



THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

ANSELM KIEFER

SOLUTIONS THROUGH CONTRADICTIONS ?

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLIMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

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1987

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER | |
| I THE SECOND WORLD WAR | 3 |
| EFFECT ON LITERATURE AND ART IN GERMANY | |
| II ANSELM KIEFER | 9 |
| SYMBOLS OF HEALING | |
| III PROBLEMS OF INTERPRETATION THROUGH ALLEGORY | 13 |
| IV SYMBOLS OF CONFLICT | 19 |
| INFLUENCE OF ROMANTIC THOUGHT | |
| V THE GERMAN BAROQUE | 29 |
| AN AFINITIVE IDENTITY | |
| CONCLUSION | 44 |
| | |
| FOOTNOTES | 46 |
| ILLUSTRATIONS | 49 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 51 |

INTRODUCTION

Anselm Kiefer's paintings of desolate wastelands and empty interiors have aroused much discussion. They have been interpreted as visions of human spiritual alienation, as visionary aspirations capable of removing the sterility from modern life, as deliberate contradictory devices, as celebrations of human existence and even as provocative images advancing towards a threatening ideology. All such interpretations are indeed perhaps valid and could readily be applied to most of Kiefer's painting. However it would be merely supposition to impose any of these meanings upon the work and we could never be assured that we had arrived at the proper conclusion. Such interpretations can therefore be regarded as merely speculative. Kiefer's meanings remain enigmatic and it is indeed possible that they remain enigmatic to himself. A conclusion is not available.

In Kiefer's vast landscapes space appears as endless. As it pushes backwards and forwards into the distance, its destination is unknown. Kiefer sees his country torn apart, he sees his culture crumble and yet try as he may to rectify this damage, one gets a feeling of his awareness of the futility of his task. The main theme within his work seems to be that struggle for the unobtainable.

It has been proclaimed of Kiefer's painting that in bringing back Germany's past that he hopes to remove the guilt from the German consciousness. But even when this hope does appear it is never conclusive, it is always contradicted by another element or by the ambiguity inherent within the ideological element itself. By making such a hypothesis of Kiefer's painting and thus stressing his intention to complete a task this notion sets Kiefer up as a symbol of hope. But Kiefer's inability to articulate his images, to set his options in a singular definite direction fail to convince us of the validity of such statements.

In fact Kiefer rather than confronting the issue, through allegory evades it, perhaps in the realisation that his task is indeed impossible. The result is melancholic. It seems therefore that Kiefer is engaged just as much in declaring the bankruptcy of his tradition as he is in attempting to recover and reinvest it with that which was lost.

We can assume therefore that no conclusion could in fact be possible when ones options are being pulled simultaneously in opposite directions. The result is confusion and alienation and the only escape is perhaps to turn into oneself. If Kiefer's paintings are escapist in the sense that he refuses to convict himself by deliberately evading the issue of his personal stance within the work, then we cannot possibly consider any claims that postulate Kiefer as a healing force within society. However if Kiefer's intentions are not as such then his stance as the noble hero or martyr figure become purely acts of indulgence on his own part, where he takes on the role of the redeeming artist or indeed the God figure capable of both redemption and destruction within the singular act. His own identity takes the leading role. If so Then perhaps Carter Ratcliff is not so far wrong when he speaks of the will of the artist in contemporary figurative art claiming sovereign position. From this it also seems that Kiefer in refusing to take sides, opens his work up for the possibility of being adopted to ideological purposes. In taking no side his paintings drift as empty vessels waiting to be filled with reactionary interests.

CHAPTER I

Karl Marx's statement that the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living is a telling premonition of much of the 20th century. Two world wars have involved mass conscription, caused the extermination of millions and brought guilt and bombardment on civilian populations. In Germany after the Second World War, writers and artists turned away from Germanic or Teutonic associations, unable to face the guilt of being German and as in most of Western Europe, American cultural influence was paramount. From the 1960's on American styles swept through the art world, Abstract Expressionism, Post Painterly Abstraction, Pop Art, Minimal Art and Super Realism. It was probably not until the 1960's that the ascendancy of National Socialism and Hitler's rise to power, the elements of an unacceptable past could reasonably become accepted within education and schooling. The result was a strong feeling especially among the younger generation that they had to deal with something they did not quite feel responsible for, but did not quite know how to get rid of. In denying it's past because of the hideous crimes of fascism, Germany had also denied the power of the subconscious and of the emotions.

"We have blasphemy on our sides. In my eyes can be seen the altar of nature, the sacrifice of flesh, bleeding from stumps and ariel roots. With solemn obsessiveness, radical gestures - we want to excavate ourselves, abandon ourselves irrevocably. We live through endless ecstasy. My secret paranoia or paranoia." (1)

Baselitz was also a contemporary of Kiefer's. For their generation the division of Germany was to become the most traumatic event of their childhood.

It is this sense of loss and incompleteness together with the repressed history of Germany that Anselm Kiefer takes as his subject, as do many of the Neo Expressionists such as Baselitz, Penck and Immendorf. This is also the subject which informs the writings of much contemporary german literature. Such literature deals with the inability of the german race to forget this immediate past. For these writers the past has also taken the shape of an oppressive guilt.

Within much contemporary german art and literature there is a feeling of responsibility to deal with this issue. The younger generation, anxious for the future of their country and the german race are naturally interested in their inheritance and are therefore counters against the older generation, who having experienced the atrocities for themselves would all too understandably wish to forget. They are however, also counters against a new generation that indeed wishes never to find out. The most formative experiences of today's artists and writers in germany have been negative. There are signs however, that some of these writers and artists are seeking a way out of these themes of annihilation into a region where the deepest concern is for a way of life that will reflect an utterly changed world before the end of the century. There is a sense of responsibility for maintaining and looking for new stable values, whilst rejecting anything that is bound down to the institutions of the past. There is a conscious attempt to hold apart the life of the individual from the life of the state. This deep-lying distrust feeds on a sense of duty to engage art and literature with the problems of the day. For these artists and writers freedom is threatened , not only by external pressures but also by internal decay. One senses a struggle for an identity that remains buried within the past, which in turn lies both literally and metaphorically buried beneath the present.

A sense of this spiritual maiming can be found in the work of the German novelist Heinrich Boll born 1917 in Cologne, conscripted into the army to suffer

"The frightful fate of being a soldier and having
to wish that the war might be lost" (2)

For Boll the crushing of the spirit was a much greater affliction than the physical threat of being a soldier and facing death. Boll like Kiefer does not take sides, he speaks of troops being rushed into action in brightly coloured furniture vans, who are equally as doomed as the Jews being similarly transported in the opposite direction. Boll's stories are full of people for whom the war can never be over. They do not suffer guilt but rather a paralysis of the will that no period of time however long can reverse.

"But we went on with the train and the fare got more
and more expensive, the speed grew faster and faster,
the inspectors more and more suspicious" (3)

For Boll as for Kiefer, war was to pervert and shatter moral order far beyond the area of physical destruction. In the short story 'Die Botschaft' Boll concludes - "Then I knew that the war would never be over as long as somewhere there still bled a wound that had been inflicted!" For Boll's characters the past is the time before the war, the present the time since and between this this past and present lies a limbo, a gulf that swallowed what might have been. The tone in Boll's writing is generally subdued, resigned, melancholy, often morbid, but also humorous and ironic and not entirely without hope. It is however, in the poetry of the Jewish Roumanian writer and poet Paul Celan, born 1920 that Anselm Kiefer possibly finds a voice that most clearly resembles his own.

Celan out of his experience of exile and horror has managed to fashion a German poetry whose compelling force has been acknowledged even by those who are most disturbed by its directness and simultaneously its all too willful obscurity. In Celan's poetry the central suggestions of disaster, defeat and foiled searchings for metaphysical meaning are inescapable and there is no mistaking his involvement. Celan's language is sinister and like Kiefer's conjure's up memories that are hidden and buried. But in both a sense of apocalyptic intensity and frenzy creep into certain works coupled with excitement and anticipation.

