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Permalink

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Journal

Télos, 1995(105)

ISSN

0090-6514

Author

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Publication Date

1995-10-01

DOI

10.3817/0995105057

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Botho Strauß: Myth, Community and Nationalism in Germany

David Pan

Since the end of communism and the reunification of Germany, writers from both the former East and West Germany have sounded the alarm against the materialism of German culture, the dangers of capitalist homogenization, and the decline of values. An entire generation of “left-wing” writers, including Heiner Müller, Botho Strauß, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, and Martin Walser¹ have attempted to defend German culture against the perceived threat of American capitalism and Western rationalism. Their concerns have led to another call to arms launched by critics, who see in such rhetoric an ominous return to themes already taken up by far Right intellectuals during the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich, and more recently within the German New Right of the 1990s.

Yet this dispute is not primarily one between Left and Right, nor is it just another episode in a continuing conflict between writers and critics in a literary marketplace. The new interest in myth, traditions, and the sacred is the harbinger of an epochal change in German culture which has been brewing all through the 1980s and which, like the social changes leading to the end of communism, did not begin with the fall of the Wall but were only revealed by it. In contrast to the post-1945 era, the post-1989 epoch in literature is not about new beginnings but an attack on the idea of beginnings and an attempt

1. Heiner Müller, *Zur Lage der Nation* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1990); Botho Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” in *Der Spiegel*, Vol. 47, Nr. 6 (February 8, 1993), pp. 202-207; Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993); and Martin Walser, “Deutsche Surgeon,” in *Der Spiegel*, Vol. 47, Nr. 26 (June 28, 1993), pp. 40-47.

to find a connection to the past which was suppressed when 1945 was declared a zero hour. For these writers, the postmodern is *passé* and liberal-minded critics are defending an *ancien régime*. The post-postmodern has finally come into focus as the pre-modern.

This shift is nowhere more evident than in the case of Strauß, whose work throughout the 1980s has been organized increasingly around themes such as myth and the sacred. Yet the implications of this work were not recognized until the publication of his essay "Swelling Song of the Satyr" in February 1993. Strauß's treatment of art as sacred experience and his polemic against an established liberal understanding of culture have provoked passionate responses from liberal critics in a debate left unfinished in 1945 and only now returning as the repressed legacy of that time when myth and the sacred were not just the domain of fascism.

Strauß lays out his pre-modern approach to culture in three basic theses. First, he claims that Germany is in a crisis of values. A society founded on economic prosperity will ultimately come into conflict with and be overwhelmed by the power of traditional, religiously-based cultures in which the members are willing "to defend their moral laws against others even to the point of sacrificing their lives."² Second, he claims that a reverent relation to tradition and authority is essential for the building of individuals. The mass media have destroyed relations to a past cultural tradition, and the Left, in breaking down taboos, has destroyed respect for authority. For Strauß, the inability to be "shaken" by the past and by authority is the prerequisite for neo-Nazi excesses. Third, following René Girard, Strauß claims that violence against scapegoats is necessary for the maintenance of order because it unifies the community around certain values by focussing aggression toward a few victims. The values Strauß then defends are those imbedded in a German tradition of high art as opposed to American mass culture.

While the Right's defense of Strauß' ideas has limited itself to making his essay the centerpiece of a collection, *The Self-conscious Nation*,³ in which the contributors, aside from generally supporting his ideas, do not attempt an extended evaluation. Liberal journalists and critics have attacked Strauß' essay for its anti-Enlightenment, anti-liberal political conservatism and condemned the references to myth, sacrifice and the

2. Botho Strauß, "Anschwellender Bocksgesang," *Der Spiegel*, Vol. 47, Nr. 6 (February 8, 1993), p. 202. This and all subsequent translations from the German are my own.

3. *Die selbstbewußte Nation*, Heimo Schwilk and Ulrich Schacht, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1994).

sacred as at best naive and at worst proto-fascist.⁴ To the extent that both right-wing and left-wing critics have simply accepted or rejected the sacred as a category, they have remained trapped within a postmodern mindset and have failed to recognize the variety of ways of understanding the sacred. Because it was abandoned by virtually everyone but the Nazis in 1945, the sacred has since remained Nazi cultural territory. Strauß' work, particularly after 1989, provides an excellent opportunity for an exploration of this space of the sacred in an attempt to finally liberate it from this *de facto* Nazi occupation.

The Aesthetic and the Rational

The first step in this engagement with the sacred is to define its boundaries. Strauß does this in his 1992 book, *Beginninglessness*, by differentiating between two ways of relating to the world. The first is based on science, reason, and the imitation of nature; the second, on art and belief: "In the end one will not have to decide between beautiful and purposive ideas. . . . The beauty of an idea is as useful for the soul and the spirit as rational cognition is for interaction with the bodily organism."⁵ He does not consider these two modes of experiencing the world to be in conflict. Rather, each has a different foundation and structure, the two forms of experience alternating in our consciousness "like the workdays and holidays of understanding."⁶

While each form of understanding has its own characteristics and therefore its own role to play in our experience, in the modern world thought and rational cognition have invaded the territory of art. This territory is the realm of belief and the sacred, which Strauß takes to be the undefinable

