology of reactionary anti-capitalism underpinning so much of the Nazi belief structure, with its emphasis on the kinship of the German 'Volk' with nature. There are parallels, too, between the absolute ego of the Romantic subject surveying nature and the individual (Hitler) surveying the innumerable ranks of the rallied party faithful through the displacement of sublimity from its foundation in natural spectacle

44. See Mark Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer* (Chicago/Philadelphia, 1987), pp. 16–17.

45. Eric Santner, 'The trouble with Hitler: postwar German aesthetics and the legacy of fascism', *New German Critique*, vol. 57, 1992, pp. 5–24.

46. Santner, 'The Trouble with Hitler', p. 23.

47. See Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, and, more recently, Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995).



Fig. 1. Caspar David Friedrich: *The Wanderer above the Sea of Mist*, 1818, oil on canvas, 98.4 × 74.8 cm. (Photograph: Hamburger Kunsthalle.)

48. The serpent could also be the worm of midgard of Norse mythology, since in a later work entitled simply *Midgard* (1980–85) Kiefer employs the same figure in the foreground.

to the experience of the mass spectacle. Thus in his choice of such a provocative set of images replete with a wide range of cultural connotations, and the salute by the sea is a particularly suggestive example, Kiefer is indicating the embeddedness of Nazi culture in Romanticism, an embeddedness which also accounts for its seductive fascination.

Occupations constitute an early work, and although he continued to work with photographs, his subsequent oeuvre undergoes a shift toward the monumental, ranging from vast mixed-media paintings, to lead sculptures to lead books. This discontinuity of media stands in contrast, however, to the continuity of thematic concern which in the early 1970s is expressed through Kiefer's melancholic obsession with the landscape. This comes to function as a point of congruence of the history of German painting and German political history. The most obvious examples can be found in the series of works of 1973 executed in oil and charcoal which explore the relation between religious and pastoral experience, works such as *Resurrexit*, *Nothung*, *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* and *Father, Son and Holy Ghost*. In these paintings Kiefer deals with themes both from Christian doctrine (the titles alone of *Resurrexit* and *Father, Son and Holy Ghost* suggests their theme, the foreground of the former being occupied by the biblical serpent⁴⁸) and from Germanic history; in *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* (Fig. 2) the named 'heroes' are placed in a wooden hall the design of which is derived from the 'völkisch' Fascist architecture, promoted alongside the better-known monumental works, and which was intended to evoke the heroic, pre-industrial German past. The hall also bears connotations of the heroic past of Germanic legend, with the idea of a hall of heroes strongly reminiscent of Valhalla, the eternal banqueting hall of Norse myth. The prominence of Norse mythology in these paintings recalls the mobilization of Germanic legend by the Nazi régime and also Hitler's favourite composer, Richard Wagner; it is notable that the name of Wagner is placed prominently in the left foreground.

These paintings, with their appeal to a pastoral pre-history, foreground in particular the notion of the pastoral as the arboreal. This recalls the



Fig. 2. Anselm Kiefer: *Germany's Spiritual Heroes*, 1973, oil and charcoal on burlap, mounted on canvas, 307 × 682 cm. (Photograph: Anselm Kiefer, © DACS.)

ideologeme of the forest, the most powerful expression of which can be found in the paintings of Friedrich, who in addition to depicting the flat emptiness of Northern Germany turns, in paintings such as *The Ruins of the Abbey at Eldena* or the earlier *Abbey under Oak Trees* of 1810, employs the forest as a cipher of the transcendent and the divine, the mediating link being the similarity between the forest forms and the Gothic architecture of the churches. Of course this symbolism achieved a wide currency beyond Germany,⁴⁹ yet it gained specific connotations in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century, primarily because of the politicized interpretation of Gothic art as the authentically 'German' art form. This notion of a specifically German spirit in art is exemplified by Wilhelm Worringer's claim in *Form Problems of the Gothic* that 'the Teutons . . . are the *conditio sine qua non* of the Gothic' or by Paul Fechter's notion of the 'Gothic Spirit' as an 'age-old metaphysical necessity of the German people'.⁵⁰ The intertwining of the arboreal-pastoral theme with myths of German identity is further emphasized in *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* through the choice of 'named' heroes, amongst whom are to be found, in addition to Wagner, Frederick the Great, the mystic Mechthild von Magdeburg, Richard Dehmel, Theodor Storm and Caspar David Friedrich himself, all of whom stand as exemplars of the romantic pastoral tradition in German culture. Amongst these figures predominantly from the past is also the name of Joseph Beuys. That Beuys the left radical is included in a list of otherwise conservative figures testifies to the ambivalence of this romantic attachment, an ambivalence which marks the works of Kiefer too. This constellation of ideas based around the ideologeme of the forest found its most potent symbol, perhaps, in the figure of Arminius and the famous defeat of Varus's legions in 9 AD in the Teutoburger Wald. The so-called Hermannsschlacht was taken up early as a symbol of German identity in the growth of a sense of nationhood in the nineteenth century, Arminius being celebrated by Heinrich von Kleist's play *Die Hermanns-schlacht* of 1808, Friedrich's 1812 painting *Graves of the Fallen Warriors of Liberty* and most monumentally, perhaps, by Ernst von Bandel's commemorative column the *Hermannsdenkmal*, completed in 1875 which, sited in the same putative Teutoburger Wald, became an icon of Wilhelmine nationalist ideology. That this quintessentially 'German' victory occurred in the forest could only add to the ideological appropriation of the episode.