In "Todesfuge" the poem that inspired Kiefer and probably Celan's most recognised poem, we are caught in a melody felt to be the dance of death. The subject is the torture and death of those concentration camp victims whose suffering continuously haunts Celan's poetry.

"Black milk of the dawn we drink you at nightfall
we drink you and we drink you at noon and morning we
drink you at night we drink and drink we are
digging a grave in the sky it is ample to live there."

The "we" in the opening line identifies the reader as well as the poet with the suffering of the Jews and the Surrealist metaphor "black milk" suggests a perversion in the order of nature, a symbol of a paradoxical and hideously distorted world.

The final lines of the poem suggest an image of two people fatally involved with one another.

"Your golden hair Margarete your ashen hair
Shulamith" (4)

This final vision of ashen hair, of the irreparable harm done to the Jewish people colours the whole of Celan's poetry. Celan's thinking is however also optimistic, in the sense that like Kiefer he attempts to thrust through time Celan directs his poetry towards an audience in the hope that he may address a 'thou' or a 'reality'. In this sense Celan confronts the difficulty of finding a person that he may address, for Celan this person has yet to be found and perhaps even yet to be created. Freidrich Nietzsche however, deliberately set out to prove the non-existence and the impossibility of creating such a person. Although Celan's searchings are more optimistic one still senses the inherent conflict and his awareness of the possible futility of his task. The result of this conflict is a tendency to fall silent.

With Paul Celan we can come to a better understanding of Anselm Kiefer. In both we sense the lack of certainty within their own positions, the sense of inherent danger and possible impending doom, frustrated hopes of rescue and above all, the oppressive presence of an ineluctable past.

An image of a cage or fence appears in Celan's later poetry and suggests a prison of the soul, with an eye peering through in search of communication.

A similar image appears in Kiefer's 'Wolundied' (fig I) in the form of a cage door. The suggestion is possibly similar. In Celan's poetry we see a natural God Seeker who has failed to find God yet cannot leave off calling into nothingness and emptiness. We possibly get a similar impression from Kiefer, of a man who desperately seeks communion with others but who finds himself forced again and again to a mode of utterance that is private, of a man who possibly tries to speak directly but finds himself ever stumbling over his words and so is driven to devices that conjure rather than state.

It seems that for Kiefer, Celan and Boll that the fate of the Jew has in fact become the fate of humanity in our time. Kiefer's paintings of scorched, desolate landscapes and empty Fascist interiors starkly convey the contemporary problem of man's alienation to the world and possibly to himself.

In his sombre and perhaps gloomy paintings landscape for Kiefer is often the sight of meaning and identity. It is noticable that since 1971 Kiefer has rarely painted a figure in his landscapes, in preference he draws them emblematically or writes a name or names accross the canvas. It is as though the artist must remake the landscape before he can paint a figure within it. This difficulty of placing a figure within an environment to which it can relate is most definitely a contemporary problem. In formalist aesthetic terms this can be seen as a figure ground problem, how to unite motif to background. Philosophically however this is a problem about our relationship to the world. It would seem therefore that Kiefer is dealing with a much more ambitious, complex and universal problem than we were led to believe.

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CHAPTER II

In his attempt to remove the guilt from the German consciousness Anselm Kiefer suggests a willingness to believe again. His work shows not only the symptoms of alienation but an engagement in the act of purification. He makes an effort to regain the spiritual dignity of art. It is as stated by Suzi Gablik in "Has Modernism Failed" as though he were opening up the "Fenestra Aeternitatis, the window into eternity and spiritual clairvoyance" which in our society has been closed for a long time. Although Kiefer's burned and parched landscapes, often encrusted with real hay and straw are metaphors for a devastated landscape they simultaneously symbolise hope for a regeneration of this landscape. Like his mentor Joseph Beuys, Kiefer would like to bring back the healing function of art. Both believed that the only way to create significantly political art today is by making the visionary powers central to the theme. This widening of the creative field by grounding oneself in transformational vision is the only thing that according to Gablik can eliminate the spiritual sterility from modern life and possibly save the world from stagnation. However the possible capability of art in saving the world is indeed questionable.

Kiefer's provocative images attempt to assimilate the burden of German culture, its agony and its defeat by transforming shame into renewal. For Kiefer art once again can be the great redeemer and a cure for the mistakes of the past. Although one may sense the suggestion of a source outside this world Kiefer's sources and concerns are however firmly rooted within the world. One senses that all has not been lost and that something even from the shadows of Hitlerian evils will emerge again.

The fact that transformation is necessary to Kiefer is enough to inform us of his awareness of the serious damages caused by the forces of

pollution. The fear of pollution may be interpreted as symbolizations of any material that is denied full expression psychologically, socially or culturally. The theories of Freud concerning repression of instinctual drives, the theory of classification where a culture attempts to ignore phenomenon that do not fit its cognitive classification such as abnormalities and the theory concerning the oppression of lower casts account for the concepts of pollution. All three concepts, repression, suppression and oppression are related to the notion of someone or something being forcibly prevented from expression or being under some sort of pressure where expression is restricted. Things under pressure can be seen as threatening because they are liable to escape and are capable of erupting at any moment.

One of the most commonly considered means of destroying pollution is by burning the polluted object. Fire is considered one of the most efficient destroyers, when the flame no longer exists there is virtually nothing left of the polluted object. Fire however is generally conceived as having more positive purifying properties, it not only destroys pollution but also creates purity. It is perhaps one of the most symbolically complex phenomena in the history of human culture. It can destroy land, forestry etc, but its ashes make the earth fertile and productive. It is therefore viewed as a powerful transformer of the negative to the positive.

This concept of renewal through destruction is a means through which Anselm Kiefer attempts to remove the guilt from the German consciousness.

He refuses to moralise himself. However his earliest woodcuts and paintings of famous heads, his overlaying of names, his earliest performances, his references to old songs and refrains were said to have been found difficult and disturbing by some of the German art world even before he made reference to Nazi architecture or to Hitler's military campaigns. Many of Kiefer's paintings refer to the Brandenburg Marches where he now lives. Brandenburg is significant because as the central area of Prussia, it was the base of the Bismark Regime and the powerhouse in the unification and militarisation of Germany. Kiefer's home landscape straddles this Limesline. The woods are dotted with the tidied and signposted remnants of forts and lookout posts. One may also find an abandoned tank with its gun pointing absurdly towards the sky. This or a similar tank appears in much of Kiefer's recent painting. In 'Wege : Markischer sand' (fig 2) this tank appears in the midst of a vast landscape.

CHAPTER III

However faced by Kiefer's painting we become confused. Their message is not revealed. Kiefer's use of allegory determines that he makes no conclusions, employs no direct expression further complicating the problem of interpretation. According to Stanley Cavell in reference to allegory the message is of such a form that the words which contain its truth may be said in a way which defeat that very truth. From this it would seem that no interpretation is possible. Kiefer further complicates the problem by employing symbolism in conjunction with allegory. The symbol itself is the very opposite of allegory. It is totally self-contained, the very embodiment of the idea lies within it and does not change. Allegory however invites interpretation while simultaneously suspending it. The activity of reading in meaning is therefore problematised. Allegory however also advances the plastic arts into the territory of the rhetorical where an audience is necessary to justify its being.

Even when allegory is not apparent the problems of interpretation are still immense. The German literary critic Walter Benjamin had much to say about the problems of translation in literature. These problems are just as relevant to the work of Anselm Kiefer. According to Benjamin

"The translator rather than finding
himself at the centre of the language
forest remains on the outside facing
the wooded ridge". (5)

The translator can therefore never hope to communicate the true language. The problems with translation become further complicated when the translator wishes to incorporate his own interpretations within the original. The translator must therefore refrain from wanting to communicate something himself. This problem arises in the many readings applied to the work of Anselm Kiefer.

Benjiman was also aware that in all forms of language there remains in addition to what can be communicated something which cannot.

From this it would follow that the less distinct the language of the original, the less fertile a field it is for translation and the more it is pondered upon the more inaccessible it becomes, and the further it moves away from its true meaning. The result is a blurred interpretation which may prove totally irrelevant to the original.

