Earlier they denied people schooling; today what they teach them in school is to act with as little imagination as possible.

(Jonke, qtd. in Friedl 99)

Best Witchcraft is Geometry

To the magician's mind —

His ordinary acts are feats

To thinking of mankind.

(Dickinson 517)

Each week I plot your equations dot for dot, xs against ys in all manner of algebraical relation, and every week they draw themselves as commonplace geometry, as if the world of forms were nothing but arcs and angles. God's truth, Septimus, if there is an equation for a curve like a bell, there must be an equation for one like a bluebell, and if a bluebell, why not a rose? Do we believe nature is written in numbers?

(Stoppard 37)

Huey, Dewey, and Louie: Jonke's Best Readers

In her contribution to a collection of critical essays, Gert Jonke's fellow dramatist and novelist Elfriede Jelinek compares his writing to an ant farm excitedly being displayed to Donald Duck by his nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie. They are thrilled by the intricate, functional passageways, the labyrinthine tunnels, the surprisingly elaborate network of crosscuts and interconnections the ants have made, all visible, to the boys’ fascinated gaze, through the glass walls of the container. Donald does not respond in the same spirit of captivation or even appreciation, though; he is dismayed, even horrified. Not that he's afraid of ants, Jelinek notes, but he’s worried about the mess they might make if they get loose in his tidy room or in the farm itself. A different idea of order from the one the boys have been observing blinds him to any sense of the daunting but beautiful complexity before him. The nephews, receptive and alert, are looking directly at the right thing; Donald, praiseworthy in his desire for neat surroundings, is too conventional and skittish, so he misses both the point and the beauty (Jelinek 17).

Most readers, Jelinek implies, even good ones, are like Donald, by no means imperceptive to the orderly arrangement of literature, intelligently able to appreciate the expected sequence of beginning, middle, and end as applied to a discernible story line—even allowing for those parts to be lightly transposed—but able and willing to dedicate their effort only to structures to which they bring prior understanding. Any alternative to their prefabricated sense of proper arrangement is not just a challenge, but a threat. They’ll try a stretch, but a slight one only. Readers who have made their way through the adventure of reading Gert Jonke, though—anything, in German or in English, for the first or the hundredth time—and who have found their way to this casebook are more likely to resemble the nephews than the uncle. Especially if they are new to Jonke, they marvel at the beauty of a complex patterning that they can see intuitively, but may need some help articulating. Enthusiasm in studying the farm itself is the starting point for further exploration; Huey, Dewey, and Louie can respond with wonder because they have either cast aside their previous notions of order in favor of the cohesive intricacy right before their eyes or...
lacked notions in the first place and were thus free to react directly to what they saw for themselves. But where do they go from there? Uncle Donald would have no need for this casebook. Since he declines to examine the complex ant farm which is Jonke's Geometric Regional Novel in the first place, what use would he have for a map or a guide to it? He's well provided for elsewhere anyway. The "critical establishment" (O'Brien) reinforces in readers like him a self-assurance and a conventional sense of knowingness that actively discourage receptiveness to uncertainty. Some components of this casebook are the large book-review supplements on both sides of the Atlantic (with prominent blurbs and expensive publishers' ads); the best-seller lists and their spin-offs (the "hundred-greatest" and what-every-literate-person-has-to-have-read lists, more often than not generated by publishers with a financial interest); the now-defunct Oprah book club or the PBS and cable shows with book talk for the more high-minded; writers' tours of chain book stores and of colleges and universities; reviews in the right magazines and journals—in all, an efficient system of guaranteeing that Donald will find out about books, but a system largely consumerist-based and of financial interests; commanding the resources to keep a lock on what writers would be covered, as well as how they would be covered. The overriding concern of that system for sales cannot but keep "books and authors... reduced only to marketplace value" (O'Brien). Often enough, the purportedly independent literary establishment is the tail wagged by the dog of writers' agents, of publishers' press packages and publicity departments. Buzz becomes a value in itself, quality an afterthought. Donald's sources validate his sense of what art is by justifying his unwillingness to look deep into the ant farm itself and thereby risk a little confusion. If the ant farm never even gets noticed, it can hardly be important by the self-assured lights of the standard critical organs; if it's caught sight of by accident, it can be easily shielded, unread, with a warning label like "experimental." That usually means, as Chesterton once said of Christianity, not that it's been weighed in the balance and found wanting, but that it's been found hard and not tried.

By contrast, even though we always see Huey, Dewey, and Louie together, "reading...is a solitary experience" (O'Brien), and when the boys regroup from their solitude, they have no one but themselves to talk to for further insight or background. They won't find Jonke discussed where their uncle reads about books. No one is writing about the ant farm the boys are so taken with. That is why the Center for Book Culture, with its related activities of two journals (Review of Contemporary Fiction and CONTEXT), a publishing house (Dalkey Archive Press), and a series of on-line casebooks (see McLaughlin), exists on a solid base of critical inquiry and with a publishing program of independent selectivity (O'Brien). No publishing program can ever be totally independent of course, but some ventures are much less beholden to commercial interests than others. So after the boys have talked to one another—the irreplaceable first stimulus to discovery—they can turn to the Center for Book Culture, to critics who have been looking at the ant farm perhaps longer, who may have discovered logical principles to the systems and layers of tunneling, who have been studying the matter and so have more background about the materials from which the farm is made, about the structures that provide a place for the ants to thrive, to increase and multiply (a novel being a living organism for each new reader). As the series editor of the web-based casebooks expresses it, "Modern and contemporary novels that participate in the tradition of formal and stylistic experimentation seek to challenge readers. But sometimes their challenges can be overwhelming for readers, especially those whose reading experiences have been shaped by the tenets of literary realism"(McLaughlin). The casebooks are meant "to open up avenues for exploring each novel and to open up a dialogue of ideas among our contributors and each new reader" (McLaughlin). To quote John O'Brien, who started these initiatives, "at the heart of our mission is an educational, interpretive function that goes well beyond what most publishers are doing, or even need to do."

Not that there doesn't exist helpful material on Jonke in English, but the contributions can be counted on one hand, even one with fingers missing. In other languages, Jonke has been well served by a variety of astute, sensitive commentaries on all facets of his work (stage plays and radio plays, film scripts, essays, extended monologues, poems, fiction recognizable as such, and miniatures—Jonke calls them "insect pieces"—that challenge the borders between poetry and prose) practically since his emergence to acclaim on publication of Geometric Regional Novel, his first work, in 1969. Critical notice increased after Jonke became the first laureate of the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize in 1977 (Kaukorot and Pfszer 202-04; Reich-Ranicki 7-13); as the works cited here show, one can find essays on Jonke's writing from almost every imaginable pertinent standpoint: regional literature, experimentalist techniques, political content, postmodernism, structuralist aesthetics, musical form, neomannerism, to name only a few. These critical materials are most useful to those who can read them, but that is not likely to include many who have come to this casebook. At a realistic estimate, no less than 95 percent of the secondary material is in German; another 4.5 percent is in French and Italian. Almost all the rest is silence, at least in English. A reader's primary concern is naturally for the primary work, not for an apparatus, and that work of course exists in English; Johannes W. Vazulik's translation of Geometrischer Heimatroman, as Geometric Regional Novel, enjoys Jonke's own esteem (Jonke, "Interview"). Readers lacking German or French or Italian, however, are missing rich and informative communal support, essays that can help them see more clearly the beauty of the ant farm itself. In summing up the critical discussions of Jonke in other languages and in working with fellow contributors whose essays are in English, the casebook editor adopts the stated aims of the Center for Book Culture, which hopes to put materials at the disposal of interested readers beyond national and linguistic boundaries (McLaughlin).

As for that previous critical material in English, Vazulik has written an afterward to the Dalkey Archive Press edition of Geometric Regional Novel, has contributed summarizing general articles on Jonke to both Contemporary Authors (vol. 177) and the Dictionary of Literary Biography (vol. 85), and has published an "Introduction to the Prose Narratives of Gert Jonke" that carefully and lucidly treats most of the main themes and processes of the fiction. That is almost all, though, in a way, it is almost enough; especially in the "Introduction," Vazulik observes Jonke's fiction so carefully and closely as to make his contribution essential. Readers of Geometric Regional Novel will find in his study a clear set of observations for contemplating and rereading the novel in greater depth. So why this casebook, when Vazulik's work is such a reliable guide? First, one commentator, however perceptive, does not a community make. Vazulik broke a path on which others now need to follow him. By the nature and scope of his task, too, Vazulik has a different focus from the one this on-line casebook is meant to take; the specific charge of the present editor is to offer a kind of critical survey, "an overview of the novel, its place in the author's oeuvre, and its critical reception" (McLaughlin) and to gather essays which "offer different approaches to the novel and different interpretive strategies from which to understand it"(McLaughlin). No one critic could conduct a thoroughgoing discussion of any literary work from across the whole spectrum of approaches, while the combination of essays by the individual contributors to this casebook suggests as no single treatment could the range of possible readings of Geometric Regional Novel. As Linda DeMeritt put it in a conversation with the casebook editor, "Geometric Regional Novel is so rich that there will always be more to say about it."

This casebook offers an anthology of essays, then, supplementing the excellent single article by Vazulik—regrettably too occupied with other obligations to be able to contribute to this collection—and opening out into additional directions the exchange among readers, contributors, and writer. Here is a necessarily sketchy look at the casebook contents and their general correlation with earlier critical studies as cited in the bibliographies of the contributors' essays. Warning: this is a preliminary orientation only.

• An American creative writer and genre critic (Campbell), citing Nietzsche and working in the heritage of Culler and Kesting, examines Jonke's work in the light of structuralist poetics, including the musical form of the folk song, and of social devices of control, especially economic; (for more on musical form, see Schönherr).

• An Austrian-bred editor, critic, and professor of Germanic studies (Caputo-May)—along with Aue one of the first critics of Geometric Regional Novel working outside Germany and Austria—writes about Jonke's parodic use of bureaucratic language to reveal political dominance in regional settings, a theme also engaged by the contributors to Polheim's collection, by Donnenberg, Düsing, and Rossbacher, and by Pichler.

• A professor of philosophy (Cook) writes about geometry as literally a "worldly measure" and how its claims to reflect nature involve an examination of the perceptual act and of categories of truth, especially the correspondence and the coherence theories of truth, a topic that also informs the work of Aue, Gamper, Kunne ("Was ist wirklich?"), and Schrembs; Cook then makes political and social applications in the spirit of Pichler on politics in Jonke's work.

• A literary critic, translator, and professor (DeMeritt) examines Geometric Regional Novel in a context of postmodernism, even of a kind of neopostmodernism, as do Bartsch, Beckermann, Esslin, and Kunne ("Das Wirklichkeitskonzept"); Amann pursues these themes in a somewhat different way in the introductory essay to a volume of critical essays he edited.

• A Viennese essayist and student of literature in German and English (Leiter) reads Geometric Regional Novel in light of kitch as ideology and of the politically charged clichés of language that shape regional literature—Adorno and Benjamin (in Arato and Gebhardt), the Polheim collection, Donnenberg, Rossbacher—as well as in light of representation through various means of rhetorical discourse, along the lines of Russegger, Shklovsky, Széli.
Sebald's observations; it could never come about that crowds would strew rose petals in his path or chase him down the streets of Vienna waving autograph books. Jonke was ethical problem of searching for truth is an intrinsically direct and reciprocal function of the aesthetic problem of how reliably structures and arrangements of words can express truth to be a messenger who is not shot because the message is so unwelcome, to become in any way popular, Musil regarded as a sign of moral and artistic failure (47).

America, she would answer that her job was different from that of the advertising agencies, to which they should turn if they want to feel good (34). Not to be resisted and rejected, superficiality and self-satisfaction. When she would meet with the frequent objection that her work was too grotesque and pessimistic to reflect conditions in a democratic, affluent "reconstruction" (Luftkrieg 14). Closer to home, lest readers of this casebook think their own country is essentially different, are the reactions of Flannery O'Connor to this brand of aspects without which Geometric Regional Novel would surely still have a profound impact—confronting the work of art unmediated is the best guide to reading it—that can only be increased by further pertinent information.

Pertinent (helpful, too, if the casebook editor is doing his job) but not always direct; that is why the essay is called "Circling the Village" in and around which Geometric Regional Novel takes place. The narrator of the novel starts at the center, as it were, by invoking the square, but he backs away with great regularity to take the larger view of the geographical setting, to consider the hills, the woods, the river, the bridge and other surroundings as well as the chronological setting, moving back into history, folklore, legend, and chronicle so as to deal more lucidly—if that is possible—with the present. The picture of the village itself at a given point eventually comes all the clearer for the journeys away from it; considering the essentially digressive nature of the whole narrative strategy, in fact, it may not be paradoxical to say that the most direct and complete understanding of the village results not just from moving around within its confines, both in space (geography) and in time (history), but also then diverging into the hillsides and the general surroundings. The hope is that context will be a good frame for text, just as the departures from the village itself define its actual scope. Of course any reader of the casebook is free to do what Donald's nephews—however they're named—will do by healthy instinct, which is to take what they can use and to leave the rest. The casebook editor takes sole responsibility for the translation into English of any quotations originally in German but cited here in English. Except in the interview with Jonke, all the sources are cited for ease of reference by those who wish to consult the original German.

Fossils at Birth?: Ethics, Esthetics, and Literary Renown

Sixty years after his death, Robert Musil is now a canonical Austrian writer, even a "classic" in his own country and abroad, a status he would have hated. Well before World War I, he was "obsessed" with "the disjunction between the quality of a work and its relative popular success" (Musil 46). As he put it, "every good book ... reaches only a small group, and it reaches each group in a limited variety of ways... The success that goes beyond this, I believe, in a matter in itself, with special (psychological, pathological) motives" (47).

No writer was ever more concerned with "pure" writing itself, with its intrinsic elements and their structure, than Musil, so his concern for a book's reception may appear tangential to his main concerns. Literary production and consumption—use relevant market terms—do not take place in social isolation, however; W. G. Sebald notes that "those who take up writing as a profession cannot as a rule be numbered among the most light-hearted of people" (Beschreibung 11), but there is more to the actual professing of letters than is often acknowledged. Literary production and consumption are not social isolates, and the larger sphere of the writer's efforts are almost always bound to meet with active or passive resistance. The culture in which writers work has forced them for the greater part of the past two centuries, as we will presently see, to be provocative and subversive of the prevailing values around them; they have no choice but to be dissenters in some way if they are to work with any integrity. Writers have "let themselves in for the impossible pursuit of finding the truth" (Sebald, Besprechung 11), and the truth, which provably sets us free, is always hard, for exactly that reason, and will thus always be resisted. Sebald points out in another book that no artist can pursue an aesthetic divorced from an ethic and still do justice to that aesthetic, for it then turns into total self-indulgence (Luftkrieg 47-52).

Even before they had any map or compass, Huey, Dewey, and Louie did just fine in their open responsiveness to the complex beauty of the ant farm, but now they may want their explorations verified and extended from various perspectives—vital, ecological sections, individual features magnified—to help them perceive the terrain more accurately. The warning repeated: it would be fatal to a better understanding of Jonke's Geometric Regional Novel if readers of this casebook substituted the very crude outline given here for actually reading what is outlined. Only by eliminating almost every particular and abstracting the remaining ones can a map give a fair idea of what it schematizes, and the brief statement of content in the paragraph above is much too rough even to qualify as a map. Instead, it offers a first general guide to the casebook contents, tying in the contributions here to the history of comment on Jonke's novel by way of crude inventory, the first step to more specific mapping.
The struggle to understand “experimental” writers is an essential strategy of their very utterance, not an arbitrary indulgence.

It should be pointed out right away, however, that the term “experimental” is used here in quotation marks because Jonke specifically rejects it in the standard meaning. When the casebook editor met him (Jonke, “Interview”) if he would describe himself as an experimentalist, his answer was yes, but only in the sense that all writers trying to be honest are experimenters, looking deep inside to find what they’re made of in regard to the craft of language, to discover through trial and error—that is, through experimentation—what they are capable of in the use of words and how they will shape their utterance and be shaped by it (Jonke, “Individum” 19-21). In Jonke’s view the very act of writing is an experiment to see what coherence will emerge. Yes and no. “Experimental” is indeed a daunting term, with its faint overtones of the mad scientist, so it can isolate a writer who would be better understood as working hard to shape the clearest forms in the simplest ways, no matter how arcane those ways may seem. Still, Gert Jonke is not a mainstream realist like Philip Roth or Penelope Lively, Edna O’Brien or Louise Begley. In his own literary heritage, his fiction resembles more that of novelists like Musil or Ise Aichinger, Ingeborg Bachmann or Inge Merkel, Peter Handke or Oswald Wiener or Andreas Okopenko, who—despite huge differences in every other way—achieve their coherence in form by devices that cause us to look away from the “what-happened-next” story aspects first and into the structural processes and materials themselves; other novelists, by contrast—Heimito von Doderer and Albert Drach, Christof Roßmayr and Doron Rabinovici (again, incompatibly different otherwise)—artfully lead us through a more seemingly conventional story-driven structure as a primary way of governing their artistic technique. The “story” of Geometric Regional Novel is quickly told: two speakers debate about whether they can or can’t cross the village square; after they examine and discuss, with interpolations by others, all manner of apparent obstacles to their goal, they end up achieving it. In a way, nothing is left out by this summary; in a more essential way, everything is. The very nature of Jonke’s art presumes conventionalism, since much of his work embodies a critique of the very language he is using while in the process of using it. Only if we are willing to ponder his refractions of syntax and grammar into unusual angles that ask us to move away from our expected ideas of sequence and proportion in a sentence, only if we can surrender to his way of developing plot by structures that have closer kinship with musical forms and devices of lyric poetry than with linear narrative can we find a home in Jonke’s world.