4. Willi Winkler, "Ist Botho Strauß ein Faschist? 'Bocksgesang' heißt Strauß' deutsches Pamphlet im *Spiegel*. Eine Replik," *die tageszeitung* (February 13, 1993), cited in Irmela Schneider, "Reiz und Reaktion," *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), p. 313, and Harald Weilnböck, "Die frühen Untertöne des 'Bocksgesangs' in Botho Strauß' *Der Park*: Zur psychoanalytischen Disposition der Literatur eines neu-onservativen Revolutionärs," *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 206, 214-220. For an overview of the responses to Strauß' essay, both in the German press and in the special issue of *Weimarer Beiträge* on the "Bocksgesang" debate, see Sigrid Berka, "Botho Strauß und die Debatte um den 'Bocksgesang,'" *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 165-178. For a discussion of myth in Strauß' earlier work, see Sigrid Berka, *Mythos-Theorie und Allegorik bei Botho Strauß* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1991) and Russell Berman, "Myth and Modernity in *Der Park*," chap. in *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 136-154.

5. Botho Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1992), p. 29.

6. *Ibid.*

source out of which human values originate. The distinction between the rational and the aesthetic is itself not particularly radical; his insistence on the distinction follows a schema already developed by Immanuel Kant.⁷ What raises eyebrows is the way Strauß defines the tasks proper to each realm. The liberal understanding believes that a social and cultural order must be based on reason. Joachim Vogel, for example, in his response to Strauß' essay, states his own commitment to the idea of "a social and cultural order based on an enlightened, historically and socially conscious reason — the incomplete project of modernity."⁸ Strauß, claims that culture must be based on an aesthetic experience of the sacred, which divides the world into separate qualities of profane and sacred, familiar and foreign. In contrast to this attempt to create a qualitative distinction between two types of experience, the liberal perspective seeks to treat all things equally. Vogel writes that "the central concept is not the foreign, but the Other, which must indeed be accepted in its historically determined, social and even magical-sacred Otherness, but which at the same time is the universally equal, equal in terms of rights, of individuality, of dignity."⁹ By transforming the question of the sacred as the intervention of the foreign in a mundane reality into a question of human rights for foreigners, Vogel shifts the discussion from the sacred to equality. Yet, in doing so, he refuses even to consider Strauß' argument about the need of the sacred in the constitution of individuals.¹⁰ This refusal reveals an essential problem with the liberal perspective:¹¹ it concentrates on the problem of mediating between varying perspectives but

7. "Hence aesthetic judgment is a special power of judging things according to a rule, but not according to concepts." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 34.

8. Joachim Vogel, "Tragödie eines Einzelgängers," in *Der Spiegel*, Vol. 47, Nr. 10 (March 8, 1993), p. 236.

9. Vogel, *op. cit.* p. 239.

10. For a similar critique, see Henriette Herwig, "Der Zusammenbruch der profanen Eschatologie: Zum Begriff der Gegenauflklärung bei Botho Strauß," in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 285-6.

11. This inability to enter into a serious discussion of the sacred is also evident in a prominent essay by Matthias Schmitz and Thomas Assheuer. Like Vogel, they understand the problem of the sacred and the totally Other immediately as a problem of mediation between conflicting perspectives: "Insofar as Strauß attempts here to transfer the immediacy of the totally Other experienced in connection with works of art onto the realm of the social, he excludes the central problem which inevitably arises with every encounter with the foreign in the *social* world: the problem of justice. . . . Thus the 'Other' in its particularity demands institutional forms of just comparison — social mediations, which form the limit of every artistic-religious reorganization of society." Matthias Schmitz and Thomas Assheuer, "'Wir sind enttäuscht genug': Die Befreiung des Menschen vom Staatsbürger — Botho Strauß und die Überwindung der (Post)Moderne," in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (July 10, 1993), p. ZB3.

never poses the question of the origin of a particular cultural perspective.

Strauß faces this problem of the origins of human order head-on and determines that they are always aesthetic rather than rational. In support of this argument, he begins with the idea, derived from chaos theory but ultimately referring to arguments from Kant, that the structures of reason are inadequate for grasping the undefinable and complex meanderings of a "fractal" reality.¹² All scientific models are in fact simplifications whose construction depends on the imagination. Under the veneer of natural laws lies the reality of chaos, and all attempts to impose a form onto this chaos are not a recognition of things in the outside world but mental fabrications providing stable and comforting categories on which to base actions. "Cognition does not have anything to do with things; it is effective action, a restless creation."¹³ Because the possibility of cognition is based on an act of creation rather than of reception, it is based on an originating aesthetic act out of which an ensuing logic develops.

Presence

Though Bernhard Greiner argues that chaos theory has led to a revision of Kant's description of relations to the natural world,¹⁴ the new insights of chaos theory are merely a reaffirmation of the conclusion Kant reached in *The Critique of Judgment* that the empirical world, though subject to natural laws, is so complex that human experience of this world would not be possible were it not for aesthetic mediation of order. In developing his arguments for the necessity of aesthetic judgment in constructing a human sense of order in experience, Kant uses the same reasoning Greiner attributes to chaos theory. Kant also begins with a concept of nature which is endlessly complex and, thus, from the viewpoint of human understanding, random in its movements and changes.¹⁵ The order

12. For an evaluation of Strauß' use of scientific sources in *Beginnlosigkeit*, see Lutz Hagededt, "Botho Strauß: Literatur als Erkenntnis?: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben der Postaufklärung," in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 270-275 and Willy Riemer, "Problematik des Ursprungs: Kosmos und Chaos in Botho Strauß' *Beginnlosigkeit*," in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 316-320.

13. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

14. Bernhard Greiner, "'Beginnlosigkeit' — 'Schlußchor' — 'Gleichgewicht': Der 'Sprung' in der deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte und Botho Strauß' Jakobinische Dramaturgie," in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 249-50.

15. "Hence we must think nature, as regards its merely empirical laws, as containing the possibility of an endless diversity of empirical laws that [despite being laws] are nonetheless contingent [*zufällig*] as far as we can see (i.e., we cannot cognize them a priori)." Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

imputed to nature is arbitrary, yet necessary for the experience of the world. "And yet we must necessarily presuppose and assume this unity, since otherwise our empirical cognition could not thoroughly cohere to [form] a whole of experience."¹⁶

In approaching aesthetic experience from the perspective of chaos, Strauß' notion of presence comes very close to Kant's idea of the sublime.¹⁷ While Kant defines the beautiful as the experience of an apparent harmony of objects with the human faculties used for perceiving them,¹⁸ he describes the sublime as the experience of a contradiction between human faculties and nature: "However, in what we usually call sublime in nature there is such an utter lack of anything leading to particular objective principles and to forms of nature conforming to them that it is rather in its chaos that nature most arouses our ideas of the sublime, or in its wildest and most ruleless display and devastation, provided it displays magnitude and might."¹⁹

Strauß goes beyond Kant by arguing that the miracle with the work of art is something completely unexpected and unrelated to anything which existed before.²⁰ While a thought "can at best be surprising, it is never a miracle. It remains in the realm of the thinkable. . . . It cannot be anything truly unexpected. Every work of art, on the other hand, enters the world as something absolutely unexpected."²¹ Aesthetic experience consists of an openness to those aspects of an existing order which are anomalous and break into the present like a glowing ember out of the depths of the past.²² The resulting experience of "presence" depends on a receptivity in which the recipient surrenders to the diffuse and the anomalous.²³

16. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

17. Cf. Greiner, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

18. "(Independent) natural beauty carries with it a purposiveness in its form, by which the object seems as it were predetermined for our power of judgment, so that this beauty constitutes in itself an object of our liking." Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99.

19. Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

20. Cf. Greiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-9. The importance of the aesthetic "Augenblick" in Strauß' work has also been discussed in Berman, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-2 and Berka, *Mythos-Theorie*, *op. cit.*, pp. 46, 84-5.

21. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 17-18.

22. "Of course there is no mere present, and even the purist, mystical moment emerges out of the depths of the past, the historical world of experience, but precisely as a wayward lump, not as a logical chain, and its glowing in the Now is its illumination." Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

23. Strauß borrows the idea of presence from George Steiner's book, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See Strauß' afterword to the German edition of this book, published separately as "Der Aufstand gegen die sekundäre Welt: Anmerkungen zu einer Ästhetik der Anwesenheit," in *Die Zeit*, (June 22, 1990), p. 57.

Surrendering is inevitable, because no individual can control his or her own origins, and myth, as the creator of these origins, becomes the foundation of every individual. "Myth weaves its knowledge beyond our heads — everyone's origins remain in darkness."²⁴ In order to exist, every individual must engage in the struggle with this original darkness. But the individual as individual is incapable of combatting this void. "The self-determined individual is the most blatant lie of reason."²⁵ The genesis of the individual is thus an assertion of individuation against the darkness of origins as well as death. This assertion is beyond the power of individuals, who are in no better position to construct their existence during life as they were able to enact their own conception and birth. The creation of the subject must be based on an originating myth beyond the immanent logic of reason. According to Strauß, the anomalous, miraculous act of creation in the work of art enacts the miraculousness of the creation of the subject.

In *Beginninglessness* Strauß makes this connection between creation of art and creation of the subject by embedding his reflections on art within the consciousness of a man considering his relation to his son, the final passages of the book describing the man as he watches the infant immediately after birth: "We greet the progeny which is our own and belongs to us and not that which suddenly intervenes and which we do not know, which has been banished by endless wisdom. In truth we have no access to the real mist out of which our consciousness arises. We press our understanding into a world closed to us."²⁶ Though we are normally closed to such an experience, art has the function of impressing on the recipient a sense of this surrounding mist, giving the recipient "a feeling for the diffuse occurrence before the event, for the unfinished form — for fog and clouds in all appearances, the stable as well as the ephemeral."²⁷

By showing that individuals cannot construct the foundations for their existence, Strauß undermines attempts to base social order on individual rights in order to move toward his aesthetic grounding of order. But in contending that the aesthetic event emerges as something completely foreign, which then breaks into the consciousness of the recipient, Strauß proposes a crucial shift in the understanding of the role of the aesthetic. While Kant insists that aesthetic judgment is only concerned with the

24. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

27. *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

structure of human experience and not with the things themselves,²⁸ Strauß emphasizes that the aesthetic moment is the result of an “emergent” reality which breaks into an existing order.²⁹