In these paintings from the early 1970s one can therefore see how Kiefer is undertaking an interrogation of the intertwining of romanticism, nationalism and Nazism by highlighting common motifs and ideologemes. Of course the existence of a connection between them is well known, especially when placed in the context of Wagner or, for example, Fichte. However, Kiefer's inclusion of Beuys in *Germany's Spiritual Heroes* adds a further dimension, since there is an implication of the much wider role of a pastoral discourse, in which Beuys's adoption of a shamanic identity, though allied with a radical avant-gardist politics also reiterates, and is therefore intimately connected with, a more conservative romanticism that underpinned the primitivist discourses of Expressionism, the anti-capitalism of Lukács or Tönnies, and Nazi myths of the primordality of the German nation. This is not to conflate these examples; crucial differences between them have to be recognised. However, it is to suggest the disturbing ambiguities attending even the work of a figure such as Beuys.

Given the seminal role of Arminius in the emergence of German nationalism, it is no accident that in the later 1970s Kiefer dealt directly with this theme in a number of paintings such as *Varus*, *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* (Fig. 3) and *Ways of Worldly Wisdom – The Hermanns-Schlacht* (Fig. 4). The

49. Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition* (London, 1978), p. 129 ff

50. Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, p. 146; Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus* (Munich, 1914), p. 29.

51. See Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 49.

earliest of these works, *Varus*, consists of a woodscape where, rather than presenting a narrative of the actual events, Kiefer has merely written the names of Varus and Hermann in the foreground, while in the upper reaches of the tree branches stand the names of, amongst others, Fichte, Schleiermacher, Hölderlin, Grabbe, Kleist, Martin (Heidegger) and Stefan (George). Some of these named figures, including Grabbe, Kleist and Klopstock, did actually write on the Arminius myth,⁵¹ but their significance in Kiefer's image is as key figures in German letters, and he is here pointing out the connection between the figure of Arminius and these writers on the basis of their *shared* implication in the ideologies of anti-capitalism and German national identity. Hence Fichte, the most nationalist of the Idealist philosophers, is named alongside Marshall Blücher, the foremost Prussian general of the Napoleonic era, while the name of Klopstock, the founder of German literature, appears next to that of von Schlieffen, whose 'plan' nearly succeeded in defeating France in the First World War. Politics and literature are therefore always brought into contiguity, and this explains, too, why Heidegger and Stefan George feature most prominently, since they in many respects were the most prominent exemplars of reactionary anti-capitalism, yet belong, too, to the tradition reaching back to the Romanticism of Hölderlin (also named) and others, a connection made all the more concrete by Heidegger's near-obsessive concern with Hölderlin's poetry. There is, further, the difficult question of Heidegger's membership of the Nazi party. As I noted above, while Heidegger did not attempt to defend the Nazi régime, becoming quickly disillusioned with Hitler and the National Socialist movement, his thinking remains sufficiently ambivalent to be not entirely free of complicity. In this