English-language readers especially may welcome the assurance that Jonke’s comparative obscurity is an inevitable characteristic of his method; instead of worrying about what’s wrong with Jonke as a writer or with themselves as readers, that assurance may help them keep their focus.

If aesthetics and ethics are intertwined, then artistic process and structure are not unrelated to political and social questions. Techniques in the arts that could loosely be called experimental or avant-garde tend to develop in times of relative change and instability, in the tensions leading to wars and the upheaval of their aftermaths, in the continuing unrest of revolutions political, industrial, and technological. Especially in times of social turmoil, political leaders will call for a “return to normalcy” (Warren G. Harding) for the same reasons that artists are trying to “make it new” and exhorting their colleagues to do the same (Ezra Pound). In both instances, there is a search for a workable order, but the artist has been forced for many decades to be more provocative and subversive than conformist. It has been a long time since “normalcy” has been anything but a vehicle for complacency. Of course the artist can block provocation of self and readers by taking refuge in wilfully “advanced” and self-indulgent avant-gardism that never engages any truth (Sebald, Luftkrieg 52-65). Their putatively radical technique is only packaging, does not grow out of any urgent need to communicate what the technique is applied to; that is what disturbs many about an artist like Salvador Dalí, for instance. When they are genuine, challenges to the prevailing means of expression and structures of representation are meant to undermine techniques grown too stale and outworn to engage thought or feeling, to bear any weight of truthful experience, especially when literary subjects and language appear to have been co-opted to the political aim of bolstering consumerist goals.

Jonke is one of a striking number of new Austrian novelists and dramatists who came to notice during the decade1965-1975; Peter Handke is perhaps the best known, but the group is marked by sheer quantity as well as quality. It will not come as news to readers that this period was filled with turbulent social and political upheaval, so much so as to make “The Sixties” even more legendary in Europe than in the United States as a time of upheaval; for Austrian literature, Schmidt-Dengler explicitly links politics and literary experimentation by placing all the experimental directions of this period under a heading called “Reorientation 1968” (223-34). A great deal of literary ferment had been taking place anyway in Austria, often as a conscious alternative to a talented but increasingly entrenched group of older writers in Vienna, the P.E.N. Club, rigidified by misplaced traditionalism, combatively conservative—to the point of dirty fighting—in their artistic aims and political principles, consciously working to neutralize and isolate a groundswell of avant-gardism and iconoclastic method, which they openly attacked (Schmidt-Dengler 282) (though more than one of their number, most notably Dodderer, broke ranks by expressing enthusiasm for the experiments of the younger writers). After decades of rhetorically lofty verse whose formal diction and structure they saw fatally requisitioned for Nazi bombast, a group of poets began restoring lyric utterance to authenticity by using colloquial and dialect elements, substituting the language of popular culture for the mechanized rhythms and rigidified formalities of consciously aestheticizing verse, while concrete poets shifted fundamental attention to the building blocks of expression as the means of expression itself, a process adopted by Jonke and other novelists. For some time, the “Vienna Group,” a drastically experimental group of writers, musicians, and graphic artists—sometimes the same artist was all three—had been staging their highly provocative, even outrageous “literary cabarets,” forerunners of the widespread “happenings” of somewhat later. Associations, collectives, journals, festivals, and performances of all sorts, both inside the cultural bastion of Vienna and in the provincial cities—mainly Graz and Klagenfurt, but everywhere in the land—fostered these new orientations, giving a whole generation of artists focus, definition, and voice. A mere list of highlights would make an essay in itself: the “Forum Stadtpark” in Graz, which gave birth to the Graz Authors’ Collective (with which Jonke was associated) and its manifesto, signed by dozens of writers, of artistic freedom through democratic access to publication; literary journals, especially manuskripte, which was dedicated only to new writers, but also Wort in der Zeit, protokolle, and Literatur und Kritik; the “steirischer herbst,” a groundbreaking annual festival of new work; the Society for Austrian Literature (Gesellschaft für österreichische Literatur), which redressed a long-lasting frustration of revolutions political, industrial, and technological. Especially in times of social turmoil, political leaders will call for a “return to normalcy” (Warren G. Harding) for the same reasons that artists are trying to “make it new” and exhorting their colleagues to do the same (Ezra Pound). In both instances, there is a search for a workable order, but the artist has been forced for many decades to be more provocative and subversive than conformist. It has been a long time since “normalcy” has been anything but a vehicle for complacency. Of course the artist can block provocation of self and readers by taking refuge in wilfully “advanced” and self-indulgent avant-gardism that never engages any truth (Sebald, Luftkrieg 52-65). Their putatively radical technique is only packaging, does not grow out of any urgent need to communicate what the technique is applied to; that is what disturbs many about an artist like Salvador Dalí, for instance. When they are genuine, challenges to the prevailing means of expression and structures of representation are meant to undermine techniques grown too stale and outworn to engage thought or feeling, to bear any weight of truthful experience, especially when literary subjects and language appear to have been co-opted to the political aim of bolstering consumerist goals.

As early as Rilke’s novel Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brügger(The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brügger, trans. Stephen Mitchell) (1910), “in which can clearly be heard the lament that the gift of narration is no longer being given to his [Malte’s] generation” (Schmidt-Dengler 228), the imperatives of narrative fiction were being fundamentally redefined. Drawing on the techniques of the French nouveau roman and other fictional departures from chronological narration and linear sequence (Bartsch 290-300; Kaukoreit and Pfoser 228), with its hundreds of photographs; they cardbook readers who know no German would gain clear insight into these groups and activities by paging through Kaukoreit and Pfoser, with its hundreds of photographs; they...
137-38), the novelists of our time are examining more radical than artists in other forms by departing farthest from the expected canons of their craft. Lyric poetry is “supposed” to be difficult, nonlinear, reflective of its own modes of utterance, so that a book like Ernst Jandl’s Laut und Luise (1966), after first arousing indignant rejection and excited applause, soon turned its author into that paradoxical figure, the grand old man of the avant-garde in Austria. Aside from Handke, though, the experimental novelists remained quite marginal in the awareness of general readers—except as ready subjects for accusations of communism by writers from the P.E.N. Club—at the same time as they were drawing the high praise of more venturesome critics. With an intensity of concentration never achieved again in German, formal processes in art were brought to readers’ awareness as a socially critical concern. What unites all the new fiction of this time is the moral conviction, played out in artistic structures, that the standard techniques of narration are manipulative and thus necessarily falsify the reality they purport to capture (Schmidt-Dengler 227). As Roland Barthes expresses it, “The writing of Realism is far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication” (67-68).

Most readers don’t want socially critical concerns, however (unless what’s being criticized appears not to apply to them), so it is not hard to understand their general reaction if we look at examples of highly challenging Austrian fiction in the context of Jonke’s emergence. In Lexikon Roman (Lexicon Novel) (1970), Andreas Okopenko dispersed altogether with standard structures of narrative by experimenting along a line now grown quite familiar to readers, the novel that arranges all its material alphabetically and that provides a directional arrow after each entry to be followed or ignored at will. Readers—each in a different way—are invited to take part in the creative process by following any sequence of their own devising. Friedrich Achtleiter, distinguished architect and historian of architecture, member of the Vienna Group, and novelist, published his Quadratroman (Novel in Squares) in 1973. Each page contains an arrangement of words laid out like concrete poetry inside a square, the words often placed to create a spatial representation of what the words themselves mean (fullness, emptiness, height, living on the edge, for example); there mostly seems little reason why any one page follow or precedes another, and there is no discernible plot as such. There are not even any true squares, as Achtleiter playfully tells the reader in a preface, while insisting—seemingly with equal playfulness—that his novel, like any other, will have no meaning unless it is read in sequence from first page to last. The fictional experiment to end all fictional experiments in Austria was die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman (improving central europe: a novel) (1969) by another member of the Vienna Group, Oswald Wiener. In the proud lineage of Madame Bovary and Ulysses, Wiener’s novel was even the subject of legal proceedings on the grounds of pornography, though that alleged quality is not what makes it a challenge. Instead, Wiener proposes to use a category of art (as his subtitle shows) to bring about the very dissolution of what art is. die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman is a kind of cybernetic rhapsody or rampage filled with lists, footnotes, endless digressions, purposely avoiding all plot and sequence, calculatedly removing all expected points of orientation. Massive, erudite, and crafted down to the last detail so as to defy craft, it cannot even be called a digressive novel, because there is no ascertainable starting point from which the digressions are taking place. Wiener, in his foreword, asks readers to “take sentences the way we take pills, let ourselves be led somewhere, let ourselves get into a state, want to communicate, and perhaps also formulate a hypothesis” (qtd. in Kaukoreit and Pfoser 162; 182; 138; 154). All comfortable assumptions about the truth content of fiction are gone.

Reviewing die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman, the more concretely the surroundings have been evoked, the more clearly the ending shows them as the ephemeral, immaterial inventions not go away, we would. That dissolving is in particular opposition to the usual markedly idyllic ending of a regional novel, in which the setting would be made transcendent, reconciliation is immediately thrown back into question.

In its old-fashioned trappings, supposed to be “geometric”? That question is the starting point for many critical investigations, including more than one of the essays in this casebook. We are manipulative and thus necessarily falsify the reality they purport to capture (Schmidt-Dengler 227). As Roland Barthes expresses it, “The writing of Realism is far from being neutral, it is on the contrary loaded with the most spectacular signs of fabrication” (67-68).

As we will see later at how Jonke refracts the artistically and socially conservative elements of conscious regionalism in fiction, but since we have been discussing experiment more than tradition so far, a survey of the experimental or “geometric” aspects will help readers understand Jonke’s methods of deconstruction and reconstruction, his ethically motivated renovation of the aesthetically superseded blueprints by which fiction, regional or otherwise, is ordinarily structured. To go back to Jelinek’s metaphor, the tunnels, passages, chambers, and connections in the ant farm are there to be marveled at because Jonke took an ant hill buried in the ground and brought its ecosystem, its character, its function, and its structure to view by making it into an ant farm with transparent walls. It is not less what it was; it is more, because it can now be presented to view.

Among the works of fiction just discussed, Geometric Regional Novel is the most playful; instead of purporting to demolish every aspect of what a novel was always thought to be, Jonke puts to his own subversive use some of the most time-honored techniques of narration and some of the most predictable and easily recognized of village settings. Structurally old-fashioned with a twist, he successfully harnesses the energy his title releases in claiming a place between “experiment” of the most radical and “tradition” of the deepest dye; negotiating that stance between experiment and tradition allows him both to incorporate the devices of postmodern and to transcend their limits as mere tokens (see DeMeritt’s casebook essay). The last two words of the novel’s title specify exactly what kind of book to expect, while the clash of those two words with the first one issues a clear call to abandon the standard expectations they create. “Regional novel” is a highly conventional category of fiction, as formulaic and predictable as a detective story (which Handke dismantled in Die Hausierer [1967]), but no other regional novel ever had those very words in its title, so we are alerted immediately that this one will largely be about “the category it is in—questioning, deconstructing and reconstructing, transmuting conventions, plot lines, character types, and rhetoric in ironic refraction. And how is a regional novel, with all its old-fashioned trappings, supposed to be “geometric”? That question is the starting point for many critical investigations, including more than one of the essays in this casebook. We will look later at how Jonke refracts the artistically and socially conservative elements of conscious regionalism in fiction, but since we have been discussing experiment more than tradition so far, a survey of the experimental or “geometric” aspects will help readers understand Jonke’s methods of deconstruction and reconstruction, his ethically motivated renovation of the aesthetically superseded blueprints by which fiction, regional or otherwise, is ordinarily structured. To go back to Jelinek’s metaphor, the tunnels, passages, chambers, and connections in the ant farm are there to be marveled at because Jonke took an ant hill buried in the ground and brought its ecosystem, its character, its function, and its structure to view by making it into an ant farm with transparent walls. It is not less what it was; it is more, because it can now be presented to view. Geometric Regional Novel forces readers to consider the “truth” of story line by creating a well-nigh plotless plot about two people wanting to cross the village square unseen and then frustrating an.

It definitively breaks the illusion of a “real” world being left behind at the end by dissolving the colors and the objects of the whole countryside into a “spilled paint box” and by removing all expected points of orientation.
It exposes the unreliability of established critical authority as opposed to the transforming power of true receptiveness to art by contrasting the sterile and mendacious “Report in the Fine Arts Section of the Newspaper” (25-27) with the rest of the section titled “The Artist’s Performance” (17-27). The critic’s column is an immortal parody of arts journalism at its worst, with its half-hidden sneering political biases, its hostility and superiority, its laborious pomposity, its arrogance of infallible taste, its assumption of the right to speak for all, its talking down, its false and rhetorical tone that interferes with the simple task of reporting what happened, its hopeless provincialism unsuccessfully concealed by self-indulgent rhetoric, its distaste for its own journalistic task while yet ending on a crow-pleasing note. The rest of the choruseiliek section, recording a montage of several individual and communal voices, captures the sense of awe and wonder that emerge when “ignorant” but observant residents of the village join to talk over in respectful appreciation the marvels of disciplined craft they have so carefully observed (Donald’s nephews again) and to yield to the deepest mystery of art—even though they saw “only” a tightrope walker—through their open willingness to be captivated precisely by what they could not understand (17-24), thus forfeiting all defensiveness about their experience to the point of living out Rilke’s admonition to change their lives.

It suggests the illusory nature of true human agency by showing the simplest of movements, like shaking hands (8), as if they were the programmed, awkwardly mechanized actions of robots. That radical questioning of freedom on the most trivial level operates in contrast to a beloved major theme of standard regional fiction, according to which the individual gains greater freedom by submitting more and more deeply, with greater and greater humility, to a communal order that mirrors the eternal laws of nature and thus elevates the individual to dignity as part of a universal cycle.

From this particular process, it expands ever outward to show over wider and wider areas the basic external restrictions on the freedoms of the villagers. The villagers appear not to notice or to care: workers and artisans, puppets of the profit motive, are hired and fired at authoritarian whim; the paternalistic structure of village life ensures efficient regimentation and mind control; that structure in turn yields by logical stages to an all-encompassing totalitarianism that has no need to use violence; capitalism comes to be the sole motive of communal activity as floods of totally unnecessary consumer goods are manufactured, incidentally destroying the entire surrounding ecosystem; a last reminder of that totalitarianism comes at the end, where the paper in which the village is to be wrapped may be printed with a store logo or a company name; further, the forests are destroyed for profit (deals are made with charcoal burners, furniture factories, and paper mills), but in the name of keeping evil strangers—no evidence for their existence is ever produced—from being able to hide in the trees. (For discussions of consumerism as the third and most insidious wave of totalitarianism, following fascism and Soviet communism, see the introductory materials in Arato and Gebhardt as well as the essays by Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer in that collection.) The whole history of the village, moreover, as recorded in the chronicle (47-49), shows that these derivations of freedom have always been embryonically present in the village’s authority structure, but we watch them expand into dimensions never dreamed of as consumerism engulfs the environment.

It demonstrates a feasible contrast to that tyranny by advocating the utter freedom of the imagination; it is not only possible, but entirely permissible (118—Jonke’s “durchaus erlaubt” is somewhat stronger than Vazulik’s “quite permissible”) to dispose of the artistic creation made and sustained throughout by the artist, with the reader’s help, so that democratic cooperation and collaboration can take place in the making of art; it is not an elitist pursuit. Though the villagers are regimented by repressive communal arrangements, the structure which examines them enacts open process by including many voices without feeling a need to reconcile the differences among them; no one view has to prevail. In this way Geometric Regional Novel enacts in its collaborative, choruseiliek structure an alternative to the repressive, paternalistic structures depicted within it. The rules, the prohibitions, the restrictions and restraints, the growing totalitarianism, do not apply in the world of art, though the exercise of art may be powerless to halt the tyranny in any direct way. The pen is mightier than the sword, but unfortunately in the long haul only.

It demonstrates that anything of “natural law” as a justification for legislated order is a related illusion, a deceit ground in massive projection of human categories onto nature. Just as “natural” human actions are described geographically, so the pathetic fallacy (“weeping” skies, “gentle” hills, “harmonious” landscapes, “furioso” winds) is shown as a purely human distortion through depictions of the surroundings in geometric terms, in radically physical descriptions—as in physics, that is—stripped of all emotive connotations. “The silhouetted margin of the mountain range . . . has the shape of four curves . . . a sine curve, a cosine curve, a sine and a cosine curve, each displaced by one and three-quarter phases” (9). The ending also reveals that this village has no “real” existence outside the imagination; it was all the construct of an artist, a set to be struck, a drawing to be tossed away. That reminder of easy disposability in turn removes works of art from any arrogant claim to be representing, let alone replacing, a higher truth and casts into doubt any artist’s claims to be reforming society, while the chastening of lyric description through denotative geometrical terminology enacts an ethical warning that the freedom of the imagination may not be abused by the aesthetic desire to be merely beautiful, to rhapsodize, to use “poetic license” and write just anything.