"The gates of a language thus expanded
and modified may slam shut and enclose
the translator with silence." (6)

Although translatability is an essential character of certain works, this does not necessarily mean it is essential that they be translated, it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. Although Anselm Kiefer is primarily a painter, his works have been approached as literal statements. Kiefer is according to Peter Schjeldhal a history painter.

"Kiefer's art holds out mighty rewards
to all viewers who having taken the
trouble to learn his lexicon, can see
with their own eyes, think with their
own heads and feel with their own hearts". (7)

In "taking the trouble to learn", the viewer obviously receives his information from a secondary source. He or she will therefore return with a preconceived notion of what these paintings actually mean and in doing so impose these

meanings upon the work. In terms of Schjeldhal's concept of Kiefer's paintings as "history painting" the true relevance of the paintings themselves is no longer considered.

But the paintings themselves when all is said and done are what remain. There meaning exists only within their formal boundaries. This is not to say that these translations or references should be glossed over in the name of pure visual experience. The point is as quoted by Charles Harrison rather that they should not be abstracted from the "text" of the picture surface. Their function as references lies in their embeddedness within that surface and not in their translatability outside it. Such interpretations and references are applicable but only within the context of the work itself, outside that they are meaningless, purely speculative.

The confusion within Kiefer's language renders the problem of interpretation all the more difficult. He deals with various themes on various different levels, using a matrix of symbols that at times converge and contradict.

But to add to this and in doing so further complicating the issue. The point is however that Kiefer in terms of his painting as "history painting" is himself a translator. He had no direct experience of World War II. Within his painting he enacts an imaginative drama by fusing his observations of landscape with an assemblage of symbols gathered from history and mythology. In this sense Kiefer is also on the outside facing the "wooded ridge". In calling Kiefer primarily a history painter we refuse to acknowledge the importance of his contemporary relevance as an artist living in the present and facing the problems of the present age.

However Germany's repression of its past is the 'ridge' Kiefer is trying to break across. In order to do so he must tap the German unconsciousness. He is therefore dealing with an extremely complicated situation. His task is not merely a physical one, but one that must be undertaken on an unconscious level.

Kiefer has in fact been related to the German Romantics for whom the primacy of the imagination was the real issue, the starting point of which was the desire for something other than what was immediately available. The act of expression then becomes equivalent to the act of lifting a veil upon the visible so as to uncover the invisible. Symbolic language was the prime medium for romantic thought and symbolism is indeed a major device in Kiefer's work. The most striking feature of the philosopher Schegel's thinking was his gift for illuminating paradox. His ideas often took the form of deliberate logical contradictions for example

"Only in mourning can one find rest"(9).

Indeed Romantic thought revels in the tension created (in the tension created by uniting opposites, nature itself being a system of interdependant polarities. For Benjamin also, knowledge was not to be found in the solution of riddles. The wonder of the appearance of things was always at the centre of his concerns. For this reason the labyrinth and puzzle proved fascinating for him. Such contradictory notions may prove stumbling blocks for those who need rational explanations. However isn't thinking in opposites not the only way to approach truths which dart in opposite directions? This is where allegory finds its true basis.

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Allegory being indirect discourse may be so either because directness is forbidden, in which case its indirectness is merely its disguise or because directness is impossible. Allegory divides itself into moments of revealing and concealing, of covering over and bringing forth. This causes much confusion. It is primarily a problem of language, not one in which there are alternative vehicles for expressing a thought, one of which conveys directly, the other indirectly, nor a situation in which there is no alternative vehicle for expression of the thought and therefore no way in which it can be conveyed either directly or indirectly. It is rather one in which while there is only one means of expression there are two thoughts it can convey and moreover the thoughts are incompatible and mutually self defeating.

If Kiefer's text does not consider those alternatives - is it because he is not concerned with ambiguity, with multiple meanings engendered by a single image?. Or is it that two clearly defined and incompatible readings are engaged in blind confrontation in such a way that it is impossible to choose between them?.

This then opens wide the field of supposition for the critic, while at the same time slams it shut in his or her face. There is an unfathomable amount of information that can be sieved from a work of art if the artist refuses to inform the viewer of his or her exact intentions. The critic can again take the leading role from which he or she was severely restricted by abstract art of post-war Modernism. But simultaneously the possibility of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion is problematised. This is enough to inform us that claims as to the easy accessibility of Anselm Kiefer's work can only be seen as ridiculous.

It is moreover not merely a problem of relating to layers of images and meanings, Kiefer makes the task of interpretation all the more difficult by adding text to his work, the insertion of names of people, usually figures of authority or recognition, places, lines of songs, poetry, the titles of his paintings and also as stated by Charles Harrison unless you can translate German you really have little insight into what Kiefer is trying to say. Whether it is possible therefore to become a competent viewer of Kiefer's painting is questionable. This competence could however never hope to be secure.

CHAPTER IV

This confusion and ambiguity was inherent within Kiefer's painting almost from the very beginning of his career, and takes a more modest form in 'Man in the Forest' (fig 3), one of Kiefer's earliest paintings where he depicts himself as a penitent dressed in a white shift, holding a blazing branch in his hand, behind are the fir trees of the archetypal German forest. When he was asked why he had not just painted the forest without the peculiar figure his reply was - "You cannot just paint a landscape after tanks have passed through it, you have to do something with it. The landscape is no longer innocent, it has been defiled by historical associations! But into this landscape Kiefer has brought light. We may ask ourselves to what source of darkness is this torch bringing light? It may be that Kiefer is referring to the peculiar forest solitude of the German Romantics. But even within this there is room for criticism. Elias Canetti in 'Mass Symbols Of Nations' stated that the mass symbol for the Germans was the army. But for the Germans the symbol of the army was more than that, it was seen as a forest on the march. He states that in no other modern nation in the world has the spirit of identification with the forest remained so vital as in Germany. "The rigidity and parallel lines of the trees standing upright, their density and number filled the German heart with deep and mysterious joy. In the forest where so many trees are seen standing side by side, the bark that might have appeared like armour, when seen in isolation now seems more like the uniforms of a military detachment!" (10)

For the German without his being aware of the fact the army and the forest were melted into one. What others might find bare and desolate about the army, possessed for the German the light and life of the forest. Here he was not afraid, he felt protected, one of them all. The effect of this early romanticism of the forest for the German cannot be underestimated. It was taken up in many songs and poems and the forest that occurred in them was often called German. Benjamin was also to speak of the forest as a key towards knowledge.

However even if Kiefer was merely referring to this peculiar forest solitude of the German Romantics he can still be taken up on the criticism of being in favour of a revival of a German National Consciousness and indeed this point could be argued quite successfully with regard to most of his painting. Whether this criticism could hold any relevance is however questionable. Romanticism itself has been said to have had a strong contributing force in the emergence of this Nationalism and of the German political state in the late 19th century. Some may wish to trace a line from romantic patriotism to nazism which took up German folk myths and the compositions of the composer Wagner and pressed them into the service of a 'horrendous' racialism.

However romanticism's original demand was for the self-affirmation of the individual and therefore it can be argued that the demand for national self-affirmation was an over-exaggerated perversion of Romanticism's original demand. Since the true logic of Romanticism lies within the reconciliation of polarities the authentic aim of romantic policies should be to preserve individual freedom while pursuing collective aims.

The ambiguity and contradictions within Kiefer's work however leave us confused as to whose side he is actually on. The forest may become the army, but as we shall see the army retreats to the hillsides, into the distance. Do they threaten the viewer or do they merely become pitiful expressions of a culture torn assunder, a culture afraid to confront itself and the world. In 'Man in the Forest' therefore the burning branch is symbolic of the artist's imagination which as we are led to believe can like fire transform our world and our experience of it.