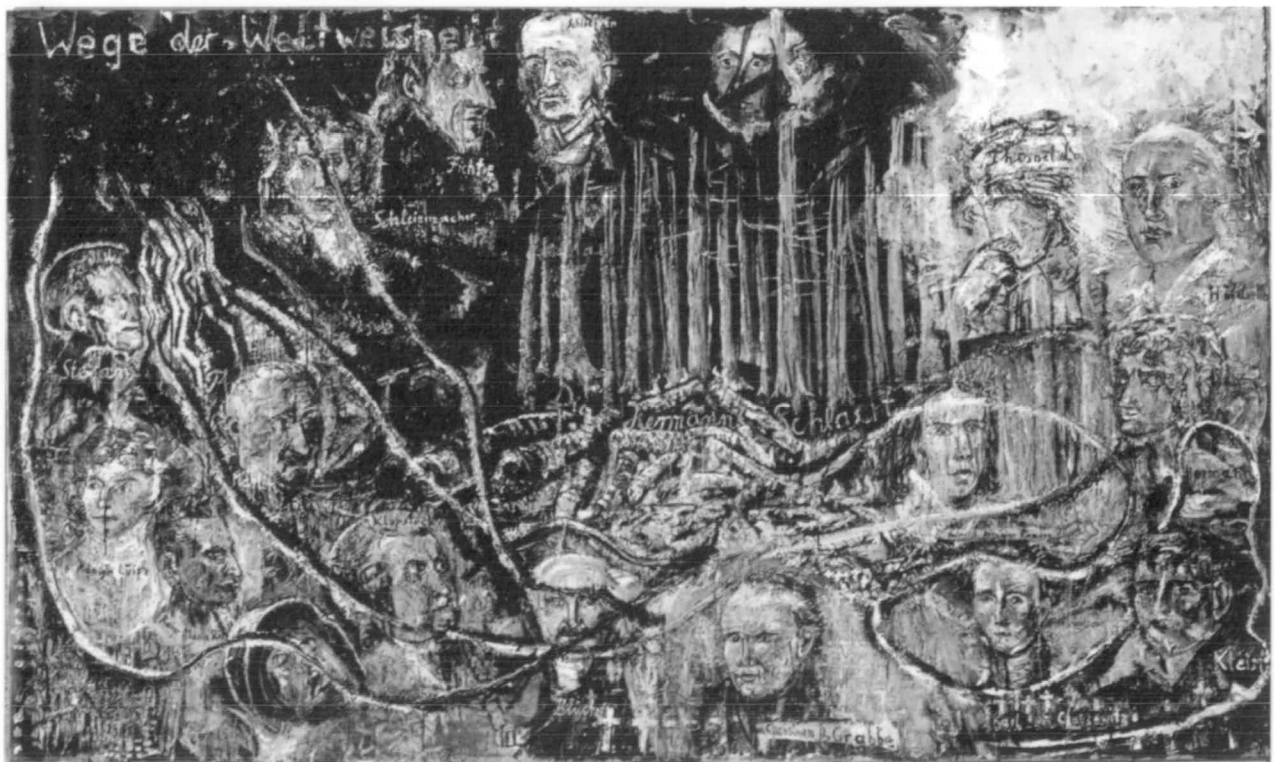


Fig. 3. Anselm Kiefer: *Ways of Worldly Wisdom*, 1976–77. oil, acrylic and shellac on burlap, mounted on canvas, 305 × 500 cm. (Photograph: Anselm Kiefer, © DACS.)



Fig. 4. Anselm Kiefer: *Ways of Worldly Wisdom - The Hermanns-Schlacht*, 1978–80, woodcut with acrylic and shellac, mounted on canvas, 320 × 500 cm. (Photograph: Anselm Kiefer, © DACS.)

light Karl Jaspers's comments on the inherently authoritarian nature of Heidegger's philosophy are not unimportant.⁵²

Shortly after *Varus* Kiefer attempted a second interpretation of the meaning of the ideology of Arminius and of its place within the fabric of German intellectual life, in *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* (1976–7). A similar forest scene is again central, with the names of the 'heroes' of the German spirit, but this time their faces have been painted, bound together by the tentacle-like roots of the trees. *Varus* himself is absent this time, and Clausewitz has been added, but the centrality of the theme of the *Hermannsschlacht* is assured through the placing of the word at the centre of the image, and once again presents the ideology of Arminius and mainstream German intellectual life as inextricably linked. Indeed, Kiefer seems to imply that the world-wisdom of the Germans, through the motif of the roots, lies at the origin of the political violence and its justification symbolized in the event of the battle of the Teutoburger Wald. Marc Rosenthal sees Kiefer as in some sense endorsing the romantic anti-capitalist world-view, noting that 'Kiefer's outlook may be compared to that of Stefan George.'⁵³ There is undoubtedly a strong affinity, but as I have maintained previously, Kiefer maintains a somewhat more complex view; the fascination with a romanticized pastoral myth is partly endorsed, but as in the case of the gestures of *Occupations*, it is also worked through in order to disengage from it. Rosenthal himself admits that 'Kiefer looks at the heroes of his country in a deadpan way',⁵⁴ and it is important to add that alongside his

52. In December 1945 Karl Jaspers was called on to report to the Denazification committee on Heidegger. Amongst his various conclusions he noted that 'Heidegger's manner of thinking, which to me seems in its essence unfree, dictatorial, and incapable of communication would today, in its pedagogical effects, be disastrous.' See Jaspers, 'Letter to the Freiburg University Denazification Committee,' in Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy*, p. 149.

53. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 51.

54. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 51.

55. Gill Perry, "'The Ascent to Nature.' Some Metaphors of "Nature" in Early Expressionist Art,' in Shulamith Behr, David Fanning, Douglas Jarman (eds.), *Expressionism Reassessed* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 53–64.

56. Worringer, 'Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Malerei', *Der Sturm*, vol. 2, p. 1911.

57. On the role of the crystalline as a Romantic motif see Regina Prange, 'The Crystalline', in Keith Hartley (ed.), *The Romantic Spirit in German Art 1790–1990* (Edinburgh, 1994), pp. 155–63.

58. Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge, 1990)

absorption in and fascination with the Arminius legend and the resulting cultural tradition Kiefer also treats it as an object of analytic enquiry.