It challenges the privileged status of all orderly or “scientific” arrangement in turn, since order in itself is no guarantee of a truth congruent with something outside itself (see Cook’s casebook essay). The precise, minute processes of description, which include several diagrams that look like parodies of blueprints or engineers’ drawings, would seem to endorse the tendency to examine phenomena and objects in great detail as a way of apprehending them in external reality. This is the procedure of the natural sciences and of humanistic scholarship founded on exhaustive primary documentation, a mode of thought which Jonke is very far from the only Austrian author to call into question. What actually happens as often as not is that chronological chronicles here wander off into speculation and uncertainty (47-49), undermining the very sense of objectivity for which they are aiming, while the meticulous “scientific” description of objects and processes becomes so minute that the description itself is thwarted (“The House of the Blacksmith” 50-59) or ends up shading off into paranoia not recognized as such because observation and documentation give it the look of objective fact (“The Trees” 74; “The New Law” 97-98). Out of the supposedly progressed, objective approach of science comes a rationale for totalitarian control, since careful enough recording of data in themselves can be put to any purpose, used to justify anything, as the flourishing of racial biology in the National Socialist world and the “scientific” genetic studies of Trofim Lysenko in the Soviet Union show. Totalitarianism of any stripe can put science to good use, provided it ignores the inherent limitations of science. Crudely put, Geometric Regional Novel dramatizes the popular expression that statistics can prove anything—as in totalitarian governments they indeed do.

It further parodies naive beliefs that comprehensive description of physical phenomena will capture the essential truth of their nature by taking methods of “objective” description so far into minutiae that all sense is lost of what is being described. That process, known as defamiliarization, is referred to in several essays here, for it forms a basic procedure of Jonke’s art. As Kesting puts it (Bartens and Pechmann 270-74), it would take no more than three seconds for a man to fall from a roof, and that is the entire content of a long story (“The Trees” 74; “The New Law” 97-98). Out of the supposedly progressed, objective approach of science comes a rationale for totalitarian control, since careful enough recording of data in themselves can be put to any purpose, used to justify anything, as the flourishing of racial biology in the National Socialist world and the “scientific” genetic studies of Trofim Lysenko in the Soviet Union show. Totalitarianism of any stripe can put science to good use, provided it ignores the inherent limitations of science. Crudely put, Geometric Regional Novel dramatizes the popular expression that statistics can prove anything—as in totalitarian governments they indeed do.

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politics, corrupt back-room deals not at all subject to regulation, money laundering, plundering of public funds to finance private profit-making enterprises, insider trading and other


this new dispensation, was increasingly corrupted by market forces. Literature not conforming to mass-market categories has often been accused of occupying an ivory tower, but as


can say by way of repetition that such questions make best sense when articulated at the meeting place of artistic process and political activity is to ask us first to take a look at the historical background to experimental writing as a political act and then to the specifics of the


Austrian background that contribute to the way in which Jonke is political.

From Axel’s Castle and German Sedition . . .

When was the writer systematically forced into social and political opposition? Doubts about the artist’s role in upholding the power structure of the Roman Empire purportedly clouded the last days of Virgil (Hermann Broch seizes on this element in The Death of Virgil), who called for his masterwork to be destroyed. In the sixteenth century, however, Ben Jonson could still write great occasional poetry—think of “To Penshurst”—that endorses and indeed celebrates as revelations of the highest universal order the hierarchies, the authority structures, even the physical edifices representing political segmentation and social subordination; in The Faerie Queene, Edmund Spenser creates an entire allegorical cosmos around the person of the monarch as transcendent representative of all positive values. While the role of flattery is not to be discounted in an age when the subjects of poems held the purse strings, there is an immediately recognizable integrity of vision about these works that would be impossible of achievement today. Works of art in praise of governments or political leaders can now not even be imagined as anything but toadying or propaganda, even at their most well meant; how forced and pale are the sections of Thomas Mann’s Joseph tetralogy that link the title character with Franklin D. Roosevelt, for instance.

And what were the specifically Austrian postulates that governed the nature of the Austrian artist’s dissent? Such dissidence is in the very nature of the artist’s work and does not become present only when the artist engages directly with political topics, but it is notable that open political activism of the kind that made headlines in France, the United States, and Germany was almost unknown among Austrian writers until 1986. Just as German writers like Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the late 1960s were calling for the total abolition of imaginative literature in favor of writing with an overtly political purpose, their Austrian counterparts, mainly the members of the Graz Writers’ Collective, were more resolute than ever in creating what Schmidt-Dengler calls “literary literature” (“Literaturliteratur”) (197), as the earlier short survey in this essay of typical Austrian novels from the time will bear out.

How are literary artists not supposed to be dissenters when language, the medium of their expression, has been steadily debased and corrupted by social institutions? In 1931, when modernist experimentation was reaching the consciousness of general readers on a larger scale, Edmund Wilson published Axel’s Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930, an aesthetic and social analysis, more timely now than when it was first written, of the conditions under which literature had been forced to grow esoteric around 1850. Several factors contributed to the corruption of language at that time, and artists accordingly had to devise new approaches to a compromised medium. Quoting Paul Valéry, Wilson notes that the rise of mass journalism had caused most literature to become “an art which is based on the abuse of language—that is, it is based on language as a creator of illusions, and not on language as a means of transmitting realities. Everything which makes language more precise, everything which emphasizes its practical character, all the changes which it undergoes in the interests of a more rapid transmission and an easier diffusion, are contrary to its function as a poetic instrument.” (284)

The language of newspapers and magazines necessarily stayed on the lowest common denominator; the aim was to achieve high circulation among busy readers looking for quick, no-frills information or entertainment. Headlines and pictures made sensation the primary vehicle of communication; instant absorption, even before reading, was what sold papers. These aims of journalism made imaginative literature with highly wrought language appear marginal, impractical, self-indulgent. Wilson again:

I agree with Valéry that “the development in Europe, since 1852, of literary works which are extremely difficult, subtle and refined, which are written in a complicated style, and which, for that reason, are forbidden to most readers, bears some relation to the increase in number of literates” and to the consequent “intensive production of mediocre or average works.” (285)

Journalism compromised both quality and integrity in the literary mainstream, which was now fished mainly for the sake of what readers could be sold; while advertising might once have been a tool, it now became the autonomous machine, the enterprise without which journalism could not exist and which therefore determined layout, content, and editorial policy. Anything recognizable as honest literature, as an effort to find that truth about which Sebald was quoted earlier, had to retreat before the realization that language itself, in this new dispensation, was increasingly corrupted by market forces. Literature not conforming to mass-market categories has often been accused of occupying an ivory tower, but it is a tower which consumerism built and into which it locked writers. A century after the developments Wilson discusses in Axel’s Castle, Flannery O’Connor’s remark about the advertising agencies is more pertinent than ever.

Aside from whatever corruption it already demonstrated, mass-circulation journalism took on the role at this time of aiding the rise of politically repressive and economically irresponsible governments of the kind since grown all too familiar. As one hand washes the other, the trade-off for such governments is to back systems that keep the media in business. Valéry mentions 1852 in particular because two events occurred in that year which would at first appear unrelated but that may show some connection in a larger view. Théophile Gautier published a collection of poems entitled Émaux et camées (Enamels and Cameos); like the bibelots of the title, these poems are exquisitely wrought miniatures, their meticulous execution and purity of craft setting a new standard of rarified formal perfection for French verse, a tradition known for strictness of form in the first place. A world away, it would seem, this was also the year in which Napoleon III came to power in France, initiating an era roughly comparable to that of the Gilded Age and the robber barons in the United States, though with even less of the limited electoral and legislative freedom America knew. The regime was marked by untrammeled capitalism, sham representation in politics, corrupt back-room deals not at all subject to regulation, money laundering, plundering of public funds to finance private profit-making enterprises, insider trading and other
stock manipulations—in short, the whole panoply of capitalist plutocracy run wild, with tax money and public institutions eagerly co-opted to greed. Widespread affluence among a growing middle class guaranteed compliant acceptance from those benefiting by these economic arrangements, and a barely disguised police state helped head off criticism. As if the journalism were not destructive enough of language by nature, its participation in backing the Second Empire’s mindless material prosperity was enough to displace imaginative literature even farther from any mainstream it might once have been able to negotiate. This was the first era in modern times that showed so many facets of Orwellian doublespeak, doublethink, brainwashing by slogan, and other methods of removing meaning from language. Gautier’s poems did not spring up spontaneously upon the accession of the new regime, of course, but we can certainly note the poetic dedication to a language yet richer and more highly wrought operating in general reciprocity with the political abandonment of sense and meaning in favor of mind-numbing propaganda and vulgarization in language.

Had writers belonged to a different social stratum from the one that aided the rapid debasement of language, they might have devised other modes of survival. The aristocrat could simply withdraw in disdain from any effort at wider contact, a retreat immortalized in the work of Proust, and the working class could escape into its own pursuits and pleasures, as Baudelaire noted, but the problem writers had was the more acute because they were products of the same class that was undoing their means of expression. As Barthes analyses their crisis, three factors caused “the definitive ruin of liberal illusions”—the development of heavy industry, the … birth of modern capitalism and the scission of French society into three mutually hostile classes.” These factors threw “the bourgeois writer” into a state of being “torn between his social condition and his intellectual vocation…. . . . The writer falls prey to ambiguity, since his consciousness no longer accounts for the whole of his condition” (60-61). The problem is yet more intense for writers than for society at large because they see themselves as enemies, or at least aliens, within their own class, unable to negotiate a position even among their own kind. For the sake of their very survival, in order not to vanish entirely inside the black hole of their supposed difficulty or incomprehensibility, writers must fit into a social code of understanding, an ethos that will allow them at least identity, if not full access, to middle-class citizens. As of 1852, writes Barthes, there were “numerous formal facts made between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter” (32). In a capitalistic society where the work ethic earns respect, “Baudelaire drew on Gautier’s ‘fetish of highly wrought form’ “ (Barthes 65); writing can now be saved not by virtue of what it exists for, but thanks to the work it has cost. There now begins to grow up an image of the writer as a craftsman—who-shuts himself away in some legendary place…devoting to his work regular hours of solitary effort. Writers like Gautier (past master in Belles-Lettres), Flaubert (grinding away at his sentences at Croisset), Valéry (in his room at the crack of dawn) or Gide (standing at his desk like a carpenter at a bench) form a kind of guild of French literature. (Barthes 63)

The components of this reputation can be extended to virtually every “difficult” writer of the past century and more; English-speaking readers need think only of James, Conrad, Joyce, Virginia Woolf, or Faulkner as examples. The work it costs to produce art is paralleled by the difficulty of that art and the corresponding investment by the reader. Joyce is famous for stating that it took him seventeen years to write Finnegans Wake and that he expected readers to take seventeen years to read it. This equation (hard work = hard works) explains why the writer’s “writer” is often known by name to the mainstream reader and even accorded genuine respect, albeit one that stops short of ever actually needing to engage the work itself. Donald has the book safely on the shelf; Huey, Dewey, and Louie violate the unspoken social contract by reading it.

As the casebook editor noticed during the interview, Jonke—very much unlike Jelinek, incidentally—does nothing whatever to project an image of himself. The most guileless of writers, he does not engage in any of the publicity-garnering activities that take up so much of so many other writers’ energy. He gives readings and interviews, cooperates readily with critics writing about him, makes his work available, gathers prizes—all when he is asked to, without orchestrating a reputation. Even so, the whole culturally determined ready-made model of the writer as a dedicated worker or heretic, a loner, an artist as described by Barthes places him in a certain light that can only be understood in the historical context we are tracing. While that light does not always best illuminate the reality of Jonke’s work—it overlooks his humor, for example—it guarantees that he does not dwell in the utter darkness of no readership at all, while also showing why that readership must be so limited.

Opposition to prevailing cultural values does not necessarily mean direct confrontation, as we are seeing. Withdrawal and retreat mark the artist’s strategies so far; Axel, the title character from a novella by Villiers de l’Isle-Adam from which Wilson takes his title, has immured himself in his castle. From inside such a retreat, Mallarmé was journeying through his poetry into a mystical realm of the ineffable, the place where language begins to grow sparse and then silent. At the same time, though, he was convinced that his poetry could yet have social impact as a practical aid to reflexive expression, a model for challenging and raising the level of public discourse, just as John Ruskin, William Morris, and the arts and Crafts movement in Great Britain offered what they thought of as workable alternatives to ugly, mass-produced goods, beautifully crafted designs that manufacturers would want to produce once discerning buyers asked for them. Worse than the Second Empire was to come, though, and these frail bridges artists were building across the mainstream to a larger public would be smashed in short order. Napoleon III’s regime was demolished by the juggernaut of the new German empire in 1871, with its militarism, its territorialism, its capitalistic acquisitiveness and industrialization, its authoritarianism, cult of strong-man leadership, and open worship of power on a whole new scale. Nietzsche, that ultimate dissenter, sees more timely than ever to many readers because his writing is always resonant with implications about the nature of political process. The character of the German empire threw him into paroxysms, and virtually every line he ever wrote was directed at exposing the gross materialism, the all-engulfing grumpthink, and the insatiable powerlessness behind its cultural pretensions. Wilhelm II might have asked how many regiments Mallarmé commanded, as Stalin asked about the Pope. As it is, what the Prussian empire stood for played its part in driving Nietzsche insane; one of the philosopher’s last acts before his collapse was to dispatch a friend a telegram dissolving the emperor and his empire.

The aftermath is too familiar to be rehearsed in detail. The whole industrialized, capitalized Western world was moving toward colonialism, expansionism, heavy armament, power elites, much of the movement fueled by rivalry and revenge, all of itabetted by phony patriotism whipped up in the mass media; irrespective of ideology or form of government, Japan at the same time and the Soviet Union after Stalin’s ascendency in 1928 were moving in the same direction. Germany can certainly not be singled out as the villain of the piece, then, but the single-mindedness of the German drive toward military and industrial power was the most overt form of a phenomenon engulfing all the major nations and can therefore serve for us as an emblem of a universal problem.

In this aftermath, in a legacy of revolution and counterrevolution, war, genocide, and upheaval that makes the twentieth century incomparably the bloodiest yet, language could only disappear into a realm of its own. In a world of authoritarianism, institutional church, crafted by the press, and absorbed by small and large investors—to the effect that the European presence in Africa is motivated only by the desire to bring the emerald green of the coffee plant and the ivory and ostrich plumes to the marketplaces of the world—language was not brought to the point of being used and abused by dictatorships and their propaganda machinery and concentration camps quite literally to death. (144)

Simon’s essay on Célan is partly a rebuttal to a famous proclamation by Adorno that poetry could never again be written after Auschwitz. Yes, it can, Simon argues, because art is not a decoration; it is form itself and can withstand and embrace horror, because it uses words to do no less than enact and thus render coherent the essence of human experience. It can perform the healing task so eloquently advocated by Sebald throughout Luftkrieg und Literatur (Aerial Bombing and Literature) of confronting memory without...
false comforts, liberating the psyche from the sicknesses that denial, repression, and silence cause. To do so, literature must face once again the task of forging those words anew, swathing away the cross, and the log with harder labor than ever, because those words have been so thoroughly abused that most people are unaware of how poisoned they are through coded meanings, propaganda, advertising jargon, and the whole doubteethink of language used in media discourse unchastened by the ethical truth of aesthetic form.

In his study of denazification processes in Austria after World War II, historian Oliver Rathkolb quotes an article published by Oskar Pollak in 1946 in Vienna. Pollak is reporting on a fairly large cross-section of Austrians, not just ones who were members of the National Socialist party or Nazi sympathizers; even so, “Most people don’t have the faintest idea that they’re still speaking and writing Nazi jargon today, that horrendous dictatorship German with its mixture of loud-mouthed sentiments and the loathsomer, eager-beaver oficialese of Nazi party bureaucrats. . . . Some education is really needed here” (86). Jonke did not purposely set out to provide some of this belated “education” through Geometric Regional Novel, yet his parodic and satiric processes bring to consciousness no preachment or analysis could the same traits of language Pollak had observed two decades before. Recall that Jonke did not “build in” the parody (“Interview”) but instead found it right in the language. Simply by listing typical words from various realms of discourse—school regulations, municipal forms, pretentious art criticism—he directs attention to the language in and of itself, breaking the link between words and what they stand for so as to reveal the codes of tyranny and mind control within the accumulation of the words themselves. Filling out an application form is a tedious chore, but one’s mind is usually on achieving whatever the application is for. Jonke’s application form for taking a walk in the woods, however (98-103), is so overwhelming (and hilarious) in its length, detail, and irrelevancy that the thought of the walk disappears behind the mania of control. Every school has its lists of regulations, but the long italics of how children should and should not behave in this village (43-46) are too exhaustive to be absorbed on the lexical level. Now become pure stimuli, they turn the children into Pavlovian specimens instead, acting by reflex according to certain words that suppress some behaviors and activate others; indicatively, the negative behaviors are listed first. As so often in Jonke, situations apparently in aid of communication now take over and thwart it.