In a water colour based on a similar idea 'Reclining Man with Branch' (fig 4)

we are again faced with this image of the artist. But here the landscape is not specific and more abstract. This time the artists corpse lies upon the ground, the branch now grows from his chest. Instead of the bright flames blood now warms its twigs, circulating through the twigs as if they were arteries or veins. Here the branch takes on biblical references. For Kiefer it stands for the idea of the eternal flame in the sense of the christian idea represented in the Roman Catholic church by the red light which is never allowed to go out. One gets the feeling that in due time this winter season will cease and the branch will live again. In his more recent painting as we shall see, the palette sometimes with wings attached in an effort to fly, takes the place of the flames or joins it in an expression of the same idea. Kiefer has dealt with this legend of war in the forest in several of his later paintings, notably by incorporating woodcut portraits. In a strange way it seems that the forest, the symbol of destroyer and that which was destroyed was to become for Kiefer not his ally but his foe and yet he was still drawn towards it. Max Ernst had earlier spoken of the german forest, asking

"What is a forest ? Mixed emotions, as he stepped into the forest for the first time, delight and oppressiveness and what the romantics called feeling for nature. The marvellous exhilaration of breathing free in open space, yet the oppression of being imprisoned on all sides by hostile trees; outside and in at once; free and captive" (11)

Emanuel Kant (1790) in speaking of the sublime appears to draw a similarity with this strangeness.

"Here are things that draw our powers of resistance to insignificance. But the more terrible they look - the more attractive they appear, provided we stand in safety, and we may call them sublime because they raise the energy of the soul beyond its average level" (12)

Perhaps this can explain Kiefer's or the German connection with this image of the forest. This conflict is to appear throughout Kiefer's entire work and is evident in the many images he employs. The inherent sense of tragedy, which Walter Benjamin has divided into two categories as we shall later see is also evident. And it is indeed possibly the fascination with this tragedy that is the real issue, while the sublime objects such as the forest are merely devices through which this tragedy can be created, they merely provide the basic material.

In his attempt to bring back the healing function within art Kiefer suggests hope for our future, but even here doubt appears to shatter his illusions. His painting however, is extremely ambitious. He has charged the space of his paintings with layer upon layer of signs and symbols. The paintings offer us layered maps of a desperate situation. He appears to belong to the present cultural moment in which the figure of the painter seems to be totally compromised by an unwillingness or inability to choose any one option over another. But his work does not lack decisiveness either and he manages his options with the surest hand. He even imposes traditional perspective on a boundless all-over field, the very concept of which is based on the total denial of perspective altogether. According to Carter Ratcliff in an

article concerning the return of the figure into painting Kiefer presents himself as a "juggling Titian" but he goes on to say that in today's world, the artist if he or she is to develop must navigate a maze. "Now possibilities for style past and present form a labyrinth turned in on itself". He states that the more sophisticated drift around blind corners, through overgrown passages to the maze's core which is patrolled by a monster - "The minotaur at the heart of every ambitious image of the self". (13)

The self is a dominant image in the work of Anselm Kiefer. It is the redeeming artist who takes the shape of the winged palette and the flames, suggesting the power of the artist through his art to heal the wounds. Perhaps this notion is too romantic to be taken seriously in the present day and whether it can be seen as realistic or practical is indeed questionable. With the winged palette Kiefer addresses himself almost as a savior, again tracing his symbols back to biblical references where the wings have their roots in the myth of creation. They attempt to overcome physical gravity and in doing so only succeed in further defining the boundary between heaven and earth.

In most of Kiefer's paintings the earth and sky make up the protagonists. The horizon separates them and between these nothing is happening. The ploughed fields are fallow and the sky is pushed back almost out of the picture plane. The furrows lead us back towards the horizon line. Then the winged palette may soar upwards and in this uprising movement both sky and earth are bound together in the act. Another metaphor for this uprising is the ladder which appears in 'Seraphim Cherubim'. The ladder is derived from mystics and accordingly the world is divided into an upper and a lower, a spiritual and an intelligible world, which

are not only opposed to one another but whose character consists in their mutual denial. Within Kiefer's painting this medium of separation always remains and cannot be leapt over. In the 'Order of Angels' (fig 5) lead courses downwards from the upper level and crosses the vanishing lines pointing towards the horizon. In another 'Icarus' (fig 6) falls headlong downwards from the upper plane to the lower plane. Here what may have initially appeared as a more joyous expression becomes an image haunted, alone and lost. Other canvases force the eye to read the perspective pull backwards as it simultaneously pulls forward. If this has anything to do with Biblical references then it might be noticeable that according to Genesis in the creation both heaven and earth are separated and since then they strive for their initial unity. Such a point of view however does not explain Anselm Kiefer's painting. His ideas are more firmly rooted in the present. The sense of the Biblical, the search for a new order stems from the present precarious situation.

Yet Kiefer's paintings are not active, their tragic exists in their intensity. Hope appears almost to turn to resignation. One senses that what we witness is neither an act of healing nor an act of destruction but the melancholic state of the artist. The lower plane of representation never becomes united with that which lies behind it. However it stands symbolically for potential fertility, especially when burnt earth awaits fresh irrigation. The landscape is void of life however "a darkness without history". Even when it pretends to contain history it does so in the shape of an isolated container, thrust into the earth bearing historical associations without any effect on the surrounding landscape. The soil destined for life persists in rigor mortis. The landscapes are characterised by their emptiness and apparent devastation.

For Kiefer the landscape can only be a war zone, a no mans land, unpeopled and lifeless. The land and buildings, usually representations of facist architecture have become scenes of human suffering. This painting belongs to an era of emotion and thought frought with problems. His vision may be seen as being extremely pessimistic and morbid yet hope as we have said is always symbolised primarily in the form of burning flames, a palette that may be drawn in outline accross the canvas or with wings extending from it, causing it to rise upwards. And yet Kiefer fails to convince us. These wings instead of soaring upwards fall headlong downwards and so the situation is reversed. The same applies to the ladder symbol, one may climb up but when one reaches the top all one can do is climb down the other side. However in the spiritual sense we are led to believe that art triumphs over death, spirit over oppression. Rupert Martin has described Kiefer's language as being similar to that of the English poet Geoffrey Hill in his sequence 'Funeral Music'

"some trampled acres, parched, sodden or
blanched with sleet. Stuck with strange
postured dead. Recall the winds flurrying
darkness over the human mire". (14)

This however suggests also a comparison with Francisco Goya's 'Disasters of War'. Here one also senses a fascination with death which verges even on the sadistic. As with the paintings of Anselm Kiefer this fascination seems more overpowering than any attempt to overcome it.

Of 'Paintings of the Burnt Earth' we witness a series of paintings in which the land is as much as much devastated as purged. In the painting 'Cockchafer Fleig' (fig 7) The black earth is covered with frost. Scrawled accross the hill in the distance are the words of an old German song.

"Cockchafer Fleig, father is in the war.

Mother is in Pomerania, Pomerania is all

burnt up".

Like the other paintings of this series Cockchafer Fleig is a scene of desolation and loss. Beneath the overcast threatening sky a sea of golden corn has been subsumed by waves of rich black earth as the soil has been turned over by the plough. The ridges of earth are being attacked by the elements. Water and ice lie in the broken burrows. In the middle ground flames seem to emerge from the earth and flicker on a burning tree, while smoke drifts listlessly across the distant country and blood perhaps oozes from the soil. The earth is no longer rich but scarred. A line of small figures string out across the skyline and on closer observation become not fleeing figures or soldiers but the words of that old German song. This painting describes the dull futility of war and evokes an image of hopelessness. The poem adds to this sense of abandonment and loss. But looking closely the impression is not of total desolation, the flames persist even in winter but again we are not convinced.

In another painting of this series 'Painting equals Burning' (fig 8) the act of imagination is equivalent to the transformation wrought by fire. Kiefer demonstrates the burning of the heritage in the act of painting, just as a corn field is burned in order that its ashes may nourish the earth and bring forth new life. As in 'Man in the Woods' the fire burns but it does not consume. Here however Kiefer has also drawn a palette superimposed over this field of burned stubble. It is through the act of painting and burning that regeneration can occur. If fire is both a destructive and a creative force in Kiefer's paintings, the palette is a more positive and in itself a less ambiguous symbol.

The palette becomes a key icon in Kiefer's work and is frequently used along with other symbols. Here Kiefer seems to make reference to the act of sacrifice in the artists work.