A final version of this theme, *Ways of Worldly Wisdom – the Hermannsschlacht*, finished in 1980, uses the same central forest motif, surrounded by portraits, though this time they are executed as woodcuts, far greater in number, and unnamed. The whole is overpainted with black spirals, a reference to tree rings, though evidently also a development of the tentacle-root motif of the second version, yet this time fulfilling another function. For the overpainted spirals give the impression of a grid, imposed on the woodcut image to keep its elements held down. Indeed they confront the spectator like a violent imposition on the heads portrayed, formally bound to the thick black trunks of the forest trees, as if to evoke the cycle of political violence both of the Arminius episode itself, and of the contemporary events of the twentieth century which function here as the discrete referent. It is also worth considering the medium Kiefer has employed for this final version, namely the woodcut. Undoubtedly the woodcut includes reference to the use of the medium as a symbol of the pre-modern and of authentic (Germanic) folkishness, of which the best-known example is its reappropriation by the Expressionists. Such a reference would suggest a further dimension to Kiefer's exploration of the politics of romanticism and modernism, for in addition to the allusions to Friedrich, he is now bringing the visual arts of the twentieth century explicitly into the equation. Primarily, in this regard, the work lets itself be read as a commentary on the discourse, so central to Expressionism, of the primitive as a locus of authenticity, and on its place within the romantic anti-capitalism which anticipated Nazism. As Gill Perry has argued, one of the most influential thinkers for pre-Expressionist artists such as Paula Modersohn-Becker or Fritz Mackensen was the right-wing author Julius Langbehn, whose *Rembrandt as Educator* was centred around the mythification of the north German and Dutch peasant, whose spiritual proximity to nature could stand as a point of resistance to the encroachments of modernity.⁵⁵

That Kiefer's work expresses an interest in the inter-relation of modernism and Nazism can be confirmed by turning to one final painting on the Arminius theme entitled *Piet Mondrian – Hermannsschlacht* (1976). The Arminius reference is here reduced to the title itself painted on the work, and the portrayal of a single tree; in other words the picture bears a metonymic relation to the other Arminius paintings. The reference to Mondrian operates beyond the mere title inasmuch as the single tree recalls Mondrian's figurative landscape studies such as *The Red Tree* (1908) and *The Blue Tree* (1909–10). Moreover, overlaid on the tree is a number of vertical and horizontal black slashes reminiscent of Mondrian's slightly later plus and minus paintings. Such a simple reading has to be rendered more complex, however, by consideration of the question as to why Kiefer has made a connection between Mondrian and the Hermannsschlacht. Two readings are possible. The first is to draw in Expressionism, and here a key figure is Worringer again, who, utilizing the romantic fascination with the crystalline, forged a link between primitivism and abstraction through their common use of the rigid geometries of 'primitive' art. In this regard it would be important to mention Worringer's attempt, in *Der Sturm* of 1911, to link Expressionism and Gothic art through their common embodiment of a primitive Germanic 'Ausdruckswollen' or 'expressive drive',⁵⁶ an idea which he restates in *Form Problems of the Gothic*.⁵⁷ Alternatively, one can argue that Kiefer's painting draws attention to the problematic political implications of Mondrian's work. As has been argued by Mark Cheetham,⁵⁸ there is a distinctly disturbing dimension to the theory

sustaining Mondrian's move to abstraction, based on an obsession with purity and exclusion, an obsession which has all too obvious parallels elsewhere in history. With either of these readings, Kiefer is making a similar point, namely, he is extending the extent of the original equation of romanticism and Expressionism by including the early steps towards abstraction. If the figurative painting characteristic of German modernism before the First World War is paradoxically implicated in the reactionary ideology sustaining Fascism, so too is the abstraction often claimed as an exemplar of anti-totalitarian art. Wim Beeren interprets the reference to Mondrian as indicating an 'indulgent attitude' towards the Dutch painter.⁵⁹ My own argument, however, is to stress the ambivalence of Kiefer's position; that if there is an indulgence towards Mondrian it is also tempered by the same distance I noted above in the case of the other *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* paintings. Central to these paintings, therefore, is both an absorption with the myths of Nature, of German identity coupled with a reflexivity, in which, from the point of view of a meta-discourse, the place and origins of those myths are subjected to scrutiny. This reflexivity underpins a number of other paintings by Kiefer from the 1970s that depict the landscape. I am referring primarily to works such as *Cockchafer, fly*, *March Heath*, or *Painting=Burning*. These images centre around the Pomeranian landscape, but in addition to depicting the landscape itself, they are, I am arguing, also depictions of the *painting* of the Pomeranian landscape and the connotations of that painting. A recurrent topos is a self-evidently romantic landscape of a type familiar from Friedrich, yet one which bears the very obvious marks of violence, of war. These works, Huyssen suggests, 'hover between landscape painting, history painting, and an allegorization of art and artist in German history'.⁶⁰ In other words, they are their own allegories, organised around the meta-discursive reflexivity I mentioned above; they consist of re-workings of the romantic landscape from the perspective of knowing what the sustaining beliefs of the romantic pastoral vision became. Furthermore, the landscape is made specific, so as to make the connection between the subject and history unambiguous. *Cockchafer, fly*, for example, bears at the top the nursery-rhyme which reads;

Malkäfer flieg'	Cockchafer, fly
der Vater Ist Im Krieg	Father is at war
die Mutter Ist Im Pommerland	Mother is in Pomerania
Pommerland Ist abgebrannt	Pomerania is all burnt up

The war-time rhyme thus contains an overt reference to the war-time burning of Pomerania, which was, incidentally, also the birthplace of Caspar David Friedrich. In addition, Pomerania was lost to Poland as a consequence of the war, and its loss therefore remains as a permanent reminder of the war, long after the marks of its burning have been erased. Kiefer again inhabits a space of ambiguity; on the one hand, the melancholy of the painting suggests a conservative nostalgia for the restoration of a lost part of Germany. At the same time, however, the lost object of longing turns out to be a site of destruction, as if to undermine the denial of history sustaining the pastoral myth.