All the regimenting, authoritarian, automatically spewed jargon of the village authorities would easily fit into the categories of Nazi rhetoric with little adaptation. The village elders might be offended by such a statement, because they don’t even recognize the dehumanizing function of the language they are using. It’s what they learned; it’s what they’re passing on. Jonke’s village is not fixed in any specific time setting, so it cannot be said that, like links in a chain, the language of the village authorities has been corrupted by the jargon of National Socialism; Geometric Regional Novel could as well be taking place in 1910 as 1965. Rather, its critique of language is far more radical than the safe containment expressed by the reductivist statement that one simple cause (the language of Nazism) has produced one simple effect (the language of the village authorities). If anything, it would have been the other way around. Just as the relatively paternalistic structures can be intensified into all-constricting tyranny, the language of which grows more surreal as the control grows more encompassing, so the long-established language of power, subordination, authority, command and obedience, all endorsing a traditional social order, would have enabled the rise of totalitarianism, which grows out of these attitudes. Even if the village elders, like the priest or the schoolteacher, could be imagined as humanists genuinely opposed to the violence and the tyranny of National Socialism, they do not realize that they’re literally speaking the same language. Jonke’s “geometry” of dissecting and deconstructing a language taken for granted in its social implications also has its analog, by the way, in the overall structure of the novel as a regional work.

Placed culturally off to the side by the media, writers had no function as direct participants in public, political discourse; their challenges were usually indirect and operated through the imagination, which abhors a soapbox. German writers, though, more than their counterparts elsewhere, became involved in a short-lived but drastic departure from this configuration. A brief sketch now will help us make an important differentiation between social factors in Germany and in Austria that caused the aims and practices of writers in both countries to diverge so greatly in the 1960s and 1970s. Jonke’s work will then emerge more clearly when seen against the appropriate Austrian backdrop, but because even people outside the German-speaking world jump to the literatures of both countries, they fail to see essential differences, historical developments quite remote from most writers’ conscious thinking but still influential in shaping separate German and Austrian literary practice.

To repeat an earlier point, Germany was hardly the only expansionist or power-seeking Western country as of 1870; power needs and the savagery they lead to are not confined within the borders of any one nation, and even a “good” cause can take on a brutal autonomy. For example, Sebald, far from an apologist for his native country, plausibly argues throughout Luftkrieg und Literatur from convincing primary Allied documentation that the infamous fire storms caused by carpet bombings of large German cities from 1943 to 1945 were acknowledged by British and American military leaders, even at the time, to be serving no war aim. For that matter, as the same sources admit, they could well have prolonged the war by stiffening German resistance and contributing to a “Twilight-of-the-Gods” mentality that welcomed a glorious annihilation in flames. Apparently, the destruction of property and human life were power aims that took on an eerie life of their own, initiated and continued mostly because the technology was there (Sebald 70-74).

Still, no sane reader, including in Germany, would seriously deny the assessment that Germany in justice bore the main responsibility for World War II. Considering the rise of National Socialism, with every attendant horror, it would not be possible for Germans to evade or avoid direct responsibility for the catastrophe of 1933 to 1945. Aside from any question of collective guilt or degree of collaborating with the Nazi regime, Germany could hardly claim victim status or act as if it had had no part in the disaster. Very much unlike Austrians, Germans were keenly aware of the heavy burden weighing squarely on their shoulders. And it is perhaps because Germany has borne such a heavy heritage of guilt for totalitarianism, war, and genocide, a heritage still very much in place,2 that German writers one generation later, in 1968, broke out so explosively and adopted political stances usually much more drastic than elsewhere, proclaiming that artistic forms and belittleric concerns were entirely out of place, that only immediate political involvement outside the usual parliamentary structures could justify the activity of a writer, all else being corrupt self-indulgence at best. There was a mini-exodus of German intellectuals to Cuba, among them Enzensberger, who branded any concern with aesthetics as “frightful self-deception” functioning only to make life cozier and substitute false problems for real ones. After the “death of literature” in any previously understood sense, the writer must now work only on documentary, discursive texts in direct aid of social change. The writer who “creates literature as art isn’t arguing himself out of existence, but there is no longer any way to justify him” (qtd. in Schmidt-Dengler 218). Terms like report and document soon became fashionable, with surprisingly deep resonance in many circles, as Marcel Reich-Ranicki says (9).

Objects and report and document soon became fashionable, with surprisingly deep resonance in many circles, as Marcel Reich-Ranicki says (9).

However, it did not take long for this forceful politicizing of literature to fail; its main legacy, in the words of Reich-Ranicki again, is that “politics wasn’t changed, but German literature was ruined” (9). The backlash against the literature of political activism was a literature of retreat into individualism and private concerns as of about 1970. Reports and documents and protocols and other such texts for public activism yielded to reminiscences, diaries, and autobiographies; now the community was again expected to scrutinize the writer as a person, not the writer to scrutinize the community. The landmarks of this newer literature can be summed up by the title of an earlier book by Hermann Hesse, now again greatly in vogue: Der Weg nach innen (The Road Leading Inward). Self-observation, self-scrutiny, self-representation became the common factor in the poetry and prose of these years (Reich-Ranicki 9-11), as German writers settled back into more traditional stances.

. . . to The Body in the Basement and Austrian Tradition

Reich-Ranicki writes as if an activist phase had yielded to a privatist one in “German” literature, and that view is largely valid when confided to the former West Germany, the Federal Republic of Germany (as the whole of Germany is now known). There were then at least three other “German” literatures, however, those of East Germany (the former German Democratic Republic), German-speaking Switzerland, and Austria. It is slightly exaggerated—but not much—to say that these “German” literatures, though coming from geographically contiguous countries, are nearly as different as the “English” literatures of, say, the United States, Canada, Ireland, Nigeria, and India. As Ulrich Liner points out, twentieth-century “German” literature would be reduced by half if the Austrian writers were taken off the list—Schmitzer, Hofmannsth, Karl Kraus, Rilke, Musil, Kafka, Broch, Trakl, Joseph Roth, Dodder, and Horváth, “to name only the most important” (“Tod” 11). Readers from outside the German-speaking world can hardly be faulted for thinking of these authors as German rather than Austrian. But when a major German publisher, S. Fischer, brought out an anthology of fiction in 1975 with the title “Tod” 11). Readers from outside the German-speaking world can hardly be faulted for thinking of these authors as German rather than Austrian. But when a major German publisher, S. Fischer, brought out an anthology of fiction in 1975 with the title
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overemphasis on formality in education and child rearing” (238)—did not proceed via direct polemics, as in Germany. Instead, it reflected on and refracted literal formality, the medium in which literature is made: language. All the disturbances and breaks with convention stay connected to the formalizations and ritualizations and conventionalizations inherent within a literary work. Austrian authors engage in social criticism by giving priority to process rather than content, deconstructing from within the tradition.
What this concentration on form, structure, polish does not mean, to repeat, is disengagement. The “intrinsic” or “literary” aspects of Austrian literature fully incorporate the
engaged” or “political” aspects, as we have been seeing with Jonke. No less eminent a fiction writer than Heimito von Doderer maintained that every Austrian novel is by nature a political novel, no matter how far from politics its ostensible subject. A concentration on intrinsic, structural elements of aesthetic form can indeed look like an abandonment of the ethical responsibility to participate in society. But it cannot be said often enough that there are various modes of participation. As a general remark, the place of German writers in their larger society invited them to grow increasingly confrontational, while the corresponding place of Austrian writers prohibited them from becoming so. Hence Jonke’s “confrontation” with mindless bureaucracy by lampo (the application form), his “confrontation” with highbrow journalistic trash by parody (the art critic’s report), his “confrontation” with consumerism and capitalism by page after page (104-07) of the needless products that will be made out of wood, to the devastation of the forest but the enrichment of the village elders.

Schmidt-Dengler points out that Austrian writers in the late 1960s, like their counterparts in other countries, were venturing on a serious reappraisal of the past, whereby they soon came to realize that Austria, to a larger extent than elsewhere, had created modes of social consent founded on a tacit agreement to maintain silence about grave injustices (238-39). This reappraisal, this search for a more valid identity, was taking place in literature on so wide a scale for the first time, but its Austrian manifestation—possibly “because of
overemphasis on formality in education and child rearing” (238)—did not proceed via direct polemics, as in Germany. Instead, it reflected on and refracted literal formality, the medium in which literature is made: language. All the disturbances and breaks with convention stay connected to the formalizations and ritualizations and conventionalizations inherent within a literary work. Austrian authors engage in social criticism by giving priority to process rather than content, deconstructing from within the tradition.
In this connection, Greiner traces a fundamental historical difference (“Tod” 15; 34-40). German writers were by and large direct participants in their larger society as public figures from the eighteenth century on. Goethe was a privy councilor, actively involved in the government of his principality, and he was aware of his role as an intellectual with official duties in shaping the commonwealth. Schiller was a university professor with a similar status in the larger society. To be sure, there was a strong dedication to privatism and separateness in German literature, from Novalis and Hölderlin to Jean Paul and Mörike, but writers who sought involvement in the public discourse during the decades of liberalism had access—even when banned or proscribed—to debates about parliamentarianism, the franchise, and equitable government for all citizens; think of Heine from within and Büchner from without. There was a general understanding that writers intended their critical activities, even when unwelcome, to contribute to political arrangements and institutions.

Handke sums up the difference in an article for the French periodical Lesnouvelles littéraires in 1978 (Greiner, “Tod” 40-42), stating that while German writers instinctively seek and find a public voice, Austrian authors are “absolutely apolitical” and shun any such role. Franz Grillparzer and Adalbert Stifter, the two great Austrian writers of the nineteenth century, were also public servants, like Goethe and Schiller, but they occupied positions that kept them relatively withdrawn, working at circumscribed bureaucratic tasks mainly away from the public eye. Moreover, they saw their artistic pursuits as distinct from their professional activities. They represent the turning away from politics that Austrian literature underwent from the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815 through the revolution of 1848. After a period of social criticism, of active involvement in public commentary during the liberal reign of Joseph II (died 1790), writers retreated under the realization that the Austrian empire (the Austro-Hungarian empire after 1867) was moving in the opposite direction from the consolidation and stability emerging in Germany; Austria was gradually destabilizing, was rightly felt to be in constant, imminent danger of collapsing under ethnic pressures. Revolutions were bringing new impulses and opportunities in other countries, heralding the proverbial dawn of freedom everywhere—everywhere but in Austria. As Grillparzer wrote:“The rest of the world will gain strength from these upheavals, but Austria will fall apart over them” (Greiner, “Tod” 29). Austrian writers were subject to considerable censorship during these years, but they were yet more vigilant in censoring themselves, not out of small-minded patriotism, but out of an almost prophetic realization that if their empire came apart, an entire world would explode in a huge conflagration. They thought of direct social criticism as a threat to what stability there was, and they did not wish to hasten the disaster that in fact happened in 1914.

Greiner notes that “the social critic requires a place from which a differentiation between true and false, and thus criticism, is possible. Such a place is occupied in Austrian literature by very few authors” (“Tod” 45). The departure from direct political and social involvement sent Austrian writers from the external world into the internal, into the realm of the imagination. The main consequence of this interiority, which came to shape the essential nature of Austrian literature, is the loss of any certitude about what is true and false “out there” in the world; the further implications of this turn inward have pertinence to Geometric Regional Novel.

Relativism and Lability. In the Austrian view, any statement we make about the world is a construct of the imagination and is therefore provisional. “Nothing is the way it really is,” as Thomas Bernhard expressed it; skepticism about the fixed nature of external reality links all forms of avant-garde experimentation in Austria. Its dynamics are linguistic (“sprachtheoretisch”), deconstructing language out of basic doubt about its power to convey meaning, and epistemological (“erkenntnistheoretisch”), setting up traditional modes of
and then deflecting them into an antirealistic direction so as to show the unreality of reality. Greiner names Handke and Jonke as primary examples of such experimenters in narrative (“Tod”47), and he cites the ending of Geometric Regional Novel as the quintessential expression of the Austrian tendency to relativism or provisionality in apprehending reality (51). The section titled “Corrugated Iron and Door” (72-74) was referred to earlier in a similar connection. No German novel would end with an invitation to wrap up the village, toss it away, and “make a turn into another region” (118); as Greiner says, this playful refraction of traditional structures is “what makes for the genuine fascination of Austrian literature” (51).
Primacy of the Imagination. In the exterior view, lability is a detriment to ascertaining reality; in the interior view, it is a strength in creating that reality out of the imagination. Rilke's poetry is an eminent example, famous for its technique (known as Weltnenraum) of progressively drawing concrete objects out of the external and into the internal world, into the formal structure of the work, and sending those objects back out, articulated through the poem, into a newly configured relationship with reality. We are always reminded by the consciousness of the work's formal elements that a shaping sensibility is governing the outside world. In a later generation, Ernst Jandl wrote whole plays in the subjunctive; the actions are purportedly anchored in verifiable, external reality, but they are reported in the verb form that in German expresses tentativeness, distancing, and relativizing of observation, a signal that the speaker feels unable to vouch for the truth of what is being said. Greiner generalizes: "Whereas what is called realistic literature sets out from a description of actual reality, making thus its way toward an Author, the... literary practice of most Austrian writers sets out from artifice," and he again drawn on a novel by Jonke as an example ("Tod" 50). In Schule der Gelüftigkeit (The School of Velocity—reference to the title of a method by Karl Czerny for achieving pianistic virtuosity), a photographer plans a garden party that will reproduce to the smallest detail one held exactly a year before. The result is that the pictures he takes at the second party are totally indistinguishable from the ones he took at the first; it is no longer possible to separate illusion and reality. The old utopian hope that literature can bring the flow of time to a stop is fulfilled here; such control has menacing implications, as always with Jonke, but the imagination has triumphed over external contingencies. Artifice controls the descriptions of setting as a basic general principle in Geometric Regional Novel as well; the book starts from "geometry," not nature—the village square as a rectangle, the mechanized movements of the villagers, the hills described as sine and cosine curves. "Nature" always comes first, but here the abstract principles of order, the extrapolations from observing nature are the starting point; the priority of interior and exterior is reversed.

Quietism and Compromise. If the outer world is not the wellspring of reality, it can be viewed and treated with detachment, especially since there is no objectively ascertainable reality to act on. Whole systems were erected in Austria on the postulate, taken to be axiomatic, that activism is futile to alter the basic nature of things; that postulate in turn has its roots in the political quietism already mentioned. The total paralysis of Kafka's characters, their inability even to determine, let alone act on the forces governing their lives, is a pathological degree of a general Austrian quietism. The basically paradela "fundamental principle of medicine—that it is above all important to do no harm—stamps other disciplines as well" (Greiner, "Tod" 36). In economics, Ludwig von Mises took an anti-interventionist position; psychologist Otto Weininger argued the inalterability of essential human traits; above all, philosopher Bernhard Bolzano created a logical system that legitimized the sense of futility regarding active intervention in the world; only coherence theories (see Cook's casebook essay) can be thought of as valid, since congruence to an external world cannot be determined. Not only is initiative not preferable; it is at best an irrelevant option. This mind set goes far to explain the robotic passivity of the villagers in Geometric Regional Novel—it is one thing to have a life of thought and imagination to compensate for separation from the external world, but without that compensation, the human element seems hardly present, and so the villagers are unresponsive, dehumanized recipients of whatever directives and stimuli come their way. And because any viewpoint or opinion is unverifiable in external reality, it can be readily compromised; besides being a logical consequence of perceptual lability, maintaining friendly relations and avoiding conflict are practical values as well. Austrians proverbially think of their former empire as having been on marriage, not war, on compromise, not confrontation. And, more than from any other cause, the relative stability of Austrian politics since 1945 results from readiness to compromise and form coalitions. Schmidt-Dengler quotes political figure Erhard Busek to the effect that Austrians have the compromise all worked out before they even put the problem on the table (217), and Wolfgang Bauer captures that mentality in the title of one of his short plays, All's Even Better Than Well That Ends Well. Jonke enacts this readiness for compromise through the narrator of Geometric Regional Novel. This narrator forsoths sovereignty, challenging and even parodying omniscience by his careful creation of concretely detailed scenes which are then abruptly dissolved—ending of course with the casual disposal of the whole village, not as a unilateral dictate but as one possibility among others; by allowing conflicting views of whether the square is empty or not to remain unresolved; by devising plausible speculations about the past and about, say, the reasons for the attacks by the birds, only to set them aside for another, equally plausible speculations incompatible with the first ones; by involving the reader, as Campbell argues in his casebook essay, by suggesting alternative explanations of historical documents.