By locating aesthetic experience in a qualitatively distinct reality that breaks into human consciousness, Strauß treats the source of this emergent reality as foreign to the recipient in order to set up a strict divide between everyday experience and the aesthetic experience of “presence.” But in thereby creating this separation between profane and sacred reality, Strauß opposes Kant’s idea that this separation has its origins not in an aesthetic experience but in moral acts. For Kant, by revealing to us our relative weakness in the face of the power of nature, the experience of the sublime forces us to confront physical existence with a spiritual ideal. Rather than submitting to the physical power of nature and allowing our lives to be dictated by material needs and desires, we sacrifice our material existence in order to preserve our principles. The aesthetic experience of the sublime is thus an affirmation of our moral ability to defy the overwhelming power of nature and sacrifice material existence in favor of our “highest principles.”³⁰ Though Kant refers to these highest principles as practical reason, he also explicitly relates the experience of the sublime to the experience of God, sacrifice and the religious fervor of Jews and Muslims.³¹ In all these cases, the power of the sublime and of the sacred is based on the mind’s ability to imagine aesthetically the idea of morality.

As a result, “sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us.”³² The experience of the sacred does not depend, as with Strauß, on surrender to an outside force which invades the senses, but rather on the moral power to place ideals above physical survival and comfort. “This might actually reveals itself aesthetically only through sacrifice (which is a deprivation — though one that serves our inner freedom — in return for which it reveals in us an unfathomable depth of this supersensible

28. Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26.

29. He describes the fall of the Berlin Wall as an example of emergence in history, analogous to emergence in art. “What happened contained rather something of that eventfulness to which the biological sciences have given the term ‘emergence’: something new, something which could not be deduced from previous experience appeared *suddenly* and changed the systemic unity, in this case: the world.” Botho Strauß, “Der Aufstand gegen die sekundäre Welt: Anmerkungen zu einer Ästhetik der Anwesenheit,” in *Die Zeit* Vol. , Nr. 26 (June 22, 1990), p. 57.

30. Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 120-135.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

power, whose consequences extend beyond what we can foresee).”³³ The experience of the sublime brings the moral idea into the imagination as a concrete experience, first by forcing the imagination to recognize the limits of its ability to experience (in the mathematical sublime) and to control (in the dynamic sublime) sensual reality, and second by demonstrating to the imagination the mind’s ability to ignore this overwhelming power of the sensual in favor of a supersensual (rational or moral) ideal. The imagination experiences in the sublime a demonstration of the human capacity to sacrifice the sensual in favor of a supersensual ideal.³⁴

What is crucial for the comparison with Strauß, however, is that the imagination perceives the supersensual, not as a positive entity, but as a lack, an anomaly: “The imagination thereby acquires an expansion and a might that surpasses the one it sacrifices; but the basis of this might is concealed from it; instead the imagination *feels* the sacrifice or deprivation and at the same time the cause to which it is being subjugated.”³⁵ The experience of the moral ideal is an experience of deprivation. Yet this lack has a positive content determined by the relation, made palpable in the sacrifice, between the physical and the spiritual in the mind. For Kant, the “exhibition of the infinite can as such never be more than merely negative,”³⁶ and the experience which surpasses the imagination can only be perceived as

33. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

34. Jean-François Lyotard also recognizes the relation between the sublime and the sacred in Kant, but interprets this relation as one of opposition rather than of identity. “By sacrificing itself [in the experience of the sublime], the imagination sacrifices nature, which is aesthetically sacred, in order to exalt holy law.” (Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991), tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 189.) Lyotard contends that nature is itself sacred, even before the sacrifice and independent of a moral law. Yet Kant, in equating the sublime with the sacred, is careful to emphasize that no object is ever sublime or sacred in itself. Sacred objects do not exist, only the experience of the sacred, which occurs through the sacrifice of material objects according to the dictates of a moral law. The imagination does indeed sacrifice nature in order to exalt holy law, but it is only in this act of sacrifice that the experience of the sacred ever occurs. Moreover, this sacrifice of nature is not a sacrifice of the imagination itself, as Lyotard claims, but only of its “empirical use.” (Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 129) Imagination, in sacrificing its use in the empirical realm, “acquires an expansion and might!” (*Ibid.*, p. 129) in the supersensual realm. Lyotard’s attempt to interpret the sublime as “the sacrifice of the imagination” (Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 189) allows him to claim that the sublime is based on a sacrilegious destruction of the aesthetic realm of the imagination in favor of the rational realm of moral law. (*Ibid.*, p. 190) By opposing the moral faculty of the mind to the aesthetic imagination, Lyotard perpetrates the same fetishization of the aesthetic as natural force as Strauß. By contrast, Kant insists upon the essential role of moral law in creating the aesthetic experience of the sacred.

35. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

such once a rational and moral faculty comes into play. By contrast, Strauß treats aesthetic experience as if it were the direct mediator of a diffuse haze outside human experience and action. Consequently, he focuses on the sacred exclusively as a singular aesthetic event and ignores the underlying moral component. For Strauß, aesthetic “presence” does not derive from a distinct moral dimension but is itself the source of the moral ideal.