In these paintings, then, Kiefer presents allegorical landscapes, oppressive through the use of a high horizon; the primitivising technique, while symbolic of the brutalism of their subject, also serves to underline the interconnection of the romantic modernist discourse of authenticity and the unfolding of actual historical events. That they also comprise a reflexive interrogation of the recent history of painting is most clear from works such as *Painting=Burning* or

59. Wim Beeren, 'Anselm Kiefer Recuperation of history', in Wim Beeren, *Anselm Kiefer. Bilder 1986ñ1980* (Amsterdam, 1986), p. 10

60. Huyssen, 'Anselm Kiefer: the terror of history, the temptation of myth', p. 36

61. Marc Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 60.

62. Paul Celan, 'Argumentum e Silentio', in Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt a. M., 1983), vol. I, p. 183.

Nero Paints (Fig. 5), in which the same oppressive landscape is overpainted with an artist's palette. In contrast to the notion, for example, that the palette is 'sacred' and that it symbolizes the 'rebirth of painting following its demise',⁶¹ I am arguing that these paintings represent painting's enmeshing and complicity in the unfolding of historical events. The fascination with the melancholic landscape is mediated by the recognition of the danger of that seduction.

Words

'To everyone the word

.....

To everyone the word which sang to them then froze solid'⁶²

The works I have hitherto discussed, many of which are to be counted among the better known examples from Kiefer's oeuvre, belong broadly under the category of 'painting.' At the same time, Kiefer has produced work that draws on an increasingly wide range of materials. From the late 1980s onwards there are, for example, the enormous lead sculptures, including the *Zweistromland*, or *Mesopotamia* (1985/89), *Poppy and Memory* (1989), and *The Breaking of the*



Fig. 5. Anselm Kiefer: *Nero Paints*, 1974, oil on canvas, 220 × 300 cm. (Photograph: Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, Munich, © DACS.)

Vessels (1989–90). In addition large numbers of his ‘paintings,’ such as *Tree with Palette* (1978), *The Mastersingers* (1981) or *Iron Path* (1986) combine paint, lead, iron, straw, sand, olive branches and photographs. Furthermore, Kiefer has continually produced ‘books’, the first attempt being in 1969 when he made two books on *The Flooding of Heidelberg*.⁶³ Of these other works I intend to discuss the Kiefer’s books and his mixed-media paintings, and I shall turn first to the five ‘books’, *March Sand*, of 1977 and 1978, each consisting of a number of photographic landscapes, overlaid with varying amounts of sand and bound together in a single volume. These have been interpreted as an attempt by Kiefer to communicate the materiality of the land, yet the thematic similarity to the landscape paintings suggests that this understanding should be qualified. In particular the books of *March Sand* can be, as it were, ‘read’ as a form of comment on the romantic tradition which aspires to just that goal, namely the unmediated presentation of nature in its absolute presence.

I noted earlier the centrality to romantic anti-capitalism of the topos of immediate and pre-reflective experience. As Paul de Man has argued, in the poetic language of Hölderlin or Stefan George, words, from being mediated signs of the real, are transformed into co-originary, literal *names* for objects.⁶⁴ This conception of language aims to banish the metaphor from poetic discourse on account of its introduction of difference between being and language. Hence, for Hölderlin ‘an authentic word . . . fulfils its highest function in naming being as a presence’.⁶⁵ In the writing of George, Hölderlin and, more recently, Paul Celan, one therefore sees a poetic inflection of the more general anti-capitalist motif of a pre-modern intimacy with the world, which stands in opposition to the alienating ‘homelessness’ of the generalizing abstraction of modernity. This is evident in the early thought on language of Walter Benjamin, which offers in essence a theology of the name, where originary words bring things into being, and where ‘the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact, and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic’.⁶⁶ It is evident, too, in Adorno and Horkheimer, who likewise mourn the loss of the name through the process of abstraction, asserting that ‘dream and image were not merely signs for the thing in question but were bound up with it by similarity or names’.⁶⁷ It forms a central element of Heidegger’s thinking, from his critique of the rootlessness of modern abstract ‘gossip’ in *Being and Time* to his later idea, in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, of poetry as the saying of being, treating poetry as a form of language which overcomes the mediations of language. Finally, the quest for immediacy recurs after the second world war in the poetry of Celan, where, to quote Peter Szondi, ‘language does not speak about something but “speaks” itself’.⁶⁸ The poetry of Paul Celan is of especial importance for Kiefer. The latter produced a series of paintings that treated Celan’s poem ‘Death Fugue’. It is thus hardly a novel venture to bring the two into conjunction. However, I shall be argue that the precise relation between the two has been mis-read, for it is within the context of Kiefer’s much wider engagement with the romantic modernist quest for immediacy and authenticity that his interest in Celan has to be placed.