Myth versus Documentary Fact. History, for that matter, is no more subject to "scientific" or "objective" analysis than any other discipline if the external world lacks primary validity anyway and is secondary to the ordering imagination that shapes it. Throughout the nineteenth century, German historians like Leopold von Ranke and Theodor Mommsen were basing history on exhaustive empirical source documentation, but the very category of empiricism was subject to skepticism in Austria. There is certainly no lack of distinguished historical writing in Austria, equally scholarly in its close assessment of primary documents, but the great Austrian historians—"rightists" like Heinrich Ritter von Srbik or "leftists" like Friedrich Heer and Erika Weinzierl—move beyond fact-finding to large-scale interpretation. Up through 1914 and beyond, when the one coherent order they knew passed out of existence, Austrian writers were motivated, with differing degrees of awareness, by an all-encompassing myth of the ruling Habsburg dynasty, of the Austro-Hungarian empire as the "great good place," the one institution that kept barbarism and violence at bay. Claudio Magris devotes an entire book to the "Habsburg myth," the central organizing imaginative structure of Austrian identity. The disorder caused by the loss of their entire world—and it set in well before that loss occurred on the calendar—helps determine the melancholy character of Austrian literature, its constant sense of not being at home in the world.3 "The decline of the monarchy is producing traumatic effects even today," writes Greiner ("Tod" 15); he quotes an essay by Thomas Bernhard from 1966 that Austrian political glory "has, in the course of a single half-century, toppled from a brick's height that once lighted and warmed the globe into its final nothingness." As recently as 2001, Franzobel wrote a spirited feature piece arguing that all aspects of contemporary Austrian life, even down to banal TV shows, are haunted by the myth of the great empire; in a popular detective series set in Vienna, the inspector has a K-9 helper, a German shepherd, and "even the dog is called Rex," Franzobel notes. In such a society, history is less helpful than myth in making sense of the world. So the narrator of Geometric Regional Novel turns not to readily available factual modes of documentation—birth, death, and marriage records; property deeds; residency registrations; business licenses—but to the town chronicle, a semilegendaary account written in vague emotive language that makes it hard to separate report from commentary, with its roots in folklore and superstition, hearsay and inconsistent oral testimony, in surmises and unverified accounts. What narrative can be shaped about the past of the village comes mostly from this source, not supplemented by documentary validation from town records, and that narrative seems to be considered adequate, because it in some way articulates current beliefs, practices, and institutions to the villagers.

Just as the myth of the empire entails paternal and hierarchical structures, so the leaning toward myth also plays its part in segmenting the villagers, rationalizing their social subordination to authority as the stable continuance of traditions all the more venerable for being wrapped in mystery. That component of mystery in turn gives those who draw on the chronicle, especially the priest and the schoolteacher, room to interpret it for their hearers as fits their purpose best, glossing over what appear to be the abuses glancingly recorded in it. More than any validating history, successful demagoguery, like its opposite, successful religious form, requires a supporting mythology, because the process of historical research and writing has banished mystery since the Enlightenment. Roughly speaking, history extrapolates from a culture, but myth shapes the culture in the first place; history applies a meaning to the external world, but myth applies the external world to a meaning. History organizes time, but myth dissolves it. History does not go as deeply to the roots of a culture as does myth; being the most elemental manifestation of cultural anthropology, myth is the modality to which Freud, Jung, and countless other synthesizing analysts of whole cultures—not to mention imaginative writers—have given preference. The subject of myth versus history as it affected Austrian culture is worth further investigation, because additional strata of myth were added to that of the Habsburg empire to shape the very way Austrian literature was written and read until recently.

In October 1943 the Allies issued a declaration in Austria defining Nazi Germany as the first victim of National Socialist aggression. The purpose was to stir up Austrian resistance, but the declaration instantly became the vehicle of additional myth-making, now to the effect that poor helpless Austria had had no part in any of the horrors. In her anthology Das Sturmwehr (The Storm Guard) (1942), Franzobel notes. In such a society, history is less helpful than myth in making sense of the world. So the narrator of Geometric Regional Novel turns not to readily available factual modes of documentation—birth, death, and marriage records; property deeds; residency registrations; business licenses—but to the town chronicle, a semilegendaary account written in vague emotive language that makes it hard to separate report from commentary, with its roots in folklore and superstition, hearsay and inconsistent oral testimony, in surmises and unverified accounts. What narrative can be shaped about the past of the village comes mostly from this source, not supplemented by documentary validation from town records, and that narrative seems to be considered adequate, because it in some way articulates current beliefs, practices, and institutions to the villagers.

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unfathomable by not talking about it; the corresponding harm it worked in suppressing memory was not seen until later, as in novels like Elizabeth Reichart’s Februarschatten (February Shadows, translated by Donna L. Hoffmeister), in which a woman is haunted, paralyzed by memories of an atrocity—an actual historical event—that took place in her village when she was a young girl, but which nobody will talk about. Nazi writers were quite eager to forget, of course (see Amann, “Tradition” 30), but even victims of the National Socialist regime, like Franz Theodor Csokor, who had publicly protested the book burnings in Germany in 1933 and had to flee for his life when Hitler came to Austria in 1938, felt stability to be the better part of valor after World War II; president of the P.E.N. Club, he was willing to “forgive and forget,” as an émigré writer ironically expressed it in a letter from New York (Ludwig Ullmann, qtd. by Amann, “Tradition” 30), to have on the membership rolls authors who had enthusiastically supported the National Socialist cause. A few writers here and there were prohibited by the Allies from publishing for a couple of years, as Amann notes (“Tradition” 31), but then there they all were, right back again. When the cold war broke out in 1947, the Allies abetted this process of Austrian denial by turning their energies away from denazification and toward fighting communism. After that point, at the latest, there was virtually no forum or institution facilitating discussion of Austrian involvement in the crimes of fascism and National Socialism. So much easier to dismiss the topic with the statement that the whole thing was the Germans’ doing; so much easier yet just to keep quiet, to apply the favored Austrian solution of toschweigen, literally of maintaining a dead silence until the problem just goes away. For decades after 1945, writers like Helmut Qualtinger or Thomas Bernhard, who directly confronted these problems, were deemed as Nestbeschmutzer, foulers of their own nest, and historians like Erika Weinzierl and Friedrich Heer, whose work linked Austrian actions and mentality to National Socialism, were shunned (see Schmidt-Dengler 16-32).

As late as 1969, with all that time period stood for, amnesia continued to be the officially sanctioned mode of dealing with the fascist and Nazi past. The Austrian Ministry for Education, Science, and Art published in that year a lavish multivolume anthology of Austrian literature from its beginnings. As practical as it is luxurious, as scholarly as it is encyclopedic, it is a triumph, with impeccably edited contributions from an immense number of writers and a critical apparatus of great depth by austute editors who were leading scholars. So far, so good—but one of the editors, Heinz Kindermann, was (had been?) a dedicated, militant Nazi in complete harmony with the goals of conquest, genocide, and total war, not just a bemused academician caught in the crossfire. While authors of every background are included, the twentieth-century section has a markedly large number of Nazi writers represented; a study of the table of contents (Schmitz-Mayr-Harting 5°-9°) shows that a good 40 percent of the writers were ones who had earlier contributed to anthologies professing their unyielding loyalty to Hitler, written poems honoring the Führer, eagerly signed up as Nazi party members, accepted honorary degrees and prizes from the hands of Goebbels and Schirach, and defamed and denounced colleagues who resisted (Amann, “Tradition” 31). The impression persisted with more than a few authors—Amann cites Ilse Aichinger, Milo Dor, Michael Guttenbrenner, and Ernst Jandl—that Austrian cultural politics after 1945, in the name of misguided “tradition,” pursued above all a direct and close continuity with conditions as they had been before the war, which entailed wholesale silent acceptance of many honored writers’ Nazi careers. Amann laconically notes that Aichinger, Dor, and the others were not mistaken (“Tradition” 30).

The most radical direct challenge ever offered to the evasive aspects of Austrian myth-making emerged in 1986, when the magnitude of a new problem in itself and the international uproar it caused placed it beyond local containment. Kurt Waldheim, former secretary-general of the United Nations, campaigned for (and narrowly won) election to the presidency of the Austrian republic. The furor over his candidacy took him by surprise—and why wouldn’t it, as Fliedl wryly observes, since “awareness of his own membership in a National Socialist riding club had quite eluded him; likewise, as an officer in the Wehrmacht, the deportations of Jews in the Balkans [where Waldheim was stationed] had never come to his notice” (204). Writers were split into the momentum of objection to Waldheim (see Bassett). Our essay noted earlier that photographs from the 1960s and 1970s show Austrian authors presenting themselves in stances of political and social provocation, but we need to note here that they were pursuing political theater or iconography, wearing Che Guevara outfits, haranguing through megaphones, staying sit-ins and protests, occupying buildings as ways to project their literary concerns through the external trappings of dissent; they were not attempting to intervene in the political process as such. Now for the first time, however, dozens of writers and graphic artists, across a wide range of approaches and political convictions, became directly engaged; this was real activism, not theater. Their contributions were published by novelist Milo Dor under the polemically perfect title Die Leiche im Keller: Dokumente des Widerstands gegen Dr. Kurt Waldheim (The Body in the Basement: Documents of the Resistance to Dr. Kurt Waldheim). Austrian mythologizing had made for stability, continuity, and social viability for a time after 1945, but the body it had buried was now stinking so badly that writers living in the building could no longer bear the stench. Silence was not a way of upholding the primordial Austrian myth any more; it was causing that myth to putrefy.

Had Jonke gone on record in this volume, we could quickly clinch the question of overt political content in his work. That oversimplification would deny the rich nuances of his work, though, because Jonke is both less and more political than most of his contemporaries: less, he mentions in an interview (Friedl 99), by having learned through negative experiences as an adolescent to hate and reject all “government offices, bureaucracies, all politics and all public affairs” to so great an extent that he never comments on them in principle, let alone engages them (Jonke, “Individuum” 15); more, by finding politically coded ways of discharging his rage throughout his work5 and even more for exposing through his parody of its elements in Geometric Regional Novel the bare bones of a politically involved form of fiction to a degree more apparent after the Waldheim crisis than before. Austrian literature had not so much avoided politics as sublimated it to the ever-present workings of imagination and fantasy to a degree that makes the political aspect difficult to see; 1986 provided a key for decoding the modes of sublimation. Outstanding works published long before the Waldheim scandal squarely faced ethical questions of fascist authoritarianism and Austrian guilt and made ordered aesthetic experiences out of those raw materials—Ilse Aichinger’s Die größere Hoffnung, Ingeborg Bachmann’s Das dreißigste Jahr (The Thirteenth Year, trans. Michael Bullock), Albert Drach’s Das große Protokoll gegen Zwetschkenbaum (Massive File on Zwetschkenbaum, trans. Harvey I. Dunke), Gerhard Fritsch’s Fasching, Hans Leibert’s Zwischenhaus, Peter Preses and Ulrich Becher’s Der Bockerer, and the “Herr Kart” monologues of Helmut Qualtinger, to name only a few—but these works, for all the token and real respect they garnered, were frequently relegated into marginal status until 1986;6 confronting Austrian complicity in fascism and Nazism just wasn’t done, and writers who persisted paid a price. But the whole political posture of the Austrian writer is different after the watershed crisis of the Waldheim scandal, much more overtly political. Artistry has not been lost in the work of more recent writers,7 but direct participation has often been gained, and in ways that allow the Austrian cultural myth to revitalize political discussion, all the more after 2000, when the xenophobic, Nazi-tolerant Freedom Party led by Jörg Haider, a regional demagogue with national influence, entered the government coalition. Yet we must point out still again that participation comes in all styles, and a look at the elements of regional literature will show the unrelenting degree of Jonke’s political participation in Geometric Regional Novel. No narrative genre goes more deeply to the roots of tradition in Austria—for better or worse—than regional literature, and the twentieth-century section has a markedly large number of writers of every background are included, the political posture of the Austrian writer is different after the watershed crisis of the Waldheim scandal, much more overtly political. Artistry has not been lost in the work of more recent writers,7 but direct participation has often been gained, and in ways that allow the Austrian cultural myth to revitalize political discussion, all the more after 2000, when the xenophobic, Nazi-tolerant Freedom Party led by Jörg Haider, a regional demagogue with national influence, entered the government coalition. Yet we must point out still again that participation comes in all styles, and a look at the elements of regional literature will show the unrelenting
Renaissance choral music on which Webern was an expert scholar; he derived many of his processes from the motets, masses, and other works of that tradition.

is contained in its very smallest part, and the smallest part proclaims the entire structure. While Webern's music was hailed after World War II as utterly unprecedented in its

incidentally) took the implications of serialist technique to the farthest possible extreme, so much so that many musicians, even in this neoromantic era, unhesitatingly name him

accusations of insanity or fraudulence, and so on. Yet what did Schoenberg in fact do in devising the twelve-tone system? Through studying the tradition of key signatures, major

The Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern created a revolution of music beginning around 1905, complete with all the riots by audiences, the boos, the

pattern the whole utterance on Renaissance tropes and figures and topoi of rhetoric, themselves a heritage of ancient Roman practice, as Chandos keeps noting. Where the

from expression, his psyche terrified on feeling that words fall into pieces and the pieces into smaller pieces even as they are uttered. The despair of language is so thorough as to

Glance—out of the most conventional kind of fiction, the regional novel, but that is exactly the life-giving quality of tradition, as Mann noted.

Mozart was one of the great innovators in opera, credited with perfecting the staged vocal ensemble in Idomeneo, the first to use a trombone in an opera orchestra in Don

allegory paintings of youth, maturity, and age. Exactly this dynamic of renewal by tradition has marked Austrian art for centuries, and a few more examples will help us better

overthrowing past practice, but by going deeper into it, to more authentic sources; now he drew his inspiration from Japanese woodcuts and Byzantine icons, from medieval

makes them notable is that they are so well executed, not that they have anything challenging about them. But the upheaval Klimt created not long after came about not by

Klimt's early ceiling frescoes in the Burgtheater in Vienna show his great skill as a copyist, reworking with technical fluency the historicist vocabulary favored in those years; what

entire Interpretation of Dreams, and in the course of this vast work Freud constantly reinforces his arguments by paralleling patterns of the psyche to patterns of Greek myth.

Freud, for example, invokes Aeneas' descent into the underworld in Virgil's Aeneid as the governing structural model for the entire Interpretation of Dreams, and in the course of this vast work Freud constantly reinforces his arguments by paralleling patterns of the psyche to patterns of Greek myth.

The Arcimbolo paintings are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, where Esslin was fascinated by them as a boy (111). Schrott knows whereof he speaks anyway—his

of innovation, therefore, it would be preferable to speak of instigation—of stimulating and inducing" (14). The Arcimboldo paintings are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, where Esslin was fascinated by them as a boy (111). Schrott knows whereof he speaks anyway—his

learning and articulateness leave readers and audiences breathless—but the location of the paintings and their impact on a young Viennese, the comprehensive long view of

Joyce's Ulysses? Banal peregrinations through Dublin on a not very eventful day are specifically modeled on characters and episodes from the Odyssey to the point of timeless

basic works of all Western literature is re-created right from the first line of the first canto, which quotes Homer directly and sets out on a new journey. Even though this new

form in Geometric Regional Novel. Techniques involving aleatory structure or other open forms, in which the composer does not notate everything, but allows great latitude to the

performers—to start and stop at will, for example, or to play at a tempo of their choice—are still regarded at the beginning of this new century as cutting-edge, avant-garde

performers could be trusted to have the mastery of idiom to fill in with improvised harmonies, trills, and other ornaments, including whole lines. It is the performer's

familiarity with traditions of embellishment, harmony, and proportion that enables the work to emerge as a coherent whole; the aleatory is anything but an invitation to willful free-

wheeling or chaos.

Returning to literature, most of the canonic experimenters of the modernist movement in English first gained notoriety for supposed upheavals in art, but it has grown clear through the decades that they are all deeply rooted in the Western literary tradition. Pound himself "rewritten" literature by turning to the disciplined formalities of the ode and the elegy in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," for instance, and whatever else the Cantos are as a complete work, they begin by invoking and then systematically reenacting the Odyssey. One of the basic

works of all Western literature is re-created right from the first line of the first canto, which quotes Homer directly and sets out on a new journey. Even though this new

odyssey is interior to the point of solipsism, readers can always find reorientation by remembering that Pound is reenacting Homer. And are readers at this point already thinking of

Joyce's Ulysses? Balan peregrinations through Dublin on a not very eventful day are specifically modeled on characters and episodes from the Odyssey to the point of timeless

reenactment. We can say of Joyce what Jonke says of the Italian hermeticists; Ulysses is not so very hard to understand if we keep in mind the parallels with the familiar epic and worry about the rest later. Screams of outrage went up in 1922, the same year as Ulysses, over the purportedly chaotic incoherence of Eliot's The Waste Land and its wallowing in a special post-1918 brand of despair and decadence, but on the journey through this wasteland we are led by no less archetypal a guide than Tiresias (having a guide in turn relates The Waste Land to The Divine Comedy, which itself draws on Virgil's Aeneid), and we encounter mythic figures (Philomela, the Rhine Maidens, a sybil), historic persons refracted through literature (Queen Elizabeth I, Cleopatra), allusions to previous works of literature and religion from the Upanishads through Baudelaire and Nerval, and other fragments that can reveal meaning because they emerge from a cultural tradition millennia old.