In the third of these paintings of the scorched earth 'Nero Paints' a palette is drawn in outline over the whole picture, allowing us to identify the picture as a vision of the act of painting, as an artistic game or catastrophe staged by its creator. But what is most arresting about this vision of the palette is the specific position it takes, usually centrally dominating the entire scene. As such, a certain tension erupts from the relationships this palette assumes. Two paintings in particular show the connotations of this palette image and reveal the multiple levels of meaning which exist in Kiefer's work. In 'Resumptio' a winged palette rises from an anonymous grave suggesting that the spirit of art can triumph over death and that imagination can triumph over oppression. In 'Palette' (fig 10) a palette is suspended over a grey abyss by two burning strings about to break. Here the image is more fragile and ambiguous. However this interpretation of the frailty of artistic vision could be supplanted by another in which the twelve tongues of flame, six on either side of the palette, viewed in biblical terms are like pentecostal fire, sustaining and giving inspiration to the artist. The palette seen in this light appears to rise on wings of flame. Both interpretations are equally valid and the ambiguity is sustained by the simple device of extending the lines to the edge of the picture frame. In images such as these, hope can be seen to alleviate the starkness of pain and vice versa.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the series which revolves around Paul Celan's 'Todefuge' in which Margarete and Shulamith embody the german and jewish ideals of beauty, but come together in tragedy. Kiefer as I have said earlier employs the same elusive, indirect method as Celan, by transforming historical fact and human identity into a symbolic language. Like the poem Kiefer's paintings are at once atonements of collective guilt and rhapsodies to love and beauty. And just

as Kiefer will always see history in terms of landscape, so here the golden hair of Margarete becomes golden corn and Shulamith's hair the ashes of the stubble. The two are one. In destroying the Jews the German culture destroyed itself. Elsewhere in Kiefer's painting Shulamith is seen mourning in front of gutted buildings. Even the victim mourns what has been lost. (fig 13)

Kiefer in this sense leads us to an understanding of the landscape not as a place of pastoral escape as Rupert would have us believe but as the background of our cultural and physical life. This is where we can relate Kiefer to the art of the German Baroque. The characters within German Baroque theatre were always firmly rooted to the world and no transcendence was possible within this existence. This led to a vigorous style of language, the practice of contradictory adjectives and mixed emotions. Kiefer's paintings too become a familiar theatrical stage where his paradoxical and catastrophic language can be given its greatest breath.

CHAPTER V

Perhaps by looking into 'THE ORIGINS OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA' by Walter Benjamin 1982-1940 we may arrive at a greater understanding of Kiefer's sensibility. In his study Benjamin set out to define the distinction between tragedy and trauerspiel. In mapping the hitherto blurred distinction, Benjamin unlike Nietzsche claimed that the true origins were to be found not in Greek tragedy but in that of the German Baroque. Benjamin was to find in trauerspiel, the baroque art of the 16th and 17th centuries an age which mirrored his own and an age which can indeed be seen to still mirror our world today. He found the German Baroque to be a profoundly disturbed and inwardly empty period but an age possessed by an unremitting artistic will, the result of which was the desire for a vigorous style of language that would prove equal to the violence of world events. For centuries there has not been a period in which artistic feeling has been closer than it is now to the Baroque in its desperate search for its own style. Therefore the Baroque can be seen to have remarkable analogies to present day german literature and art.

The Baroque was to appear as a godless and heathen period and in much baroque painting the clouds may be seen to move darkly down towards the earth. Humanity was confined within this world without any access to the beyond. It was under such restrictions that the german baroque grew up. Benjamin poses Cain as the first 'courtier' because through fratricide and god's ensuing curse he no longer had a home of his own.

It was however not so much the conflict between god and fate which took over trauerspiel as the unstable conflict between the Sovereign ruler's virtues and vices. This explains why trauerspiel can only really be grasped within the events of history itself. Unlike tragedy which was rooted in myth,

trauerspeil was to find its roots within history. The earth was identified as the stage and the content and style of such drama was determined by political and social conditions. Set within the court the trauerspeil was taken up entirely with the sovereign ruler's capacity to rule and his inability to do so. The ruler was to reveal at the first opportunity that he was almost incapable of making a decision.

"Well then let her live, let her live-but no, yes,
yes, she shall live... No, no, she shall die, she
shall perish, let her be killed... Go, then, she
shall live!" (15)

The ruler was therefore capable of assuming either the role of the tyrant or martyr, capable of announcing either the culmination of salvation or disaster. The tyrant and martyr were therefore seen as two faces of the one monarch and it was the potential capacity of this ruler to exercise dictatorship that led to the mood of unrest and shifting emotion typical of the German Baroque. As with Kiefer's paintings of desolate landscapes and empty interiors the German trauerspeil was taken up entirely with the hopelessness of the earthly condition and the only redemption it knew resided within this existence. Discontent was therefore its motive and there was no revolt against this. According to Benjamin, the baroque artist feeling himself dragged towards the abyss of damnation, clings to the world and looks for no means of escape.

The Baroque had a clear view of humanity in its creaturely position. The result could only be horrific to any viewer of such a situation. This creaturely condition led to melancholy in which there could be nothing heard of the voice of revelation. However although Kiefer's landscapes are depicted as sorrowful, exhausted and lifeless, also depicted is a lust for life. Schegel in speaking of the poet Calderon with whom Benjamin believed that the trauerspeil took its richest form

has said

"Whatever its apparent objective it is a neverending hymn on the majesty of creation. He celebrated the productions of nature and art with an astonishment always joyful and always new, as if he saw them for the first time"(16)

Like Kiefer the Baroque dramatist loved to rearrange the order of creation and within both Kiefer's painting and trauerspiel natural settings, can be seen to intrude increasingly into dramatic action. Although existence within this world was to take an oppressive form, along with it however there were dreams and aspirations and the fear of an end in which night and darkness played a major role. Trauerspiel however, had no proper end and the game was continuous. The word 'trauerspiel' itself means game or play of sorrow.

It is a strikingly similar oppression within the earthly condition that informs much of Kiefer's painting. The images within his paintings clearly reveal the inherent conflicts within existence. The sense of anticipation and dread and the conflict which results from such tensions determines the allegorical rhetoric that he employs. This takes a dramatic form in 'Die Meistersingers' (fig 14). In an observation of this painting, the straw which is applied in large quantities, covering almost the entire landscape with the furrows remaining distinct, appears to lift and almost remove itself from the canvas. This shifting is further emphasised as one moves around the painting. The cracks open up before our eyes to reveal the darkness underneath. Blood in the form of thick dashes of paint is scattered across the landscape. The setting could be either sunrise or sunset, a characteristic of much of Kiefer's painting, that moment when the darkness changes to light and less optimistically when the

light changes to darkness. This ambiguity is not removed or reduced by the presence of any other image. The strength of emotion implied by such contrasts are dominant features of Kiefer's work. Through allegory the observer is confronted with history as a petrified, primordial landscape. The eruption of images gives rise to a chaotic mass of metaphors. The enigmatic is part of its effect and this fascination with the enigmatic, the basis of his sensibility continues to appear throughout his entire work.

For the baroque artist the theory of melancholy was to have a close connection to astrology, therefore reality was all the more difficult to explain. The baroque was to look towards saturn, the spirit of contradictions. Saturn was explained through Cronos - the god of extremes. Duality could therefore become the only conclusion.

Within trauerspeil, because transcendence was not possible, humanity was condemned to be free. Nietzsche had however viewed this love of fate 'amor fati' as the formula of human greatness.

"Freedom far from being the essence of hope
and joy, is the source of man's dread of the
universe and of himself"(17)

This paradox is evident throughout Kiefer's painting. His works are perhaps comparable to the Dionysian celebration of existence where all things merge into a flowing invisibility. Kiefer's paintings however in their search for order are related not only to Dionysian impulses but also to those of Apollo. Dionysian theory was based on an overflowing celebration of existence where there existed a cruel longing to exceed all norms, while Apollo, the god of restraint and order was to limit the potential for freedom of expression.

For Nietzsche it was only through a fusion of both apollonian and dionysian forces that great works of art could be created.