In *March Sand*, therefore, the background of the romantic modernist aim to overcome the mediations of representation informs Kiefer’s own exploration of the possibilities of communicating the landscape in its full materiality. This background also explains Kiefer’s fascination with the book format. The book has often played an important role as a modernist strategy, and one might think of Max Ernst’s *Une Semaine de bonté* or John Heartfield’s collaboration with Kurt Tucholsky in *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*. In Kiefer the book

63 For a fuller history of Kiefer’s interest in books see Götz Adrani (ed.), *The Books of Anselm Kiefer 1969–90*, trans. B. Mayor (New York, 1991).

64 Paul de Man, ‘Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image’, in de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, 1984), pp. 1–17.

65. de Man, ‘Intentional structure’, p. 3

66. Walter Benjamin, ‘On language as such and on the language of man’, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, p. 71.

67. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 11

68. Peter Szondi, ‘The poetry of constancy Paul Celan’s translation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 105’ in Peter Szondi, *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays*, trans. H. Mendelsohn (Manchester, 1986), p. 169.

across the image, including Rheinsberg, Paretz and Winterhausen. Again the same contrast between the immediacy of the sand and the abstract 'objectivity' of the photograph is apparent, but the clash is made all the more acute by Kiefer's inscription of geographical names. The fact that only they give the landscape any kind of orientation undermines the romantic myth of a secret affinity with the land which had been a central object of Nazi ideology and which had been opposed to the disorienting effects of modernity. The mixing of media serves to explore the types of representation available, playing off the iconic photograph and the symbolic words against the non-representational sand overlaid on the surface of the image. Given my reading of Kiefer's books within the context of the modernist discourse of the naming word, it is also tempting to reconsider, too, his frequent use of the word 'Weg', meaning 'way' or 'path', in his titles, given its central role in the title of later works by Heidegger such as *Holzwege* (literally, 'Forest Tracks'), or *Unterwegs zur Sprache* ('On the Way to Language'). This preoccupation is also explored in *Burning of the District of Buchen* of 1975, where the burning of Buchen, site of a military installation, is represented quite literally through carbonized paintings which, bound into single volume, constitute the work. Later examples of this preoccupation with language and the book can also be seen in the simply titled *The Book* of 1979–85, in which a zinc and lead book is superimposed on a flat, featureless landscape.

More recently the monumental *Mesopotamia* or *Zweistromland*, consists of a number of lead 'books' containing decayed landscape photographs supported by steel bookcases. The sense of a link between language and the primordial, symbolized by the landscape, is maintained, with the sheer weight of the books of *Mesopotamia* indicating the burden of history which that link involves. Kiefer's use of lead is also of some significance, for his references to alchemy have often been remarked on. Not only does Kiefer frequently use lead, both in his sculptures and also in paintings, but also some of his works refer to specific alchemical processes: *Nigredo* (1984), for example, refers to the first stage in the transmutation of base materials into gold. 'The metal or material first had to be broken down into a "body": a degeneration that might be brought about by fusing it with sulphur. This step was called blackening, *melanosis* [the Latin 'nigredo' means the same].'⁶⁹ Alchemy fits into the context I have outlined above, in which representation is held to be based on affinity between objects, rather than a more abstract semiotic relation. Central to alchemy was the logic of sympathetic participation, in which all elements in the world were held to be bound together by occult affinities or antipathies;⁷⁰ it was this system of mutual participation that allowed materials to be transmuted into each other. Kiefer's attention to alchemical practices obviously goes beyond the question of romantic modernism, but nevertheless indicates again his interest in the notion of unmediated affinity as the fundamental relation between objects and between humans and the world.

Within the context of the modernist critique of abstract language, with its concomitant quest for a restoration of pre-modern immediacy, space should be given to the consideration of Kiefer's practice of including titles *in* the works, rather than maintaining them at a discrete distance. Commenting on this feature, Andrew Benjamin writes 'The words . . . open the possibility of a presence that eschews the distinction between the literal and the figural,'⁷¹ inasmuch as the practice disrupts the boundary setting apart work from frame, ergon from parergon. Yet if it is the case that Kiefer is disrupting such a distinction, his goal is not the overcoming of this difference in order to open up a new discourse of representation, but rather in order to erase it altogether.

69. Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London, 1970), p. 112.

70. The operation of a law of resemblance has been analysed by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* (London, 1989).

71. Benjamin, 'Painting Words: Kiefer and Celan' in Andreas Papadakis (ed.), *New Art* (London, 1991), p. 120.

72. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence. A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott (Chicago, 1994).