From among authors likely to be known to our casebook readers, we could add to this list of experimenters-as-traditionals at will, but the major "innovators" just mentioned will suffice to show that literature is not rewritten by tradition. Even the seemingly unprecedented turn from what words are expressing to the words themselves as the subject matter, surely that most deconstructively modern and postmodern break with the literary past, derives from tradition, as Martin Esslin shows (111-12); he relates this pursuit to mannerism, which has always entailed a greater concentration on the means of expression; "it is not what is represented that's important but the virtuosity of how it is represented, to the point that the technique of representation grows autonomous and becomes the subject of the representation" (111).8 He compares the mannered work of Jonke (and Bernhard) to those famous paintings by sixteenth-century artist Arcimboldo, in which the faces and clothing of figures representing the four seasons are revealed on a closer look to be made up of flowers, fruits, and farming tools of the appropriate season. We can sum up by quoting poet, novelist, translator, and anthropologist Raoul Schrott, perhaps the most erudite expert anywhere on the heritage and transmission of poetry from Sumerian and Babylonian times to the present. As he expresses it in the foreword to his great anthology Die Erfindung der Poesie (The Invention of Poetry): "the invention of poetry can be reduced to concepts like 'originality' or even 'individual genius' only in a very narrow sense, rather than speak of innovation, therefore, it would be preferable to speak of instigation—of stimulating and inducing" (14).
shattered. When Pascal looked out and saw only vast dark spaces, he concluded that it is not possible to deduce the existence of a God from the operations of nature; not that

It is precisely when allegedly universal laws observed in nature are applied to human behavior—from justifying the divine right of kings via the great chain of being to justifying

any of the individual component pictures but emerging from their arrangement and from their arrangement only. The pattern of the whole composition is not transferable to any of its

formulate, like a natural scientist, the "gentle law," "das sanfte Gesetz," "by which the human race is guided" (9). "Just as it is in outward nature, so is it in inner nature, that of the

unreality when narrowed yet further. Stifter was concerned to note the workings of these natural processes beyond the separate phenomena in nature in the effort to find and

show humanity destroying itself and nature by cutting down the last tree and polluting the last stream. If the external world in all its concrete order provides humanity with a set of

laws for living, then create a memorably vivid landscape and have somebody open a door or window so that the landscape disappears and proves to have been a reflection only,

see that the catalog that brought the story to a halt is the story. If humanity and nature are to live in mutually fruitful harmony and respect, then turn that relationship askew and

take home; as an adult, he still collects stones and now wishes to present literary analogs of such humble objects in all their true significance to his readers.

The movement of the wind, the plashing of water, the ripening of grain, the breaking of sea waves, the greening of the earth, the brightness of the sky, the glimmering of the stars—

these I consider great; the storm gathering so mightily, the lightning that splits houses apart, the tempest that drives the waves, a mountain spewing fire, an earthquake that

devastates the countryside—i do not consider these greater than the other phenomena. In fact, i consider them lesser, because they are only the results of much higher laws. . . .

The force that causes the milk in an old woman's pan to bubble up and spill over is the same that drives lava upward through a fire-spewing mountain and causes it to pour down

to the sides. (Stifter 7-8).

At his poetic best, Stifter governs his materials with complete apparent ease; stylistic grace and poise place the work in a state of perfect equilibrium, making it seem to be writing

itself, the effect of which is a lyrically rhetorical advocacy of the small compass being wide enough to disclose the workings of the cosmos in its general laws.10 Regional writing

has always taken it as an axiom that observing natural processes, especially in miniature, would reveal a transcendent order, and the rejection of any overriding pattern of meaning

in nature is at the heart of Jonke's "geometrizing" the regional novel into an ironic version of itself. It would not be overstating the case to say that Geometric Regional Novel could

be read as the negative answer to Stifter's foreword, the political and social deconstruction of its reliance on the pathetic fallacy, its grounding of ethical behavior in purported

natural laws, and its attendant stance of quietism and apoliticism.

A survey would probably reveal that almost half of Austrian regional works either explicitly have some form of the word small (klein) in their titles or pointedly allude to the limited

range of setting and action. (See the collection of essays edited by Polheim.) The constant effort is to show overarching, cosmic principles of order in the simplest, everyday

structures; the consistent implication is quietism, exclusive concentration on the narrow compass of the individual's life, and a gentle passivity, cultivated as a principle of emotional

health and precluding engagement in conflicts large or small. Greiner makes an observation about Stifter's Der Nachsommer (Indian Summer, trans. Wendell Frye) that could

apply to all his work: "The peculiar artistry of this novel consists in making anything that could develop into an event or an episode culminate in a state of rest in which episodes and

pipes, the ducts, the cables—on the outside, using as much skill to reveal the artifice of the art by showing the blueprint along with the building as Stifter and other regionalists

expected to conceal the artifice behind "nature." Hence the defamiliarization. If unevennessfulness is a value, then make the crossing of the square the only plot line. If excitement and

sensuality are alien effects, then provoke a mystery around why it is so important for those trying to cross the square to do so unobserved, and then never mention it again. If

quietism is a value, then go all the way and turn the villagers into voiceless robots programmed to have no humanity at all. If village squares or rustic bridges or rolling hills are

described with lyrical, poetic beauty, then describe them from a distance, with a diagrammatic, an abstract geometric term, a bewilderingly detailed description of how the bridge works. If an indifferent temp of description functions to slow the narrative to a gentle pace, then stop it altogether with another set of regulations or another manic list of actions or objects and then let the reader

see that the catalog that brought the story to a halt is the story. If humanity and nature are to live in mutually fruitful harmony and respect, then turn that relationship askew and

show humanity destroying itself and nature by cutting down the last tree and polluting the last stream. If the external world in all its concrete order provides humanity with a set

of laws for living, then create a memorably vivid landscape and have somebody open a door or window so that the landscape disappears and proves to have been a reflection only,

not "real" at all, thus creating basic doubt about the validity of the very perceptions on which social structures and human laws are erected. If the cycle of the seasons is a

stabilizing factor in human life, creating a coherent sense of eternal recurrence, then parody it by a cyclical but inexplicable return of the mortar-eating birds and "geometrize"

recurrence in form by giving the same title to alternate chapters ("The Village Square")12 and having those chapters open with the same words in a pattern of repetition broken only

because the novel stops. All this defamiliarization or geometrization exposes a basic manipulativeness about regional literature. The reality of the universals which regional writing upholds is called into radical doubt by scrutinizing that very reality on an even smaller scale than before. Precisely the circumscribed scope that gave shape to that reality is the scope that will reveal its unreality when narrowed yet further. Stifter was concerned to note the workings of these natural processes beyond the separate phenomena in nature in the effort to find and

formulate, like a natural scientist, the "gentle law," "das sanfte Gesetz," "by which the human race is guided" (9). "Just as it is in outward nature, so is it in inner nature, that of the

human race. . . . Just as this law is in nature that which upholds the world, so is it that which upholds humanity" (9-11) when its postulates are followed. But think of those

photographs which, when inspected closely, are shown to be made up of dozens or hundreds of much smaller photographs arranged by color into a large pattern not present in

any of the individual component pictures but emerging from their arrangement and from their arrangement only. The pattern of the whole composition is not transferable to any of its

separate elements, and to suggest that the larger is contained in the smaller in any way except through the work of an intervening artificer is false. That is just the falsity, when applied

to "universal laws," that Jonke's defamiliarization exposes. The "big picture" is one we are making up through the pathetic fallacy.

It is precisely when allegedly universal laws observed in nature are applied to human behavior—from justifying the divine right of kings via the great chain of being to justifying

social Darwinism via natural selection—that this whole ordering principle is revealed to be dubious and controlling, because the verifiability of the observation itself is questionable

from the start. As early as the seventeenth century, Blaise Pascal, the old congruity between humanity, nature, and God was shattered. When Pascal looked out and saw only vast dark spaces, he concluded that it is not possible to deduce the existence of a God from the operations of nature; not that

Regional: Challenging the “Gentle Law”

Consider the process known as defamiliarization, which Kesting—among others—identifies (Bartens and Pechmann 270-74) as one of the avant-garde devices of Geometric

Regional Novel. She is referring, we mentioned earlier, to a level of observation so microscopically detailed and precise that it renders the very reality unrecognizable (272). In time,

split seconds extend over pages; in space, the observed object is so close that we don’t see the forest for the tree, the tree for the leaf, the leaf for the veins and pores. The level of

precision is so minute that is becomes impossible to keep the overall picture in mind; the unity of the thing vanishes into its own components. Yet this experimental technique of

narration, a device well suited to challenging accepted reality, is not so avant-garde; it arises directly out of the conventional treatment of nature that regional fiction involves. The

term itself announces that the compass will be small—a "region" is always local—and so the sweeping view, the grand expanse, the monumental scale are absent. As in

Geometric Regional Novel, the scope is carefully circumscribed. The horizon is constricted; survey from a height is uncommon. A patch of woods, a group of houses in a village, a

deriver, a distant mountain, a meadow, a small farmlandholding are the most likely settings; characters like the village schoolmaster or an old woodsman are gentle, humble in their

occupations and expectations; and the overall patterns of the natural cycle are invoked in small, nearby objects—a flower, a domestic animal, the changing of the leaves, a

gathering of clouds over a hillside. The drama arises not from large effects but from the sorrows and joys of a narrowly compassed life. The power of regional writing arises directly

out of revealing the great within the small, of charging the mundane with profundity; at its best, regional fiction can create a spell of intensely idyllic, lyrical beauty.

The most eloquent statement of this approach can be found in the foreword Adalbert Stifter wrote to his collection of stories called Bunte Steine (Many-Colored Stones) (1852),9 an unsurpassed compendium of regionalist concerns in all their implications and a perfect work of art. Stifter is a great writer by any measure; no more than Eudora Welty was he a

realist in the sense of being minor or local—indeed. Handke praises him as the greatest Austrian writer of all (Greiner, "Tod" 24), and he has been translated by writers as

eminent as Marianne Moore—but his literary practice derives from the pastoral impulses of regional writing, and his writing in turn haunts the work of all subsequent regionalists.

Stifter's impulse originates, he writes (15), through remembering the delight he experienced as a child in seeing a whole world in some small stone he would find on the wayside

and take home; as an adult, he still collects stones and now wishes to present literary analogs of such humble objects in all their true significance to his readers.

Whether we note that Austrian drama was renewed after World War I by a return to medieval ritual drama or Spanish autos sacramentales (Hofmannsthal) and to the traditions of

the popular folk play (Horváth) or, after World War II, that poetry was renewed by a similar return to dialect folk verse (Artmann) and by a more meticulous attention than ever to the

acoustic properties of poetry (Jandl), we cannot avoid concluding that tradition was the means of renewal. Jonke virtually proclaims that process in alluding to both experimental

("geometric") and traditional ("regional") aspects in his work. We can gain greater understanding of Geometric Regional Novel itself as we look at the three terms of the title in

contextual terms. We can take them separately, but since they are unified in the title, we will find some overlap. Let us look at the terms and their implications in themselves,