As I have already pointed out Trauerspiel was counter transcendental. It was seen as a celebration of everything inherent within existence, even when this existence was passed in torment. Nietzsche's tragic hero however was to search for an escape from this existence and this is where trauerspiel and tragedy are radically distinct. The tragic hero, by elevating himself above the realms of existence enters "the icy loneliness of the self, who knows nothing other than itself". In this act the hero was endowed with the realization that he was ethically in advance of the gods and that his sufferance of good and evil, of fortune and desolation, had projected him into a category beyond comprehension. This realization was to compell the tragic hero to silence and this silence was to become a manifestation of his agony.

Trauerspiel on the contrary is exaggerated and longworded. It is emphatically earth bound, mundane and opposed to the spiritual. It is not the tragic hero who occupies the stage but the dual faced composite of tyrant and martyr, of the sovereign who incarnates the mystery of absolute will. Trauerspiel postulates the dual presence of Christ's nature - part god, part man but overwhelmingly of this world. This possibly explains why baroque drama was inherently emblematical as greek tragedy never was. Within tragedy the spectators emotions are refined and brought into order. But fundamentally tragedy does not require an audience. Its space is inwards and the viewer aimed at is the 'hidden god! Trauerspiel on the other hand signifies sorrow and lament. Lament and sorrow demand audience. The trauerspiel was to become a play of human wretchedness.

If Kiefer's paintings are escapist in the sense that he refuses to moralise himself they are not however escapist in the sense that, in his attempt to heal the present from the guilt of the past he does not attempt like Nietzsche's tragic hero to search for solutions outside this existence

However in an observation of Kiefer's paintings we do witness a similar silence. Although this silence may stem from the inability of the artist to articulate his images, it also stems from the inability of the observer to interpret the message.

Although Kiefer's paintings are clearly relevant to trauerspeil there is however one important distinction. The difference between Kiefer's painting and trauerspeil is that, spoken language was the domain of the free spontaneous utterance of the characters within the German Baroque while the written or painterly language of allegory enslaves objects within their formal limitations, making any interpretation all the more difficult.

Although Kiefer may constantly allude to the possibility of change his images remain entangled within reality and any possibility for escape is impeded. The melancholic expression within his work portrays the fall of nature. Because it is fallen, nature mourns and in all mourning there is again a tendency to fall silent. The psychological explanation of melancholy is imagination that suppresses the tired spirit which because it is in the body loves its own affliction. It is important to realise that melancholia may also embrace dead things in its contemplation as Kiefer embraces history in an attempt to redeem it.

Kiefer's stance as the redeeming artist can be seen to take its form primarily in those paintings where the artist's identity asserts itself most dramatically. Faced by this image of the redeeming artist one may sense a desire inherent within the image to remove itself from this existence. But such images remain firmly rooted within this world and there is no means of escape. As we have seen in 'Icarus' the winged palette hovers in mid air. In the landscape below, the horizon line moves diagonally, the ploughed furrows move backwards and forwards into space. The entire landscape seems to be in motion, swirling before our eyes.

What may on initial observation appear as a joyous image suggesting freedom, now appears as an anxious image attempting with all its strength to remain suspended but finding itself being dragged back down towards the earth. The precarious position that such redeeming images assume, clearly conveys Kiefer's awareness of the instability of any possibility of redemption. Doubt dramatically shatters his illusions. This awareness is further conveyed by the over exaggerated rhetoric and display of melancholy within the work, further emphasising the artists realization of the possible futility of his strivings. Benjamin himself was aware that 'neither in knowledge nor in reflection, can anything whole be put together again'. Kiefer's awareness of his position is clearly evident within his use of allegory.

Kiefer's use of allegory has therefore created a dualism, that he appears unable to come to terms with. The result of this dualism is a tension that arises in a restless form. He displays no certainty whatsoever, his doubt goes right to the core of his own position and is given shape in shifting aspects. It would seem that reality and identity are not safely mastered by Kiefer. The present interposed with reflection continuously intrudes into the past or vice versa with what can be seen as a frightening existential strangeness of memory.

Perhaps the frightening content in Kiefer's painting is an expression of vitality, an enjoyment of experience, a closeness to the movement of life and the squalor of decay, ultimately a sensuous contact with existence. He seems to find it natural to move towards mystery, troubled lives and darkness. His work is about conflicts. It is responsive to the confusion and disorder within our environment, to the contradictions, ambiguities and irrationalities of life itself. He appears to accept complexities as the defining features of the human condition. It seems that fascination and pleasure is derived from the feeling of being on 'the edge' of the world. This view was also consistent within the work of the Northern

Romantics. Kiefer's paintings have indeed been compared to those of the 19th century painter Casper David Freidrich. Romanticism was also seen, as an age which tore off its mask to utter one last shout of defiance.

Although Kiefer is obviously struggling to say something, the result however is not by any means directly communicative. Although he appears intent on finding a way of communication that will tell the whole truth about the human condition, there is nonetheless a feeling, that in such a pursuit that he may end in a cul-de-sac. Schopenhauer in his attempt to analyse the human estate ended by declaring that humanity must learn to reject life and its inevitable torments. Goethe in his search for truth came to the conclusion that 'we can know nothing'. It would seem that there is presently a tendency to believe that if one pursues truth too far that one can only end by regretting it. Existence seems to have become largely a matter of obstacles, the desire for change counters the realisation of possible unchangeability. It would seem that Kiefer is continually fighting a battle with himself. One senses an anxious desire to open a door the wrong way, under the impression that it is jammed. His images however, nonetheless, reflect humanity's need to break out of the prison it has encaged itself within. However like freedom, the lust for life cannot exist without direction. This direction is not defined within Kiefer's painting. One may sense his zest for living, but one also senses his awareness of his inability to arrive at such an ideal. Therefore within his paintings we may find it difficult to draw a line between illusion and reality.

With the image of the redeeming palette this can perhaps be seen as a complete dislocation from everyday reality and possibly as escapist. Any dislocation from reality and the evolution of the social being can only be dangerous and a Marxist critic might rightly refer to it as escapism. However escapism is an accurate description, only when there is no connection between the images and everyday life and Kiefer's images are by no means dislocated from such reality. This need

for change is on the contrary, clearly a reflection on reality. It can be seen as a consequence of the restraints and limitations of logic, formulae etc and has therefore much to do with the modern neurosis.

In a watercolour titled 'Ex-istence' (fig 14) Kiefer also refers to the philosophy of Existentialism which also sites the isolated position of humanity within the world. Although the existentialists were often condemned for their pessimism they were perhaps wrongly judged. Their purpose was to offer humanity the concept of freedom of choice - freeing him from any obligation, from any hierarchy and leaving him totally in control of his own existence. However this created a panic. They suggested that humanity was faced with an indefinite range of possibilities from which he or she was free to choose his or her own solutions. Nevertheless there are clearly limits to the possibility of choice, indeed it would make no sense to believe that ones choice is logically unlimited. It would therefore appear seriously misleading to crave for and aim towards an unintelligible ideal. It may become apparent when confronted with the redeeming palette, the symbol that appears to suggest that art can save the world, that we are indeed faced with such an unintelligible ideal. If so then this ideal can only logically be seen as impractical and deceiving.

However Kiefer himself has not suggested such idealism. Such notions have been imposed upon him by the critics. Rudi Fuchs has even referred to him as the "Darling of the Gods!" Such a romantic and indeed sentimental notion could hardly be taken seriously. And as Freidrich Jameson has said, "Most forms of contemporary criticism tend towards their own ideal, towards a model of their own immanence and towards their own utopia!" It would seem therefore that it is the criticism and the ideals imposed upon the work through such criticism that are escapist, rather than the work itself. From this it would seem that we have not yet finished doing away with idols.

Jameson also believes that the most interesting artists and thinkers of any period are those who cling to the experience of meaninglessness itself as ~~to~~ the ultimate reality-- "those who do not wish to be cheated by illusions"

However although Kiefer's intentions may have more to do with the notion of demystification, as a reduction of illusion, it remains questionable however whether or not he achieves such a goal. The situation seems to comprise a double personality - to liquidate the idols and face up to the state of reality and yet simultaneously in his attempt to heal the present from the guilt of the past he seems to pose a new ideology. It would seem therefore that for Kiefer a fatalistic attitude and an optimistic attitude go hand in hand.