73. Rosenthal, *Anselm Kiefer*, p. 95.

His paintings seek to exclude the figural in order to give the words a literal presence in the picture, to make them as fully present as is the material landscape. In his works the word ceases to be a mere sign, external to its referent by a fatal act of mediation, and becomes instead equiprimordial with the world as a constituent part of the works. Here, too, it is important to draw out all of the connotations embedded in Kiefer's painting *The Iconoclastic Controversy* (1981). This work has been commented upon numerous times and its overt reference to the war, consisting of three tanks converging on a bomb crater, clearly brings to mind the suppression of modernist culture by the Nazi régime. The title also brings into play the Byzantine controversy of the eighth century concerning the possibility of depicting human figures. This historical fact, noted by all, needs to be investigated further, however. For at the heart of the controversy lay the question of what representation amounted to. As Hans Belting has shown in his monumental study of the Byzantine cult of the icon, the Byzantine image was not merely a representation but also the place of the literal presence of the represented figure.⁷² Hence the persistence of the image-cult which, in terms of a semiotic understanding of the image, comes across as inexplicable. Indeed it is probable, as Rosenthal has suggested, that Kiefer's repeated practice of naming figures rather than depicting them – and *Varus* offers a clear example – indicates that Kiefer maintained a consistent interest in the Byzantine debate, since such a practice was endorsed as an alternative to representing figures visually. By virtue of the historical reference in its title, therefore, Kiefer's *Iconoclastic Controversy* again thematizes the idea of an unmediated literal presencing. This is evident, too, in the way that Kiefer engages in a visual ambiguity reminiscent of Picasso and Braque's visual punning; the black lines painted over the wooden veneer that dominates the foreground of the work conjure up both a tree trunk and the painter's palette.

The use of sand in Kiefer's works of the 1970s opens the way towards his much more frequent and well-known use of straw in his paintings. This has been interpreted as comparable to the practices of Italian Arte Povera.⁷³ Despite certain superficial similarities, however, this is largely missing the point, not only because Kiefer shows little interest in the Modernist concerns of artists such as Merz, Fabro or Ceroli, but also because it ignores the specificity of their employment by Kiefer as an investigation into the literalism of the romantic anti-capitalist tradition discussed above. In *Nuremberg*, for example, sub-titled *Festival Field*, Kiefer has literally brought the field onto the canvas through the inclusion of straw which by its enmeshing with paint produces a muddy field on the pictorial surface. Indeed the distinction between the surface and the plane has been erased. This is not in order to shatter the illusions of an Albertian mimesis, as if to foreground representation as a semiotic process; rather, it is recall the romantic ideal of overcoming the *mediation* of representation in the name of being. The significance of this formal procedure matches the subject matter: Nuremberg, with its indelible historical meaning. *Nuremberg – Festival Field* binds together the belief in a primordial unity of being and representation to the trauma of history, and hence Kiefer is again bringing into contiguity the pastoralism of romantic modernism and Nazism. This theme recurs in other similar works such as *The Mastersingers on the Festival Field* (1981–2) and the two versions of *The Mastersingers* (1981), which make the connection more explicit by use of the Wagnerian motif with its unmistakable political and historical connotations. Kiefer's use of straw gives an added dimension to his critical articulation of these thematic concerns here inasmuch as his use of a decidedly unimpressive material deflates the metaphysical profundity ascribed to the unmediated presentation of being, a

kind of *reductio ad absurdum* which could easily be brought to bear, for example, on Heidegger's near mystification in his essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, of a (putative) pair of peasant shoes in van Gogh's painting.

I noted earlier the importance of Paul Celan to Kiefer. Most notable is Kiefer's repeated treatment of what is probably Celan's best known poem, namely the 'Todesfuge' or 'Death Fugue'. Written in 1945, it compares the fates of the Jewish woman Sulamith, reduced to ashes, and the German woman Margarethe. Margarethe bears the characteristics of the 'typical' Aryan woman, not only through the golden colour of her hair, but also by virtue of the fact that her very name evokes the quintessential work of German literature, Goethe's *Faust*. In contrast, the ashen hair of Sulamith functions both as the marker of her difference, in other words, the darkness of her hair, and also as the indication of her ultimate fate, namely cremation; as Celan puts it, 'as smoke you will rise in the air'.⁷⁴ In his paintings on the subject of the 'Death Fugue', including *Margarethe, Your Golden Hair Margarethe*, and *Your Golden Hair Margarethe – Midsummer's Night*, Kiefer represents the hair of the German woman with straw. In formal terms *Margarethe*, executed in 1981, differs very little from *The Mastersingers* of the same year, with the straw rising vertically like so many plants, only to be ablaze at the top. In using straw in this series of paintings Kiefer has subtly altered the meaning of Celan's poem. As I noted earlier in reference to *The Mastersingers*, the straw bears connotations of the discourse of authenticity and primordiality central to the tradition I have been discussing. By equating Margarethe's 'golden hair' with straw, Kiefer is subverting the myths of Aryan racial supremacy and also bringing into play the various ideological discourses sustaining such myths, a move reinforced by the flammability of the straw, which indicates, too, the equality of Margarethe's golden hair and the burnt ashen hair of Sulamith. In this respect it is notable that the 'stems' of burning straw representing Margarethe's hair are accompanied by dark shadows which, as has been observed, surely indicate the 'ashen hair' of Sulamith. These works thus continue the thematic concerns of Kiefer's other mixed-media works discussed above, in particular those using sand and books, which explore the intertwining of romantic anti-capitalism, specifically its impulse to authenticity, and the politics of Nazism.