sometimes in combinations. The ant farm is too complex for us to follow first one straight line and then another; it's the interwinnings and branchings off that make it what it is.
adept at image management and persuasively stylized themselves to many as simple, good people with a love of homeland and reverence for the earth, wishing to live only in enthusiastic proponents of the Austro-Fascist state from 1934 to 1938 and the National Socialist regime from 1938 to 1945. Franz Karl Ginskey, Franz Nabl, Paula Grogger, Robert inspiration, about the simple life, the peaceful pursuit of rural occupations in nature, the quiet and gentle cultivation of eternal order, the harmony of the seasonal cycle, were also regionalist writers is striking. Certainly Stifter, a great humanist, would have been aghast, stupefied with shock to see that those who wrote, under his more or less direct Not for nothing does Haider cultivate an image that could make him a character from the pages of the traditional regional writers; he patterns himself on the same rural values, the purvey anti-Semitic innuendoes, to foment xenophobia, to play off “healthy” rural values against urban, sophisticated thinking in a country still mostly rural and agrarian. close association of Nazism and regionalism is considered self-evident by this commentator, and his context also assumes that the audience will immediately make the same them to the surface. In the television series we mentioned earlier, an observer of the cultural scene during World War II noted that those who were celebrating Nazism now will be messenger for the message, these exposés didn’t exactly help the antiregionalists (202). They did not so much reveal correlations between regionalism and totalitarianism as bring regional writing wears its artifice openly. From Virgil’s Eclogues or Spenser’s Shepherd’s Calendar and Milton’s Lycidas through great modern works of pastoral fiction like Sarah Orne Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs or Eudora Welty’s The Golden Apples, the literary work of purposely small range that draws on nature for a coherent vision of harmony is the more honest the more it displays its artifice. The skies weep because Daphnis and Chloé are apart, but realize that the “weeping” is not in nature; the plain, lonely woman of Jewett’s tale reminds the narrator of a great heroine from Greek tragedy, but the narrator does not confuse a comparison for a genealogy; mythical beasts—griffons, sphinxes, basilisks—gather at the burial of Mrs. Rainey in Morgana, Mississippi, in The Golden Apples, but we are given right in the name of the town to know that we are witnessing a mythic, symbolic cortege, not reading a list of the funeral guests. It is when the highly wrought rendering of pastoral takes on the seeming realistic artlessness of regional that the ethics can be slippery. The overtly poetic idylls of Matthew Arnold’s Thyriss or of Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited are autobiographically based, but no one would ever consider them direct reproduction-re-creations of life at Oxford. However, regional writers who appear realistic—Stifter as the towering Austrian artist, Waggener, Ginskey, Rosegger, Nabl, Grogger as lesser ones—are inconspicuously transfiguring the objects of their perception into poetic mode, subjecting the smallest and most common elements to the glorification, idealization, and lyrical transmutation of landscape through structural choices. In the 1970s a resurgence of regional writing occurred, which like their opposite number, the idyllic regional fictions against which they were reacting, these works were strongly autobiographical, which can only make the reader wonder how the authors survived to write about the conditions they describe with such harrowing immediacy. As Fliedl notes, antiregionalism aimed to dismantle the idyll with a vengeance, depicting with unsparring graphic detail the humiliations and abuses, the serfdom and slave labor, the violence and drunkenness, the backbreaking toil, the extreme regimentation, the ugliness of the manure pit and the pig slaughterings, the annihilation of personality, the utter hopelessness of ever escaping to or even imagining a different life (202). Stifter’s “gentle law” yields to brutality. Village and provincial life could offer the pageantry and solemnity of the Catholic church year, but the distortive provincialism of religious instruction erected a stark system of sin and damnation, all of it based in some way on transgressing against authority. Among other gifted artists, Franz Innerhofer and Josef Winkler are the two leading antiregional authors; both achieve the visionary poetry of writing with the heart’s blood. Innerhofer writes about what he calls the “concentration camp down on the farm” (233)—the brutality of the pecking order, the beatings, the emotional and sexual abuse, the long workdays at age seven, the callousness of parents and relatives,13 while Winkler is haunted by Catholic ritual and prayer to the point where, as Fribolin so well puts it, his whole oeuvre is “a black Mass” (206–11). In conflict over the extreme disparity between the magnificence of Catholic liturgy and the terror of Catholic transgression, Winkler found mediation and sense in the life and work of Jean Genet, who makes a consistent moral code out of that transgression; still, as Winkler himself acknowledges, he is unlikely ever to get beyond the central conflicts of his childhood (Fribolin 206). With all honor to these novels of profound artistic depth and even more profound ethical courage, they are not categorically different from the kind of work against which they are reacting. Regional writing in Great Britain and the United States14 has a wider variety of registers and tones than regional writing in Austria. In America there is the same kind at intensively rapturous lyric idyll in The Country of the Pointed Firs and The Golden Apples and in the beauty of the bleak Midwestern landscapes in Willa Cather that one finds in Austrian regional writing; there is the ennobling myth of a bygone hierarchical order in Thomas Nelson Page’s Marse Chan: A Tale of Old Virginia; but there is also the awareness of terrible tragedy in racial hatred and its indictment in George Washington Cable’s The Grandissimes and in the work of Faulkner; there is the buffoonish and occasionally squalid yokelism of Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s Georgia Scenes or Joseph G. Baldwin’s Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi, a tone adapted by Mark Twain and later by Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O’Connor. In Great Britain there are numberless works that extol the idyllic peace of rural and village life under threat, novels that with almost sociological precision capture worlds in the process of disappearing, if not already gone—mention need be made only of G. B. Edwards’s Book of Ebenezer Le Page or Flora Thompson’s Dark Rlite to Candlesfield—but there is also a consistent trend of seedy hilarity in depicting the farm and the village as places of gloom and utter dullness until peppeled up by city people, like the well-known Cold Comfort Farm of Stella Gibbons (not to go as far back as the scenes with Squire Western and Mr. Thwackum and Mr. Square in Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones). We need recall the bleak, hopeless antipastoral poems of George Crabbe in this connection, as well; The Borough and The Village are almost naturalistic studies in the cruelty of humans and the mercilessness of nature in East Anglia. This range of approaches was not at the disposal of Austrian antiregional novelists; they had only a near-unanimous idyllicism and idealization against which to react. Accordingly, the one strategy available to their artistic process is to reverse or invert the standard settings, characters, emotions, and structures of the rhapsodically, poetically regional, stressing the violent, the squalid, the brutal. They remain parfique on the level of content, and even their structure relies on the standard geography of regional life. Winkler’s novel Der Ackermann aus Kärnten (The Plowman from Carinthia)—an allusion to a famous religious work of the late Middle Ages, The Plowman from Bohemia), for example, takes its form from descriptions of the twenty-one houses in the village; ranged along a main street and another street that crosses it horizontally, the village has the shape of a large crucifix (Fribolin 168). Of course the structure of Der Ackermann aus Kärnten works in perfect congruity with its subject material, but that structure relies on traditional content of regional works, in which the church and the pastor play important roles. The content-determined structure reinforces the convention, and very effectively so for Winkler’s purposes, but it does not anarolize or “geometrize” that convention. Not deconstruction, but reconstruction on the old basis. Along with other abuses it was unmasking, the antiregional fiction of the 1970s was unearthing the deeply rooted Nazi past of Austria, which, as Fliedl says, “wasn’t so past all but was preserved into the present through various nationalistic and right-extremist associations” (202); she goes on to note that, in keeping with the old reflex of beating up the messenger for the message, these exposés didn’t exactly help the antiregionalists (202). They did not so much reveal correlations between regionalism and totalitarianism as bring them to the surface. In the television series we mentioned earlier, an observer of the cultural scene during World War II noted that those who were celebrating Nazism now will be singing their old tune when it’s all over, “just as it if had never been, with the pig roasting on the spit and the cabbage and beets of their region” (Weissenberger in Mück 99). The close association of Nazism and regionalism is considered self-evident by this commentator, and his context also assumes that the audience will immediately make the same correlation. It is notable, too, that when Jörg Haider dons a rustic outfit, speaks in the local dialect, and is filmed for the early news on the family farmstead, he is probably about to purvey anti-Semitic innuendoes, to foment xenophobia, to play off “healthy” rural values against urban, sophisticated thinking in a country still mostly rural and agrarian. Not for nothing does Haider cultivate an image that could make him a character from the pages of the traditional regional writers; he patterns himself on the same rural values, the same incurruptible honesty, simplicity, and courage to speak out for his homeland and his country. Indeed, the high incidence of National Socialist involvement on the part of regionalist writers is striking. Certainly Stifter, a great humanist, would have been aghast, stupefied with shock to see that those who wrote, under his more or less direct inspiration, about the simple life, the peaceful pursuit of rural occupations in nature, the quiet and gentle cultivation of eternal order, the harmony of the seasonal cycle, were also enthusiastic proponents of the Austro-Fascist state from 1934 to 1938 and the National Socialist regime from 1938 to 1945. Franz Karl Ginskey, Franz Nabl, Paula Grogger, Robert Hohlbaum, and Karl Heinrich Waggener are only a few of those regionalists who found Hitlerism the fullest realization of their social ideals. Of course the National Socialists were adept at image management and persuasively stylized themselves to many as simple, good people with a love of homeland and reverence for the earth, wishing to live only in
because she questions the correlation of standard graphing in algebraic geometry with what it is graphing can the girl begin developing a more truthful, more precise earthly and incorporated into a coherent unity that approaches closer to truth. Truth, in turn, is a category whose existence can be doubted only when it is seen as a purely formal or be shown to cohere, because congruence would seem impossible.15 that geometry itself, with its inexorable use of logic, is by that very logic a form in Goethe’s sense and thus inherently false. The geometry of Geometric Regional Novel radically addresses this problem precisely: “Any form, even the most sensitively felt one, has something false about it” (Doderer 16). Jonke makes his “geometry” into a means of showing the work of Albert Paris Gütersloh in 1962, Heimito von Doderer drew on a little-known utterance of Goethe—a respected natural scientist as well as a man of letters—that nature, both artist and scientist can fall into the arrogance of believing that they have captured the “real” reality of whatever objects they have structured into coherence. Reviewing constructions based on nature, are “the thing itself,” nature as it “really” is. Gould in showing the racial and ethnic prejudices built into intelligence testing—arises from the mistake of believing that our “ideas about the thing,” our extrapolations and hindsight about exploded “scientific” approaches to social issues—social Darwinism, eugenics, Lombroso’s theories of criminal “degeneracy,” the famous work of Stephen Jay fulfilling whose condition in words is impossible, though the creating power of logos is the very dream of art. The blindness to ethical implications that it is so easy to note in though it comes close to embodying the thing through mimesis, any utterance whatever about the thing is automatically a reordering of the thing and therefore a denial of the title, well that art cannot surmount the paradox any more than geometry can. Art may not give us ideas about the thing, as geometry does, but it can never give us the thing itself; the imagination cuts both ways; it allows us to make sense of our perceptions only by causing us to distort them. Geometry may be no less a disruption of nature, no more trustworthy an “earthly measure” than the pathetic fallacy, because it does the same thing; it compromises reality by extrapolating principles from separate phenomena and then reapplying those principles to subsequent incidences of those phenomena. The principle—a contrivance of the human mind—then becomes the reality, the separate phenomenon mere validations of it. But the abstraction of a phenomenon is not the phenomenon itself, and the very gap that opens up between any observed natural phenomenon and whatever we say or think about it, however we abstract from it, falsifies the immediate truth of observing it. And yet such abstraction is essential to comprehending the phenomenon in the first place; the human mind cannot even perceive it otherwise. That is the great paradox Jonke points up through his structure. That paradox may be almost too commonplace to deserve mention, but it has always created the kind of unease Dickinson notes. The classic Euclidian definition of a line, for example, is a study in pure theory, not nature, since the infinite points that supposedly constitute it can by definition never join in nature; a point has no dimensions, yet we see the line. The circles and squares of the geometry textbooks are seldom found perfect in nature, so they represent a starting level of abstraction upon which is then built another whole, a system of measuring areas and volumes. Zero drew on this paradox between the phenomenon as it actually operates and our attempts to formulate it with his famous demonstration that an arrow can never reach its target, mathematically speaking, because it can at any instant cover only half the distance to the target, and those halves can be subdivided infinitely. But it is exactly because an arrow does hit its target that Zeno’s playful “proof” of the impossibility of its ever being able to do so has endured. There must necessarily, then, always be a disturbing discrepancy between nature and all systems of apprehending it, an inherent paradox in the very process itself, and that discrepancy has always been a fruitful theme of art that in any way addresses the workings of the imagination, especially in an age when science, in the form of technology, made material gains that encouraged it to claim superiority over art as the more accurate and fruitful mode of “earthly measure.” It is then that the paradox took on social and political dimensions. That disturbance haunts the work of William Blake, who writes of the “chartered” streets of London, all measured out by surveyors and engineers for trading and profiting, even the River Thames is “chartered.” Blake finds a later echo in the Duino Elegies of Rilke, regretting that we cannot apprehend an object in its full immediacy; instead, “we are not very reliably at home in this construed world” (9)—construed through scientific, geometric measurement. The sinister villains of Poe and of E. T. A. Hoffmann, like the later mad scientists of popular culture, are almost always technocrats, engineers, machine-monitorers, and physicians who undermine the sensitivity and otherworldliness of the poet and the dreamer. This paradox also supplies Wallace Stevens with one of his most characteristic titles, “Not Ideas about the Thing, but the Thing Itself,” but that title shows as well that art cannot surmount the paradox any more than geometry can. Art may not give us ideas about the thing, as geometry does, but it can never give us the thing itself; though it comes close to embodying the thing through mimesis, any utterance whatever about the thing is automatically a reordering of the thing and therefore a denial of the title, fulfilling whose condition in words is impossible, though the creating power of logos is the very dream of art. The blindness to ethical implications that it is so easy to note in hindsight about exploded “scientific” approaches to social issues—social Darwinism, eugenics, Lombroso’s theories of criminal “degeneracy,” the famous work of Stephen Jay Gould in showing the racial and ethnic prejudices built into intelligence testing—arises from the mistake of believing that our “ideas about the thing,” our extrapolations and constructions based on nature, are “the thing itself,” nature as it “really” is. Thus what the modalities of art and science have in common, despite their supposedly irreconcilable differences, is their recourse to the shaping force of the imagination; science no less than art must apply to nature processes and forms that are not in nature, as Zeno’s paradox reveals. Both modalities require the thoroughgoing application of a consistent form that governs as many of the separate, individual details or data as it can possibly encompass. If they forget that their articulated formal systems originate in themselves, not in nature, both artist and scientist can fall into the arrogance of believing that they have captured the “real” reality of whatever objects they have structured into coherence. Reviewing the work of Albert Paris Gütersloh in 1962, Heimito von Doderer drew on a little-known utterance of Goethe—a respected natural scientist as well as a man of letters—that addresses this problem precisely: “Any form, even the most sensitively felt one, has something false about it” (Doderer 16). Jonke makes his “geometry” into a means of showing that geometry itself, with its inexorable use of logic, is by that very logic a form in Goethe’s sense and thus inherently false. The geometry of Geometric Regional Novel radically questions whether, in the terms of Cook’s casebook essay, any congruence of a system with nature is at all demonstrable; systems of “earthly measure” are valid only if they can be shown to cohere, because congruence would seem impossible.15 Only when art and science are mindful of the self-referentialism in their processes can they hope to refine and revise their methods such that more of the data will be accounted for and incorporated into a coherent unity that approaches closer to truth. Truth, in turn, is a category whose existence can be doubted only when it is seen as a purely formal or aesthetic problem separated from ethics. In a work likely to be familiar to English-speaking readers, Tom Stoppard’s Arcadia—like Geometric Regional Novel a brilliant exploration of “geometry” and its truth content in science, art, and history—a landscape gardener around 1810 is creating the latest Gothic, romantic effects on a large estate, complete with grottoes, ruins, and a hermitage, all in the belief that he is authenticity going “back to nature” as compared with the geometric formality of the previous clipped hedges and symmetrical gravel paths.16 Inside the library-schoolroom, at the same time, the young daughter of the house, whose words to her tutor Septimus we quoted at the beginning of our essay, is innocently starting to lay bare the basic inadequacy of traditional geometry; like Jonke’s narrator, she ingeniously traces a mounting incidence of discrepancy between the old system of earthly measure and the earth it purports to measure. By noticing that she can stir jam into her rice pudding but not back out of it, she is beginning to account for the principles of thermodynamics. As she starts to graph irregular shapes like flower petals with finer and finer detail in what we would now call feedback loops, she is depicted by Stoppard as unwittingly laying the groundwork for chaos theory and fractals, which could not be developed until the age of instant calculation in the later twentieth century. Only because she questions the correlation of standard graphing in algebraic geometry with what it is graphing can the girl begin developing a more truthful, more precise earthly
traces the basic movement, and the following chapter, "The Bridge" (30-39), elaborates the increasing prohibition by overregulation to a point that would stretch rondo-variation

parks" about the dangers of sitting under trees; bureaucratic overregulation has displaced living organisms and created yet more restrictions for the villagers. The chapter itself

In general, each variation takes in more of the history, topography, geography, and social structure of the village, while the alternating chapters, the ones not titled "The Village

ingenuity with which the composer will expand the theme into greater complexity, so Jonke's reader begins each "Village Square" chapter knowing that a simple exchange will

or not and whether they can make it across the square unobserved. Where there is not an actual dialogue, the thematic material about the emptiness of the square is still present,

comes at the opening of every other chapter, beginning with the first. These chapters are all called "The Village Square"; in them, two people debate whether the square is empty

complex variation, however, needs by nature to be relatively short, since its function is to refract and develop the theme, not to be an autonomous unit. Still, the similarity of rondo-

variations, while rondo form keeps adding complexity and variety, diverging ever farther in each variation from the theme but always returning to it.17 Even the longest and most

theme, now developing it into a third, yet more elaborate variation, and so on. Fractals replicate exactly the same structure on every level of subdivisibility, with no additions or

When Jonke was working on Geometric Regional Novel from 1967 to 1969, chaos theory and fractals were barely starting to be developed as such, but just as patterns of thought

and insight can develop simultaneously in different places and modes of thought, so Jonke tailors the old concepts of macrocosm and microcosm to the process of infinite divisibility

in a strikingly similar way. That infinite divisibility is the method that Jonke's formal processes have in common with fractals, even though his divisions reveal divergence from

replication, not identity. We get fifty verbs, but we could get two hundred; we get an application form that would take weeks to fill out, but we could get one that requires months. It

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Jonke is deploying irony in following patterns of chaos theory and fractals,because while fractals replicate the same structure on every level, with no variation, the fractal

subdivisions of Jonke's narrative process ultimately cause the supposedly identical character of microlevel and macrolevel to rupture. That rupture is another way of questioning

Stifter's "gentle law," the assumption that universals can reliably be drawn from particulars. Where one verb has simple denotative impact, ten synonyms of it will reveal an

authoritarian pattern; one incident of employing help (hiring the man to sweep the leaves from the square) is neutral, but where the town chronicle is closely examined for historical

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Jonke's formal processes have in common with fractals, even though his divisions reveal divergence from replication, not identity. We get fifty verbs, but we could get two hundred; we get an application form that would take weeks to fill out, but we could get one that requires months. It is a characteristic of the fractal process that when the real has shaded over into the surreal, the logical into the insane, the organized list into the manic litany. The village chronicle goes back about two centuries, but it could plausibly have been taken back further; there is simply no artistic need to carry the process past the point at which it makes its effect.

Like them, he is a pianist with professional conservatory training and is a highly informed concertgoer and a passionate listener. Our several talks ("Interview") during the summer

Jonke is deploying irony in following patterns of chaos theory and fractals,because while fractals replicate the same structure on every level, with no variation, the fractal

Jonke draws on another sort of geometry as well, one marked by repetition within variation. Like a good many modern Austrian writers (Bernhard and Jelinek are only two examples), Jonke has a comprehensive grounding in music. Like them, he is a pianist with professional conservatory training and is a highly informed concertgoer and a passionate listener. Our several talks ("Interview") during the summer of 2002 in Vienna were dominated by music across a broad range. Jonke’s comments were consistently directed toward musical form both in the score and as captured in performance, and his particular want to pianists went to a work such as Marc-André Hamelin, who combine virtuosity with a sense of musical structure, especially where that structure seems elusive, as in Schumann's Kreisleriana or Carnaval. It was at first surprising to the casebook editor that Jonke tended to dismiss Geometric Regional Novel as the work of a child, a piece on a level he had long since moved beyond. Among other reasons why he regards this early novel as relatively unsophisticated is that, except for the folk song, it does not draw on musical topics or materials for its content, does not parallel musical devices of verbal composition with overt musical allusion and subject. His later work, for example, includes an inner monologue by Georg Friedrich Handel during the composer's last hours (Der Kopf des Georg Friedrich Händel); a novella (Gebledender Augenblick) centering on the bizarre accidental death of Anton Webern; a play (Sanftwut oder der Ohrenmaschinen) in which Beethoven energetically holds forth to his companion and amanuensis Schindler; a poetic prose reflection entitled "Concerto Grosso"; essays about the nature of musical sound in general and about songs from the Austrian province of Carinthia in particular; novels with titles that allude to musical works—Der ferne Klang, referring to an opera by Franz Schreker, and Schule der Geläufigkeit, based on Czerny, to which we have made reference already. (See Campbell's casebook essay for a discussion of the folk song in Geometric Regional Novel; also, for musical structure and content, Schönherz; Hemecker; and Schwarz 111-34.) While the musical content of Geometric Regional Novel is limited, especially compared with Jonke's later work, the structural process is eminently musical; the overall organizing device of this novel is the rondo-variation form. Like the fractal, rondo-variation form allows of repetition potentially to infinity—no classic resolution of plot brings Geometric Regional Novel to an end, but only the suggestion that the village could be wrapped up and tossed away. As the term indicates, the repetition is not a replication; a rondo begins with a simple statement of a theme, develops it, returns to it, departing from it a second time for a more elaborately developed variation, then returns again to a restatement of the theme, now developing it into a third, yet more elaborate variation, and so on. Fractals replicate exactly the same structure on every level of subdivisibility, with no additions or variations, while rondo form keeps adding complexity and variety, diverging ever farther in each variation from the theme but always returning to it.17 Even the longest and most complex variation, however, needs by nature to be relatively short, since its function is to refract and develop the theme, not to be an autonomous unit. Still, the similarity of rondo-variation form to fractals is greater than the difference, in that the same theme, the same basic material, is the recurring point of departure. The underlying tonality of Geometric Regional Novel is the gradual increase of authoritarianism through the extant, seemingly harmless social arrangements in the village; the actual theme is the verbal exchange that comes at the opening of every other chapter, beginning with the first. These chapters are all called "The Village Square"; in them, two people debate whether the square is empty or not and whether they can make it across the square unobserved. Where there is not an actual dialogue, the thematic material about the emptiness of the square is still present, creating a clearly recognizable point of departure for progressively more extended, complex, and wide-ranging variations. Just as a listener anticipates the inventiveness and
form into unrecognizability if it were not a section of its own. “The Bridge” begins just where the chapter before it left off, with posted warning signs, goes on to develop a mock-

geometric drawing of the river and the boats (fig. 2, 32), describes every detail of the bridge’s placement and the process of crossing (complete with “footnotes” that aren’t at the foot of the page (35 and 36)), and includes the convoluted “bridge ordinances” in all their excruciating legalism and bureaucratic. Jonke’s consistent double structure shapes Geometric Regional Novel as a unified entity: rondo variations in “The Village Square” chapters grow more complex in sequential, successive order, but no variation is proportionally overdeveloped to the point where its place in the rondo scheme becomes unclear; developments that require more expanse than rondo-variation form can accommodate are placed in separate chapters, long intermezzi that appear to be modeled on sonata form, whose larger dimensions allow a greater and more detailed scale of development. Where the microlevel of lists, rules, signs always threatens at any moment to create formal chaos by running out of control and into unchecked elaboration, those enactments of obsessiveness are contained within a carefully graduated process of progressively more complex variations, themselves governed by constant return to a basic theme; when the implications of the material in any variation threaten to strain the sequential complexity, that material is made into a discrete but related episode and developed in a movement of its own. Jonke meticulously creates, then, an overall structure for his novel in which the incremental proportions of rondo-variation form are punctuated by separate sections of larger thematic development.