This shift in emphasis becomes most striking in Strauß’ attacks on the culture industry: “Whoever allows himself to be gawked at by millions of strangers during a private conversation damages the dignity and the wonder of the dialogue, face-to-face speech, and should be punished with the lifelong withdrawal of an intimate sphere. The regime of the telecratic public sphere is the unbloodiest rule of violence and at the same time the most comprehensive totalitarianism in history.”³⁷ Such an extreme reaction to German television can only make sense when aesthetic experience itself becomes sacred, rather than the moral order which underlies it. As a consequence of his stance, the solutions Strauß proposes for the perceived German crisis of culture are not moral (e.g., stop burning down refugee centers) but aesthetic: “so many wonderful writers still to be read — so much material and models for a young person to become a loner [*Einzelgänger*]. One only needs to be able to choose: the only thing one needs is the courage to secede, to turn away from the mainstream. I am convinced that the magical sites of seclusion, that a scattered bunch of inspired non-conformists are indispensable for the maintenance of a general system of understanding.”³⁸ Instead of mediating a collective moral sensibility to the individual, art for Strauß turns the individual away from the collective in order to create a minority of “inspired non-conformists” who maintain order for the masses. The aesthetic experience, rather than a moral sensibility, is itself the source of a sacred experience, which occurs in isolation from, and in opposition to, the views of the community and is only accessible to a select group of the “inspired.”

Matthias Schmitz and Thomas Assheuer have described both the aestheticism and elitism of Strauß’ conception of the sacred in art in which “emancipation can only be imagined as a ‘being freed from outside,’ the outside understood as a cultural shock.”³⁹ Yet their critique is misplaced, to the extent that they classify together and reject all attempts at cultural

37. Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” *op. cit.*, p. 207.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

39. Schmitz and Assheuer, *op. cit.*, p. ZB3. Cf. also Bernd Graff, “Wirklichkeit ist das, was wirkt. Oder: Die Schaubühne als ‘neutraler Boden der Nation’ — ‘Überlegungen zu Botho Strauß’ *Park und Besucher*,” in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), pp. 229-230.

creation, the construction of truth and the search for tradition: "Strauß abandons, under the cover of a neo-Gnosticism, the completely enlightened world of the (post)modern through the emergency exit of an imitation authenticity. Like liturgical phrases from a book of prayers, he emphasizes, not 'critique of the existing order,' but creation, not play, but truth, not concrete utopia, but 'origins and tradition'."⁴⁰ The consequence of Schmitz's and Assheuer's blanket rejection of "creation," "truth," and "tradition" in favor of "critique," "play," and "utopia" is an inability to differentiate between Strauß' fetishization of the aesthetic and other attempts to consider the sacred as an essential category for human experience.

As opposed to both Strauß' emphasis on the primacy of the purely aesthetic and the equally one-sided liberal rejection of the sacred as the basis for social order, Kant maintains the primacy of moral ideas for the construction of individual aesthetic experience. The ability to experience the sacred depends on the cultural development of moral ideas in a community. Thus an individual who does not exist in a proper cultural context will not be able to perceive the sublime. "What is called sublime by us, having been prepared through culture, comes across as merely repellent to a person who is uncultured and lacking in the development of moral ideas."⁴¹ The importance of aesthetic experience is a result of the fact that moral ideas are based in a collective and must be mediated to each individual.

The sacred is necessary as the aesthetic experience which performs this mediation. The experience of the sacred cannot be made by one artist for the benefit of the community, as in the case of science. Rather, because morality cannot be carried out by the few for the many, the sacred must be experienced independently and individually. This necessity explains the efficacy of "primitive" forms of social organization supported by taboos. As opposed to written laws, taboos only exist within the consciousness of individuals in a community. Though he describes the mechanism of taboos in a different way, Strauß recognizes their significance: "The old

40. Schmitz and Assheuer, *op. cit.*, p. ZB3.

41. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 124. Kant also notes, however that "the fact that a judgment about the sublime in nature requires culture . . . still in no way implies that it was initially produced by culture and then introduced to society by way of (say) mere convention. Rather, it has its foundation in human nature: in something that, along with common sense, we may require and demand of everyone, namely, the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to moral feeling." *Ibid.*, p. 125. But though we might reasonably demand moral feeling from everyone and the *idea* of the sublime can perhaps be deduced from human nature, the actual existence of such moral ideas will depend upon the characteristics of a particular community. Here, it is precisely conventions and rituals which present the experience of the sublime to each individual in order to reinforce moral ideas.

held rules to be sacred. Consider, on the one hand, how matter-of-factly, how 'efficiently' the taboo was able to provide protection and on the other, the arduous paths which must now be traveled by the enlightened in order, after the desolating destruction of taboos which has afflicted both nature and the soul, to construct safe zones against violent determination."⁴² Because they are inseparable from the community members' everyday actions, the taboos form a cultural system which is constantly being extended, reduced, and revised according to the exigencies affecting the people in the community in their everyday experience. As opposed to this self-regulating system, enlightenment attempts to replace taboos with a codified legal system that is complex and arduous, and which is consistently unable to simultaneously maintain the discipline and flexibility necessary to prevent the breakdown of values.

As the example of taboos illustrates, the aesthetic construction of order must be taken up anew everyday. "Everything which today seems to simply remind us of or seems to be *like* this struggle (the struggle with constricting ideas, with something bigger than life) is and remains this same old continuing struggle with the angel."⁴³ The inescapability of the struggle is a result of the fact that it must occur continuously within each individual in a community in order for moral ideas to survive. But while Strauß' insistence on the continuing significance of the struggle with the sacred is a valid response to the liberal attempt to deemphasize the importance of the sacred, his understanding of the terms of this struggle leads to serious problems in his political views.