Nevertheless although many attempts have been made to explain Kiefer's paintings, they can however never ultimately be defined. It would seem then that these works should perhaps be judged by this undefineable vitality rather than primarily by the ideas inherent within them. Indeed to verbalise things deeply felt can only be seen to undermine and therefore violate the experience of these things. It is also, possibly because of this undefineable quality that a type of mystique has developed around Kiefer's work.

However when all is said and done the concern of artists for the future of their societies seems to have become for the most part with Neo Expressionism an acknowledgement that art will never change the world. The role of the artist as an heroic figure is therefore no longer valid. Peter Schjeldahl wrote recently in *Art in America*

"Art as a substitute religion has disappointed us
and there is a general understanding that artistic
grandeur is not worth the terrible human investment
required to attain it" (18)

However it would be more than a shame to let our present cynicism be made retroactive, denigrating great art created in probably the last high tide of artistic faith. With Kiefer we witness a return to a belief in the importance of art, even though this reemergence may have no possible centre. However there is no mistaking his involvement. Whether it is possible that we could hold any trust in this belief or not is nonetheless questionable. Kiefer's art is however not without meaning, it is rather so full of options that meaninglessness is threatened.

In Kiefer's painting we are confronted with this sense of defeat, displayed in an uncomfortable mixture of emotions. Ambiguity has given rise to multiplicity of meaning, suggesting at once a ruin. He exploits every imaginable formal device and technique in order to superimpose one level of meaning upon another so that they merge and multiply, leaving scope for multiple interpretations. In his attempt to impose order on the world, Kiefer returns to Expressionism, to Romanticism and even to the art of the Renaissance, by employing traditional devices of perspective. Benjamin Buchloh poses this return to traditional modes of representation as a regression that "stubornly pursues the illusion of unity and completeness". In Kiefer's painting however we are faced by no such unity. If anything he depicts the very instability of such a notion. He perhaps succeeds rather in further defining the very instability of humanity within the world and in his relationship to *trauerspeil* this view of humanity, centered on its agonies and its defeats is the basis of its being and there can be no resolution.

Kiefer has also been interpreted as the artist who makes it all better again after the war, but through allegory how can one possibly envisage any conclusion. It is indeed questionable whether anything can originate in its opposite, whether order can originate from confusion or logic from illogic. In attempting to remove the guilt from the German unconsciousness Kiefer through allegory

appears to end by evading it. His paintings become further definitions of hopelessness and alienation.

Here again we can draw a comparison with the German Baroque. The notion or ambition of baroque theatre was also not based on an attempt to create order. Therefore differences and extremes were not brought together in an attempt to arrive at a logical conclusion, in fact a conclusion was not possible. Although there may have been an attempt to capture meaning, the baroque artist was aware that the result could only be conflicting. This same awareness appears in Kiefer's painting. The exaggeration of violence and misery within the baroque was likewise designed to conceal absence and decay and as allready pointed out this violence within their manner and language was equal to the violence of world events. Within the baroque and within Kiefer's painting this can only be seen as a search for new pathos. However this also led to arbitrariness and within the baroque it also became difficult to abstract the real content from the conflict of the many forces that had been unleashed.

The mood of trauerspiel was to suggest that only allegory, in that it makes substance totally representative of ulterior meaning and therefore unreal in itself could render bearable an authentic perception of the infernal, "Through allegory the angel can look into the deeps" (19) This love and indeed need of mystery, of complications rather than solutions appears also to form the very basis of Kiefer's work. For Benjamin the 'idea' as a potential for full meaning may contain a picture of the world specific to it, yet he was aware that such an idea entirely transcends the particulars found lodging within it. For Benjamin 'truth was the death of purpose! He was also aware that valuable ideas fail to realise their full potential when there exists an attempt to relate them to any type of system. The romantics were the first to become aware of allegory as a key towards knowledge. For them allegory was not merely a sign of what was to

be known, but a sign of knowledge in itself. However within the baroque allegory was also to proclaim the loss of freedom and the fall of nature. The ruin was therefore considered the finest material within the german baroque.

However as allready stated, Kiefer's paintings have been open to much criticism. Such criticism stems from the inability of the observer to decide whether in his painting he is announcing the culmination of salvation or disaster. However in today's world, conflict appears to have become the source of much of humanity's practical activity and this conflict may be stressed as a positive aesthetic value up to the point at which it begins to precipitate overt action. Indeed harmony the very opposite of conflict, itself threatens monotony, regularity and the deadening result of habit. This is where conflict can be seen to be so important. - there is nothing more effective in countering such results as the shock of conflict. In the tragic mournfulness of Kiefer's paintings, conflict has been used skillfully for aesthetic and indeed moral purposes. In his painting deeply moving drives are set into action and are deliberately confronted with frustrations. His aim appears as a desire to increase the vividness of the depicted experience to the highest endurable intensity that it can yield. Indeed the ultimate human value of this conflict can be seen to consist in its making humanity keenly aware of his or her environment and so enable him or her to cope with this environment in emergencies and indeed in everyday life. Within trauerspeil these polarities were to define the hopeless desires of humanity and the indifference of the universe but the above applies here also and we can now see the more positive side of the dilemma.

Kiefer is probably aware that the depiction of any cultural monument cannot be seperated from everything that is oppressive and barbaric within it. Therefore extremes must be enscribed within its genetic code right from the start. His paintings are however, stained with the guilt not merely of a culture in

particular but of history itself as one long nightmare.

Therefore Kiefer's paintings come as a rebuke and a warning against the possible easy persuasion and so reappropriation of any historically progressive force. By reasserting the distortion that persists within nature and existence, Kiefer can also possibly be seen to suggest through his art that authoritarian domination perseveres, and the dangerous implications of such a condition.

However Kiefer's paintings, again relative to the poetry of Paul Celan, begin at the experience of death and lead to an avowal of life. They become the design for an existential border situation. He has managed to successfully transmute the horror and inhumanity of our age into visualizations which neither trivialises them, nor renders them so starkly that aesthetic distance is totally annihilated. He has managed to fashion fascinating visual portrayals which strike us as immediately relevant to our lives, conveying powerfully the alienation of modern humanity. The exile of the Jew has now blended into a universal experience of exile, which is the fate of modern man. The Jewish phenomena is therefore now beyond nationality. It has become a universal phenomena. Humanity is now defenceless against the crushing impersonality of history and the prospect of a nuclear war which can only be even more devastating. It seems that for Kiefer, the nightmare has become too real for any dream or illusion to replace, so he therefore accepts them both and lives in the light of their unmitigated contradictions. It is these contradictions which define the allegorical expression within his work. This functions to make up the portrayal of a poignant present day example of insecurity, estrangement and despair. In Kiefer's painting, we have at the very least a testimony to the fact that all is not well.

Although Kiefer may be denounced for causing disruptive tendencies to our time, he may on the other hand, like Goya, be acclaimed for holding up a mirror to the human predicament. And even though Goya's 'Dream of Reason' may have been

seen to produce monsters, it however nonetheless, also produced countless emotions and countless wild and poetic images. Albert Camus in his novel 'The Rebel' has also claimed that

"Only the cry of anguish can bring us to life"

Celan's 'Todefuge' and Kiefer's paintings become comparable to the 'dance of death' depicted within the German Baroque.

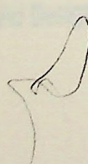
Within Kiefer's paintings one nevertheless senses his concern to explore the forces that give meaning and direction to life. Even though such concerns lead him to contradictions and paradox, his work on the whole, deals with practical realities and moral issues. The trauma that Germany had suffered as a result of the war provoked in him the desire to initiate some sort of healing process. Although he may prove incapable of achieving such a goal, if indeed such an achievement is possible within the aesthetic domain, his purpose is nonetheless to bring out the truth and help society. Although he deals with a very particular place and time, this sense of 'Paradise Lost' is clearly a contemporary problem and perhaps even a universal problem. His work becomes an expression of humanity's crying need for help.