If the 'Death Fugue' paintings continue Kiefer's meditation on the implication of conservative romanticism in the growth of the Nazi régime, they pass comment on Paul Celan, too, as an author profoundly affected by both German history and that same romantic tradition. While he can be placed within the poetic tradition outlined by de Man, Celan was also intensely ambivalent over the possibility of such an unmediated 'saying', not least on account of the burden of guilt of such a discourse. Celan's best-known poem after 'Death Fugue' is entitled 'Todtnauberg', and it is based on a visit Celan made, at Heidegger's invitation, to the mountain hut in Todtnauberg in July 1967 where Heidegger had written *Being and Time* some forty years previously. By all accounts the meeting was a disappointment to Celan. In the poem, commenting on his entry in the Visitor's Book, Celan writes of 'the line, inscribed / in that book, about / a hope, today, of a thinking man's / coming word'.⁷⁵ The 'coming word' Celan refers to is commonly held to be the admission of guilt from Heidegger regarding his implication in Nazism. Celan's desire to see in Heidegger such an admission has an autobiographical significance, too, inasmuch as it implies that Celan's own fascination with the limits of authenticity in poetic discourse, a fascination replete with Heideggerian connotations, would thereby also be absolved of guilt.

74 Paul Celan, *Poems*, trans. M. Hamburger (London, 1980), p. 53.

75 Celan, *Poems*, p. 85.

76. See Georg-Michael Schulz, *Negativität in der Dichtung Paul Celans* (Tübingen, 1977), p. 55 ff

77. Andreas Huyssen, 'Kiefer in Berlin', *October*, vol. 62, 1992, pp. 84–101.

78. Quoted in Charles Haxthausen, 'The world, the book and Anselm Kiefer', *Burlington Magazine*, vol. 133, no. 1065, p. 851

79. Eric Santner, 'The Trouble with Hitler: postwar German aesthetics and the legacy of fascism'.

Ultimately, Celan's poetry exceeds the question of merely personal guilt to address the doubt over whether such a redemptive 'word' is even available, a doubt which causes his poetry to linger on the threshold between language and its limit.⁷⁶ And this yearning for the 'coming word' coupled with the sense of its elusiveness reinforces the sense of a parallel between Celan and Kiefer. For were Kiefer simply engaged in a critique of romantic anti-capitalism from an external position, his works would not display the fascination with Nazi iconography and with German history which has made him such a controversial figure, a fascination which has 'amounted to a kind of original sin of the post-Auschwitz era'.⁷⁷ Instead, his work is imbued with a profound melancholic desire to maintain the primordial vision accompanied by the recognition of that vision's implication in the guilt of history. Here one can make a comparison between Kiefer's own statement that 'I, however, do not believe that in the beginning was the Word. The world goes on without concepts',⁷⁸ and the evidence from his large output that such a disavowal is not wholly believed.

Conclusion

Despite the vast literature on Anselm Kiefer I have, in this paper, attempted to go beyond many current interpretations which, while stressing the importance of history to his work, tend to treat it as an abstract fact to be overcome, and according to which Kiefer appears to confront the Nazi past by contrasting it with the redemptive power of traditional German culture. Against this I have suggested that the general thrust of Kiefer's work from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, far from emphasizing the *distance* between Nazi Germany and mainstream German post-Enlightenment culture, actually explores the links which suggest their proximity. Kiefer's position in this process is ambiguous. That he repeatedly returns to the landscape and the topic of German history, coupled with the materials he includes in his paintings and his books, suggests that he stands as the latest representative of this romantic anti-capitalist tradition. His work shares the political ambiguity of that tradition; in the same way that the one tradition could develop into such diverse modes of thought as those of Ernst Jünger, on the one hand and, for example, Ernst Bloch on the other, so too Kiefer's work has been subjected to a diversity of critical responses. However, Kiefer's use of motifs, such as the painter's palette, his deadpan images of Germany's 'spiritual heroes', his mixing of media, with the probing questions that raises, distances him sufficiently from the tradition to permit him to be regarded as interrogating it, *but only just*. While his paintings refer to the historical violence of the primitive German landscape, and thus hold it at a certain distance, his return to certain stereotypical romantic themes again and again, including the burnt landscape, Germanic and Norse myth, pastoral and mystical experience, testifies to the perpetual fascination which this subject exerts over him. Indeed it is in this context that his work has been seen as sharing certain commonalities with the films of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg who, as Eric Santner has indicated, regarded history as capable of being overcome only through the proper process of mourning, a process which had been taboo in post-war Germany.⁷⁹ Kiefer's oeuvre is in one sense, therefore, providing an explanation for the rise of Nazism, inasmuch as it draws out the community of interests shared by Nazism and the longer established currents of reactionary anti-capitalism I have discussed earlier. At the same time that it articulates this critical attitude to the history of German culture, however, Kiefer's work also displays a profound ambivalence. It is as if to say that what for Kiefer is most terrifying about German culture proves also to be what is

most absorbing; to borrow the phrase of Huyssen, Kiefer's work explores the temptation of myth while also recognizing the terror of history. Kiefer's paintings and 'books' dwell in this ambiguous space of repulsion and attraction, and it is this very ambiguity which has provoked such a range of hostile responses.