Sacrifice and Scapegoat

Strauß claims that "the community is the truly mystical (deeply incomprehensible, most moving) human dimension."⁴⁴ But his vision of the sacred as the experience of the unexpected and foreign leads him to a specific notion of community based on the ideas of horror and victimization. In "Swelling Song of the Satyr" he discusses neo-Nazi violence as a breaking of taboos but also as a form of sacrifice. He explains the functioning of sacrifice not as sacrifice of material comfort in favor of spiritual convictions but as a violent victimization of a scapegoat, which serves to reinforce the belief of the community in its values: "In *Violence and the Sacred* René Girard writes: 'The rite is the repetition of an original spontaneous

42. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

lynching which guaranteed order in the community.' The stranger, the traveler is captured and stoned when there is unrest in the city. The scapegoat as the target of violence is never just an object of hate, but also a thing of worship: it attracts the common hate of all in order to liberate the community of this hate. The scapegoat is a metabolic vessel."⁴⁵ The scapegoat idea is based on the assumption that aggression constantly builds in a society and must periodically be released. If this excess aggression is not vented on a sacrificial victim or scapegoat, it will ultimately explode in a frenzy of violence which will destroy society.⁴⁶ Two difficulties with this argument are that the assumption of an ever increasing excess of aggression in society has never been satisfactorily demonstrated and that Girard ignores an essential distinction between scapegoat and sacrifice.⁴⁷

Strauß suggests that neo-Nazi violence in Germany conforms to Girard's idea of scapegoating in that victims are chosen at random and not according to any particular guilt or distinguishing characteristics. As Enzensberger notes about the neo-Nazis, however: "Germanness is a slogan lacking content, while only serving to occupy the empty spaces in the brain. Just as easily as Turks or Vietnamese, the perpetrator could be 'bashing' cripples, homeless, the retarded, the elderly, or schoolchildren, or even, if he were not too cowardly to do so, West or East Germans, depending on the perpetrator's geographic location."⁴⁸ But Girard's theories notwithstanding, this neo-Nazi scapegoating does nothing to reinforce community values. Strauß admits this, but only because he believes condemnation of the neo-Nazis amongst the German people is not as universal as the condemnation of left-wing terrorism, to which he ascribes the status of successful scapegoating. Both instances of terrorism broke taboos. For Strauß, the earlier terrorism was successful because the entire population in Germany, in its unified rejection of violence, reaffirmed the

45. Strauß, "Anschwellender Bocksgesang," *op. cit.*, p. 205.

46. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 31 and René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), p. 26.

47. For a more extended discussion of these arguments concerning violence and aggression, see Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1969), pp. 61-64 and David Pan, "Enemies, Scapegoats and Sacrifice: A Note on Palaver and Ulmen," *Telos* 93 (Fall 1992), pp. 83-88. For a further discussion of these issues in connection with Strauß, see also, Peter Glotz, "Freunde, es wird ernst," in *Wochenpost* (February 25, 1993); and Eckhard Nordhofen, "Vor der Bundeslade des Bösen," in *Die Zeit* (April 9, 1993), both cited in Berka, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

48. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Aussichten auf den Bürgerkrieg* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 26.

broken taboo: left-wing terrorism, contrary to its intent, “created a negative harmony in the rejection of horror.”⁴⁹ Though Strauß criticizes left-wing terrorism for breaking taboos, he contends that its violence also led to a reaffirmation of values — a “negative harmony” in the face of horror. In this Girardian reading, violence is considered sacred because it horrifies horror, infusing a sense of morality into a community through fear and awe at the consequences of the breakdown of order. Even when Strauß describes the outbreak of right-wing terror, its horror has the same structure as that of an aesthetic event: “we fear it, we seek to prevent it with all our remaining powers, yet we have no secure means of defense when Bromios, naked horror, breaks into our abstract world, and the structure of simulacra and simulators, which seemed to stabilize reality so well, from one day to the next begins to crumble.”⁵⁰ The inevitable breakthrough of the unmediated and uncontrollable horror of Bromios (one of the manifestations of Dionysos in Greek legend) is both Strauß’ fear and wish to the extent that horror is the ultimate aesthetic experience and fear the foundation of moral order.

Against this vision of morality as a surrender to horror and fear, Kant defines the sacred and the moral as an overcoming of it. According to Kant’s interpretation, fear cannot be the basis of morals or of the sublime because it is based on a concern for one’s own physical well-being, whereas both morality and the sublime depend on a disdain for the physical in favor of a supersensible reality.⁵¹ The experience of the sublime only originates with reference to an act of self-sacrifice. Individuals negate their physical being for the benefit of a value considered greater than the individual. But although sacrifice negates the individual, it also lends spiritual value to the individual through the linking of the individual to the ideal. As Enzensberger notes: “One must even ask oneself whether what one calls culture would be possible without this willingness to sacrifice one’s own life.”⁵²

Unlike acts such as self-sacrifice, the scapegoat mechanism does not create moral values. Rather, it is the symptom and continuation of a total collapse of collective values. “When [the neo-Nazi] has a choice between Germanness and a motorcycle, there is no difficult decision. Since his

49. Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” *op. cit.*, p. 205. I follow here Helga Kaußen’s reading of this passage in “Der Sündenbock als Gärtner. Oder: warum verstiegene Blöken nicht mit Begriffen beizukommen ist,” in *Weimarer Beiträge*, Vol. 40, Nr. 2 (1994), p. 294.

50. Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” *op. cit.*, p. 205.

51. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 122-123.

52. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

future is unimportant to him, it is not surprising that he does not care about his own country either."⁵³ Scapegoating does not create morals but is a consequence of their disintegration, and such "sacrificial violence" cannot be the source of moral order. "Violence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues."⁵⁴ In order to avoid instrumentalization, sacrifice must itself constitute the rejection of instrumentalization. It does this by enacting the moral act of self-sacrifice for a higher good. The creation of a distinction between the profane and the sacred is thus not prior to the moral act, as Strauß contends, but the essence of it.

Community and Nation

The sense of self-sacrifice described by Kant and Enzensberger, as opposed to Strauß' invocation of the scapegoat mechanism, only functions properly in face-to-face context. Enzensberger points out that it is important to "form a close tie between the helper and the needy. This not only allows a concentration of material and emotional energy. In place of abstraction, there is a concrete relation. Every attempt to help and to be aided brings unavoidable conflicts which can only be dealt with if the parties know each other."⁵⁵ Face-to-face contact is not only necessary for properly resolving conflicts, it also guarantees the legitimate functioning of sacrifice. As with taboo, a sacrifice for the community can only make sense if the individual has a concrete and everyday interaction with the people who are meant to be aided by the sacrifice. Otherwise, the sacrifice will become as abstract and destructive as the scapegoat mechanism, in which there is no concrete relation between victim and aggressor, and the victims are chosen precisely because of their foreignness.

The issue of concrete relations between people is the point at which Strauß' notions of the sacred and community deteriorate into a nationalism depending much more on scapegoating than on sacrifice. The community for Strauß is not based on everyday interaction but ultimately on the German language. "But today the idea of the German people (*Volk*) does not exist as a secret treasure in the soul of the individual, which could be the basis of his or her power. The German people is nothing more than a moody, complacent majority power; an extinguisher of all ideal force. It only speaks German out of laziness. Most of its impulses and interests

53. *Ibid.*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

54. Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

55. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

would be better expressed in American English.”⁵⁶ By focussing on the German language, Strauß commits himself to an abstract idea of both community and culture. He assumes that by reading texts by Goethe or Kafka instead of watching movies by Coppola or Spielberg, the Germans could maintain a sense of both the sacred and the community. This literary and nationalist understanding of culture ignores the crucial significance of concrete actions and social relations for the constitution of a community. Taboos and sacrifices — the everyday expression and basis of community — are also the basis for the aesthetic significance of works of art. Once art is separated from this everyday context and defined in terms of the German language, it has moved from the self-constituting realm of community to the manipulated level of the nation. Instead of arising out of the taboos and sacrifices individuals negotiate with each other in their everyday lives, culture becomes fixed not only within a canon of texts, but limited to an attitude of passive reception.

The Aesthetics of the Nation

Strauß conceives of participation in culture not in terms of decisions and actions but in terms of a passive reception of the aesthetic. This understanding of culture whose goal is “to allow oneself to be overwhelmed”⁵⁷ is not only valid for the reception of poetry or music but also of social experience. The opening to “Swelling Song of the Satyr” describes in the third person an admirer of the complexity of society, which “must appear to every outsider, so long as he is not afflicted with a political malady, as an incomprehensible piece of art rather than as a boiling kettle, a ‘hell of others’.”⁵⁸ The individual does not relate to the group as a participant engaged in Sartre’s hell of human interaction but rather as an outside observer.⁵⁹ As this passage suggests, Strauß extends the attitude of reception and submission beyond the relation to the work of art into the relation to a collective, thereby rejecting concrete human interaction in favor of the adoration of society as an aesthetic vision.

In his recent play, “Final Chorus,” Strauß depicts this transposition of the aesthetic attitude of wonder into the social realm. The most prominent effect of this transposition is the immediate subsumption of the community within the nation. This subsumption occurs as a direct consequence

56. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

57. Strauß, “Aufstand gegen die sekundäre Welt,” *op. cit.*, p. 37.

58. Strauß, “Anschwellender Bocksgesang,” *op. cit.*, p. 202.

59. My reading of this passage is based on Kaussen, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300.

of Strauß' attempt to construct identity out of the sacred moments of "presence." The first of these moments occurs in the first act, in which a group of people stand before a camera in order to be photographed as a group. Instead of being constructed along acts of obedience, domination, and sacrifice, which occur between specific people tied together by their common context, the unity of the group is constructed in the scene as a photograph. While Greiner argues that the focus on a photographic document rather than on human interaction is meant as a critique of West German society and the aesthetics of representation,⁶⁰ the problems with Strauß' depiction lie in that he reinforces an understanding of community which has been subsumed under the idea of a German "*Volk*." The photographer's manipulation of the group into an abstract unity is repeated by Strauß when he situates identity within the group photograph.