CONCLUSION

Benjamin's Origins of German Tragic Drama could possibly be seen to epitomise the unstable glories between the German and Jewish connection. It becomes a presentment of humanity's suffering and cruelty. It depicts an awareness of a humanity surrounded by fear anxiety and oppression. For Kiefer this suffering is as alive today as it was then and the fate of the Jew has become the fate of the German and indeed the fate of the world. Although Kiefer's meanings remain enigmatic we are however aware of his closeness to reality and existence and although this may prove a fascinating topic to him there is nonetheless a struggle for change. His allegorical rhetoric displays his love hate relationship with existence. Perhaps Kiefer is aware of the affinity between good and evil and his fear of the possible repetition of this catastrophe can be seen to charge the space of his paintings. George Lukacs was also aware of this affinity between good and evil. His remark that "the slightest difference even in a puff of wind might have made the hero turn out differently" also possibly summarises the fear in the minds of the critics when faced by Kiefer's paintings. Such a fear was also the basis of the mood of unrest within the German Baroque. Donald Kuspit has stated that Kiefer's expression of power is a continuation of the distinguishing mark of the German ideology. However faced by Kiefer's painting we witness not so much power as despair but also a struggle to overcome this despair. Sometimes this struggle may appear violent but this violence only becomes a further definition of frailty. The Germanness of Kiefer's painting stems not only from the fact that he is in fact a German but also from his possible awareness that loosing ones sense of belonging to a tradition can only lead to demoralization.

Indeed in attempting to interpret Kiefer's paintings we only succeed in moving further away from them and it is this distance that has led to such accusation.

What we can establish however, is that Kiefer's inability to create direct and easily understandable representations of reality, is clearly a response to his understanding of and his reaction to the world around him. In searching for solutions through interpretation and viewing Kiefer's painting on purely political terms, the complete meaning and value of his painting is possibly overlooked. Indeed in assuming meaning the allegorical within Kiefer's painting loses its very centre. In such explanations the rich and strange also lose their value. In Kiefer's painting the subject matter becomes more exciting precisely because its truth content is concealed. Therefore in attempting to interpret Kiefer one possibly misses the point and in condemning him one only succeeds in condemning oneself. If we are to give credence to Freud then these taboos are only logical to those who believe in them. Kiefer does not introduce such themes for effect, he is concerned with human values and it is the pressure of such values that have created the intensity within his work. However although it is unfair to moralise in such a way the question remains - can such suspicion ever be removed ?



FOOTNOTES

- (1) QUOTED BY GEORGE BASELITZ
EXPRESSIONS NEW ART FROM GERMANY (1985)
- (2) QUOTED BY HEINRICH BOLL
AND WHERE WERE YOU ADAM (1970)
- (3) IBID
- (4) QUOTED BY PAUL CELAN
CONTEMPORARY GERMAN LITERATURE (1972)
- (5) QUOTED BY WALTER BENJAMIN
ILLUMINATIONS (1973)
- (6) IBID
- (7) QUOTED BY PETER SCHJELDHAHL
ART IN AMERICA (1986)
- (8) QUOTED BY CHARLES HARRISON
ARTSCRIBE U.K (1986)
- (9) QUOTED BY SCHEGEL A.W
IMAGES OF ROMANTICISM (1978)

- (10) QUOTED BY ELIAS CANETTI
MASS SYMBOLS OF NATIONS
GERMAN ART IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY (1985)
- (11) QUOTED BY MAX ERNST
IBID
- (12) QUOTED BY EMMANUEL KANT
THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE SUBLIME (1960)
- (13) QUOTED BY CARTER RATCLIFF
ART FORUM U.S.A. (1983)
- (14) QUOTED BY GEOFFREY HILL
ARTSCRIBE U.K (1983)
- (15) QUOTED FROM ORIGINS OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA (1924)
WALTER BENJAMIN
- (16) QUOTED BY SCHEGEL A.W
ORIGINS OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA
- (17) QUOTED BY FREIDRICH NIETZSCHE
THUS SPOKE ZARATHRUSTRA (1883)
- (18) QUOTED BY PETER SCHJELDAHL
ART IN AMERICA (1986)
- (19) QUOTED BY WALTER BENJAMIN
ORIGINS OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1 : WOLUNDIED (SONG OF WAYLAND) 1982
oil, emulsion, straw, photo projection on canvas with iron
wood and metal tongs. 110 x 150
- Fig 2 : WEGE : MARKISHER SAND (WAYS : MARK SAND) 1980
oil, emulsion, shellac, sand, photo projection on canvas
110 x 150
- Fig 3 : MAN IN THE FOREST 1971
oil on canvas. 48 x 54
- Fig 4 : RECLINING MAN WITH BRANCH 1972
water colour on paper. 18 x 15
- Fig 5 : ORDER OF ANGELS 1985
oil, emulsion, shellac, photo projection on canvas
110 x 150
- Fig 6 : ICARUS 1981
oil, emulsion, shellac, sand, photo projection on paper
and canvas 114 x 141
- Fig 7 : COCKCHAFER FLEIG (COCKCHAFER FLY) 1974
oil, emulsion, shellac on canvas
110 x 150
- Fig 8 : PAINTING = BURNING 1976
oil, emulsion, shellac and photo projection on paper
110 x 150

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- Fig IO : PALLETTE 1977
oil and acrylic on canvas 82x128
- Fig II : MARGARETTE 1981
oil and straw on canvas 110x150
- Fig I2 : SHULAMITH 1983
oil, emulsion, woodcut, shellac, acrylic and
straw on canvas 90x110
- Fig I5 : DIE MEISTERSINGER (THE MASTER SINGERS) 1982
oil, acrylic, straw and cardboard on canvas
110x150
- FIG 14 : EK - SISTENCE (1975)
watercolour on paper



WOLUNDIED (SONG OF WAYLAND)

Fig 1



WEGE : MARKISHER SAND (WAY : MARK SAND)

Fig 2



MAN IN THE FOREST

Fig 3



RECLINING MAN WITH BRANCH

Fig 4



ORDER OF ANGELS

Fig 5



ICARUS

Fig 6



COCKCHAFER FLEIG

Fig 7



PAINTING = BURNING

Fig 8



PALETTE

Fig 10



MARGARETTE

Fig 11



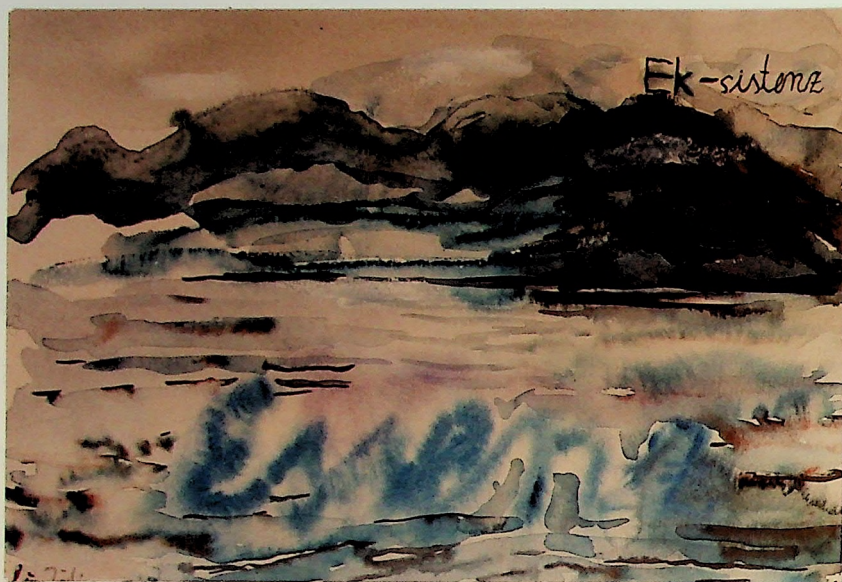
SHULAMITH

Fig 12



DIE MEISTERSINGERS (THE MASTER SINGERS)

Fig 13



EK - SISTENCE

Fig 14

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