The conflicts which arise in the scene — how individuals can be defined within such a photograph, who will choreograph and take the photograph, who might be left out of the picture — are all issues which can arise if community is conceived only as a nation. In this case, representation takes precedence over the mechanics of concrete relations, and in the scene the constant bantering of the group must stop and is in fact silenced by the snap of the camera at the end of the scene: "The Woman: If you would be so kind as to stop your conversation while I photograph you. *The Chorus begins to hum quietly. Darkness.*"⁶¹ Talk gives way both to the picture and to the unifying hum, regardless of whether it is the professional photographer or the passerby who takes the picture. Like the cry of "Germany," which in the middle of the scene brings the group to silence and attempts to create one of the moments of "presence" in the play, there is no issue of direct interaction and sacrifice which would be the basis for the experience of the sacred. Instead, there is only a suppression of interaction for the benefit of a unifying because homogenizing moment.

The same lack of human interaction characterizes the second attempt to depict a transcendent moment in the play, when an architect searching in an apartment for his client opens a door and sees her naked in front of the bathtub. This "oversight" becomes an experience of sacred immediacy which structures the relation between the two for the rest of the act. Here the transformation of experience which Titania attempts in vain to enact purposefully by exposing herself in *The Park* is successful because the experience is accidental. Strauß describes such a moment in

60. Greiner, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

61. Strauß, *Schlußchor* (Munich: Hanser, 1991), p. 32.

Beginninglessness as that of “blind passion” opposed to the Enlightenment tendencies of a love story. “Every woman can become a saint of desire when the fleetingness with which we gaze upon her leaves behind a heightened, clear imagination. When she becomes totally and absolutely present to us for a moment in this single point in time every adventure, every story, every word disappears like material beyond the horizon of events.”⁶² Instead of a moment of decision, and an embeddedness in everyday events, Strauß’ construction of the basis of the sacred is a sudden, accidental and unexpected vision, as if the sacred were a random event. Once again, he elevates the abstract photographic moment to a sacred level. There is no concrete relation between the spectator and the naked woman. Instead, the situation of an accidental exposure creates the sacred as a random intervention of fate which transforms history.

In this construction of the sacred, the oversight exposing the naked woman is equated with the oversight which opened the boundary between Hungary and Austria leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of East Germany.⁶³ These events are described in the third act of the play: “They’re at the brink of chaos over there. They open the border today and close it again tomorrow. Simply as an oversight. Perhaps something will happen, merely because they are constantly confused.”⁶⁴ The fateful intervention which changes history is disconnected from any human agency. Rather than an outgrowth of individual acts of rejection of the East German state system adding up to an overwhelming collective power opposed to the violence of the state,⁶⁵ Strauß constructs the fall of the Berlin wall as a consequence of the state’s chaos and confusion, as if the “emergent” reality of revolution had come from above as a kind of divine intervention.

Instead of East German mass demonstrations, church gatherings, and mass exodus (all results of a collection of private decisions), Strauß chooses to focus exclusively on the East German government decision to open the borders. For the play, this is the moment that changes history and causes events to unfold. But in fact this primarily aesthetic moment in the play was much more a consequence than a cause, and the true history-making decisions lay in the private choices of the East German people, one by one withdrawing support from the government and risking their

62. Strauß, *Beginnlosigkeit*, *op. cit.*, p. 103-4.

63. Cf. Greiner, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

64. Strauß, *Schlußchor*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

65. See Arendt, *op. cit.*, p. 51-56, for a discussion of the opposition between power, whose effectiveness depends upon the consensus of a large number of people, and violence, which depends upon the implements of war.

lives to defy it to the point that the government was no longer able to use violence against them because its soldiers no longer obeyed government orders. Strauß' decision to focus on the fall of the Wall as the history-making event which changes lives is perhaps a typically West German reaction to events for which West Germany remained a passive onlooker. Yet it is also an expression of Strauß' idea that history and the sacred are unexpected and therefore alien to individual action.

In addition to presenting history as spectacle, the final act also considers history as individual memory. Here, Anita struggles with her mother and then with Patrick, the historian, in order to determine the role her father played within her family history, on the one hand, and in German history, on the other. However, because the family drama concerning her mother's and father's loyalty to each other is merged with the national drama of resistance to Hitler, individual identity is immediately understood in terms of national identity. Though Anita's emotions within the scene are most excited by intimations of her mother's possible unfaithfulness to her father and vice versa, in the play these issues of personal loyalty within her family are not important in themselves but only insofar as they relate to the role the father played in national history. After the argument with the mother is abruptly interrupted by her departure to participate in the "fall of the Wall" celebrations, the argument with Patrick revolves around this historical role, and his reference to personal family history is regarded by Anita as "taboo."⁶⁶ But this taboo is a consequence of the overriding importance of the family drama for her psyche: she reacts violently to Patrick's suggestion that her father's main preoccupation was not with resistance to Hitler but with sleeping with the wives of Nazi officials: "*Anita stands up and strikes Patrick in the face. 'You twisted, cold, dirty slanderer . . .'*"⁶⁷

Though for Anita the family drama is the primary site of memory and emotion, this drama is pushed aside at the end of the play by Anita's allegorical encounter with the eagle. The entire scene merges personal and national identity, which is precisely the problem of a German nationalism which links a concrete struggle between individuals with an abstract problem of what to do with an oversized German eagle. The obscuring of the family drama by the symbol of nation is the consequence of Strauß' preoccupation with aesthetic "presence" and national identity — to the detriment of the moral foundation of the sacred in which individual sacrifices define community.

66. Strauß, *Schlußchor*, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

67. *Ibid.*