Characteristically reticent and courteous, declining to manage comment on his work, Jonke listened carefully when the casebook editor developed this point about rondo-variation form with him; his only comment was, “Yes, you could look at it that way.” So this analysis of the musical geometry of Geometric Regional Novel cannot claim the “authority” of the author’s endorsement; it is modified more by awareness of Jonke’s fascination with musical forms and structures. If it has validity, though, it offers an alternative to Vazulko’s point that Geometric Regional Novel is like hypertext fiction in its “interactive features, branching options, expansive networks of textual components” (Afterword 129-30). Hypertext allows for sequencing which, if not entirely rigorous, does not depend on a linear, predetermined succession of structural elements and is therefore not primarily “geometric,” whereas the rondo depends on increasingly complex variations which can be understood only if their linear sequence is followed. It is the incremental increase in the elaboration of the theme that gives rondo-variation form its coherence; through it, we can once again observe Jonke, by his use of mathematical and musical “geometry,” esthetically honoring traditional forms in fiction while yet ethically questioning every element of those forms.

Novel: Illustrating Imagination

Campbell and Leiter point out in their casebook essays that Jonathan Culler views the process whereby readers assess any novel as a structural judgment, weighing it against instances of the novel that they already know and allowing the particular novel in turn to modify their sense of the genre as a whole. Seen in this way, Geometric Regional Novel, because it so readily shows its building blocks and its systems as part of the finished work, compels in any reader a thorough reassessment of what a novel is, how it produces its effects, and how the aesthetics of structure harmonize with the ethics of truth content. By being explicitly “geometric,” Geometric Regional Novel invites recognition that all novels are geometric, all products of contrivance, all exercises of the imagination, which cuts both ways, as we said earlier. Novelist and critic Richard Ford quotes Randall Jarrell to the effect that “a novel is a prose novel of a certain length that has something wrong with it” (xxvii). The most elementary problem with almost any novel, the tension guaranteeing that it will always turn out “wrong,” is based on a point we have been discussing all along; it imitates the outer world by creating a whole plausible world of its own, and it even rejoices in devices for establishing that the story is “real,” not made up, and yet it cannot ever be the reality it so convincingly captures. The form of art known as the novel originated in factual, journalistic, self-help kinds of writing. Daniel Defoe’s journals of the London fire and plague in 1666 are essentially newspaper accounts of actual events, reports on which he honed the skill to make a full-blown novel out of newspaper stories about a caswayaw who survived; readers could be guaranteed that the story really happened and that they weren’t wasting their time on a writer’s fantasies. Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novels Pamela and Clarissa emerged out of their author’s activity as a successful writer and publisher of books with samples of model letters which inexperienced correspondents could follow; practicality was the mother of invention. Over time, it became a feature of the novel to provide a frame which “proves” that the story is not made up. Rather than run the risk of losing their reason through fantasy, like Don Quixote, readers could be assured that their feet never leave the ground of actuality. Of course what began as a kind of pretense ethical mollification turned into an aesthetic elaboration. Throughout the eighteenth century, novelists purported to be transcribing letters or diaries or other real-life sources. Jonke’s inclinations of various drawings and diagrams can be seen as a loving parody of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century illustrated novel, in which woodcuts or engravings added that much more atmosphere of reality through the pictorial dimension; part of the delight of Lewis Carroll’s Alice books is that the Tenniel illustrations offer minutely detailed, that is “real,” pictures of impossibilities. Poe and Hofmann are forever providing “source documents” found in an attic or a basement or a bottle to show that they are merely transcribing a written account actually extant; even when the “author” of one novel by Hofmann is a cat (Lbensansichten des Kater Murr; The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr, trans. Anthea Bell), for example, the cat draws on documentary sources, a series of papers by his eccentric master. Heimito von Doderer’s novel Ein Mord den jeder begeht (Every Man a Murderer, trans. Richard and Clara Winston) was harshly criticized on first publication in 1938, because the strange manner of the main character’s death was considered too improbable and arbitrary ever to be possible in real life; when a story from a newspaper in Germany recorded an actual death in exactly the same way about a year later, Doderer considered the report a vindication of the artist’s imagination and made careful note of the article. In The Turn of the Screw, Henry James does not tell a ghost story, but the “actual” story of a ghost story; the framing device creates the “reality” of a country-house party at which a guest sends to his home for an old manuscript which he then reads to the other guests. Heart of Darkness is not just Marlow’s “fictional” account of the abominations he witnessed in the Congo; it is that account in the very process of being narrated in present time to a group of men on board the Nellie by a man who was “really” there, so that Marlowe’s account, read a century from now, would still be unfolding at a present, “real” moment in time. Vladimir Nabokov toys with the concept of actual events in Lolita with the same kind of framework James uses; an attorney acting as Humbert Humbert’s executor is presenting to the authorities the “true” story in the form of an “actual” document. Possibly the culminating, sometimes dangerous category of truth and “fiction” is in Truman Capote’s “nonfiction novel,” In Cold Blood; its highly skilled blend of immediate documentary sources with the shaping devices of imaginative literature set a new standard of interplay between invention and actuality, as Kunne notes, that has dominated the realistic novel since (“Was ist wirklich” 65-80). Novels based on scrupulous documentation of actual sources but freely imaginative in their character development have become a norm; one thinks of Stefan Heym’s Five Days in June, about the workers’ uprising in East Berlin in 1953, of Milo Don’s Die Schüsse von Sarajevo (The Shots at Sarajevo), about the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, or of Erich Hackl’s Absehied von Siodne, a short novel-documentation about the deportation of a Gypsy foster child in 1943 that has become standard reading in Austrian secondary schools. Finally, in the spirit of the illustrated novel, the late W. G. Sebald is an especially pertinent recent example of grounding in “reality”—although Sebald clearly labels his fictions novels or stories, they are filled with seemingly unposed photographs that have clear relation to the story line but that are not identified, let alone captioned. The cover of Austerlitz, for instance (trans. Anthea Bell), has a photograph of a boy in costume who may or may not be Sebald himself (or Austerlitz, a fictional character); illustration is taken to another level in that actuality and invention are now fused; we simply cannot ascertain under what modality of truth to order Sebald’s photographs.

Jonke has created such a fusion in Geometric Regional Novel with so much playfulness that the question of what is real and what is made up has leapt outside the framework of the text itself. No geographical coordinates for the village are ever supplied, and Jonke has repeatedly pointed out (for example, Jonke, “Individuum” 17-19) that its topography is based on small settlements he saw in the Middle East, worked up later from observations in a travel diary he kept during a trip in 1966. But for all his innocent protests, the village geography in Geometric Regional Novel is like hypertext fiction in its “interactive features, branching options, expansive networks of textual components” (Afterword 129-30). Hypertext fiction offers a movement of its own. Jonke meticulously creates, then, an overall structure for his novel in which the incremental proportions of rondo-variation form are punctuated by separate sections of larger thematic development.
interplay of the realistic with the imaginative that dramatizes the hybrid truth nature of the novel as a whole. Readers are never far from the awareness of contrivance in Jonke's work, and, their consciousness that aesthetic craft and technique are always to the fore, like the visibility of a building's systems on the surface, has the ethical effect of keeping them conscious that the imagination is a two-edged sword.

Ever since Aristotle's observations on mimesis, the shaping imagination that produces a unified literary structure has been championed as a force for comprehending reality, for staying off chaos, for ordering life such that it can be relived and encompassed by readers as a coherent experience. Through a successfully invoked word of concrete particulars, through the imposition of a beginning, middle, and end, the imagination patterns the randomness of raw life; Henry James once said that there are no plots in real life. Readers come away from novels comforts, challenged, illuminated, changed through enacting the orderly pattern that the novel shaped life into.

There are two related senses, however, in which the sword can inflict damage. Probably not very many people have actually gone insane from reading novels, though a story like Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" or the early plays of Hofmannsthal dramatize the psychological folly of escape into hermetic aestheticism. Besides potentially offering flight from the life with which it means to confront us, the imagination can also manipulate that life politically and socially, as the art critic's propagandizing report in Geometric Regional Novels shows (25-27), a sample all the more successful because it is done with satiric exaggeration, albeit of characteristic rhetorical features. Even at the journalistic level—or perhaps especially at it—the imagination enters in, by nature, the second any kind of verbal shape is given to life experience, but its presence is often unrecognized, and so it can abuse its power by purporting to describe where it is in fact passing judgment. That is the sense of the legend according to which William Randolph Hearst boasted that he could start a war with the right headlines. That is the sense in which advertising takes on totalitarian force; it exercises mind control through emotional manipulation. Jonke's adoption of such techniques within a novel forces us to ask if the novel is necessarily any loftier than journalism or advertising, with which it shares the imaginative reshaping of reality. Some novels aim higher, certainly, and their power to cause reflection can be quickly and certainly validated by looking at "ordinary" readers' positive reviews of many novels (try Stifter's Indian Summer) on websites like Amazon or Barnes and Noble. A novel does not have as its only aim that the reader should buy something; still, Jonke's methods never allow the reader to forget that it is the authorially shaping imagination—the authority of the author—which is making a world just as artificial as that of the slickest billboard ad or TV commercial; that awareness of artifice, that warning by the author about the author, is an ethical admonition.

And it needs all the more to be in an age when the "illustrations" of a novel can grow into a separate powerful media event. Julian Barnes portrays with depth and wit in his novel A History of the World in 10 Chapters the confusion that arises when people do not distinguish between the imaginative and the discursive modes of truth—myth and documentation, epic and source event, legend and established fact. In Barnes's novel, for instance, characters set out at various times to find Noah's Ark on Mount Ararat, losing their balance and sometimes their lives in the process, but impelled by the conviction that they will fi help of science. In the middle chapter, seemingly related only by the nautical topic, a brilliant essay of art criticism carefully points out the differences between the components of Théodore Géricault's famous painting Scène de naufrag (Scène of a Shipwreck)—usually known as La rade de la Méduse (The Raft of the Medusa)—and what can be determined about the historical event on which that painting is based. Gradually, by minute demonstration, the utter arific of a picture that seems representationally realistic, to almost a photographic degree of reproduction, emerges more and more clearly: a triumph of art in making visible and coherent, by inventive rearrangement, the data about the actual shipwreck that could only baile viewers if reproduced too literally, but also a warning against "literal interpretation," a call to become aware of the social and political agenda, the manipulation by pathos and hope, that Géricault was incorporating. Likewise, Jonke's "illustrated" Geometric Regional Novel adds another layer of playful ethical admonition through the figures and diagrams, which, like Tennie's drawings, appear to bolster the "reality" of the event or setting at the same time as the language and plot development make it more than apparent that the object or place illustrated is a pure extrapolation from documentary reality into imaginative elaboration. That aspect of "illustration," of documenting the supposed reality of a fiction through other than verbal means, has pertinence in a time when the confusion between "real" and "made up" has caused debate and even panic. The classic instance is the hysteria caused by the documentary-style radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds in the late 1930s. In a later generation, moviegoers and history buffs, not to mention scholarly specialists, reacted to Oliver Stone's JFK as if it were a film record of the historical facts; not seeing it as a work of art, not realizing that it is an imaginative elaboration on documentary events, practically a grand political opera in the manner of Wagner's Ring, audiences were either fascinated at finding out the "real" story of the Kennedy assassination at last or furious at Stone's "distortions," as if a work of art were obligated to confine itself to pure documentation. Much of the momentary effect of the more recent film Blair Witch Project arose from the very sophisticated contrivance of making the footage look amateur, like a documentary mysteriously stopped in progress, presumably by the sinister forces the young filmmakers were investigating; supporting websites that looked equally "untouched" supported the creative blurring between "real" and invented. Also, lest twenty-first-century readers consider misgivings about the imagination as a seductive force to be a concern of the Puritan past, it might be well to remember the widespread objections to the Harry Potter books and movies as encouraging belief in witchcraft; apparently, children are better able to balance between documentation and imagination than the concerned adults around them, but the very loss of balance by parents and educators is a testimony in another way to the enormous power of the imagination—for liberation or for enslavement—as a force in an age purportedly drained of it. As a device for keeping readers aware of how the imagination is involved, Jonke's "geometric" method is more pertinent than ever.

Our contextual study of Geometric Regional Novel ends with two observations that Jonke's work brings to better awareness about the novel as a genre, about fiction as a whole. In its implicit demand, from the title on, that readers question the nature of the novel itself, it is a work—like Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, Joyce's Ulysses, Mann's The Magic Mountain, Döblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz, or Musil's The Man without Qualities—with influence beyond its own excellence as an individual work of art in revolutionizing readers' assumptions about how fiction is developed and structured; it thereby expands the canon. Geometric Regional Novel tosses out so distinct a challenge right in the title ("geometric?") that we are forced to ask—through example, not theory—what a novel is in the first place. Samuel Johnson once invited a critic who was disparaging Alexander Pope to devise a definition that would include all the acknowledged great poets—Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden—but that would exclude Pope; the critic could not do so. Likewise, many works quite not determinable as to genre could be fairly excluded from the category of the novel only if a definition could be produced that would exclude them. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn calls his documentation/autobiography Gulag Archipelago "An Experiment in Literary Investigation" in its subtitle, and we should note the mixture of categorizations; a reader who would dispar Gula Archipelago from the status of imaginative fiction, of the novel, that is, would need to say how it does not fulfill the structural conditions that Manon Lescaut, The Vicar of Wakefield, The Sorrows of Young Werther, David Copperfield, Madame Bovary, The Portrait of a Lady, or To the Lighthouse do fulfill. What is Georges Perec's W or The Memory of Childhood—an autobiography with fictional interruptions, a novel with autobiographical excurses? For that matter, any number of "pure" autobiographies, and the genre of autobiography at large, have undergone reassessment in recent years as works no less carefully rendered in theme, structure, and form than outright novels. The erasure of a clear dividing line between "fact" (autobiography) and "fiction" (novel) has worked to the enrichment of both genres; not only observers read more clearly the transmutation from raw life to shaped art in The Master and Margarita, Brideshead Revisited, The Optimist's Daughter, or American Pastoral, but they can better gauge the shaping artistry, once assumed either nonexistent or inferior to the novelist's, in works of biography from Lanterns on the Levee, The Seven-Storey Mountain, Becoming a Man, Black Dog of Fate, Dust Tracks on a Road, and others, which now enjoy the attention, the respect, the reputation of art, once accorded only as an exception to a few works like Apologia pro vita sua or The Education of Henry Adams. Jonke's placement in his title of a structural category that seems at odds with its kind of fiction not only intensifies our awareness of "pure" fiction but also helps render canonical "geometric" works that once would not quite have been accepted as art.

Jonke's title at first might seem to state that some novels are geometric and others not; we usually have the plain old regional novel, but here we have something special, the geometric regional novel. Instead, though, very much in keeping with Jonke's humor, the designation that seems to stake a claim for the unique status of his own novel actually leads to the opposite recognition—there is not, never was, and never could be a novel that is not "geometric." His term is a witty tautology. If shape and form, beginning, middle, and end, sequence and logic are necessary in the hallmarks of fiction, as is universally claimed, then all novels are geometric by those hallmarks. Again, Jonke's methods invite us to a deeper understanding of the novel as a whole by seeing how contrived they all are. What novel could not somehow be graphed or otherwise represented in its form by a geometric design? Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Austen's Pride and Prejudice are only two examples of novels that proceed with seeming inexorability, starting with an opening "thesis statement" and widening out ever farther, like fans. Martin C. Battestin has shown how Fielding's Tom Jones balances with perfect symmetry, like a great Georgian mansion, at its narrative midpoint; at the exact center of the novel, Tom, standing atop Upton Hill, looks back to where he has been and forward to where he has to go. Warren's All the King's Men seems filled with disparate plot lines until near the end, when a telephone call to Jack Burden's mother causes her to reveal the Oedipal charge she paid for his paternity, at which point the novel's threads weave together suddenly. Dreiser's Sister Carrie is like a graph illustrating inverse proportion; as Carrie's fortunes rise and take her ever farther out of the gutter, those of her protector sink ever lower until his body is taken away on a garbage scow. Like the concentric ripples caused by a stone in still water,
to the point of extreme artifice—has more in common with the writers of the Oulipo group in France, especially Georges Perec.

Jonke is often compared with the French exponents of the nouveau roman, but this aspect of his art—extraordinary fidelity to minute realism combined with highly wrought form—sets him apart. In the words of Aichinger, he does not try to "cover the cracks," but instead "digs under them." This approach is evident in his description of Waldheim, who is depicted as "a man with a fake grin" (104). The recasting of history as myth is not a thing of the past in Austria; one novel from 1990 can illustrate the new tendency of mythologizing to confront through irony what it used to promote. For example, in "Waldheim's Grin" (104), the radiance of the president's artificial grin suddenly causes his face to burst into flame.

Notes

1 Sane: Sebald discusses a letter he received after delivering in Zürich the lectures that formed the basis for his book, a letter "I had to read through several times, because I could not believe my eyes at first" (104). His correspondent, writing in 2000 (!), explains that the annihilation of the German cities was planned by Jews living abroad; they wanted to destroy true German culture and replace it with the general Americanization which has in fact occurred (104-06).

2 The casebook editor consistently meets Germans no older than twenty who seriously ponder their history, deeply involved in efforts to come to terms with it and their place in it, even though their parents—and sometimes grandparents—weren't even born until after 1945.

3 One of W. G. Sebald's two books about Austrian literature is called Die Beschreibungen des Unglücks (The Description of Unhappiness).

4 All the examples would be worth citing, but two of them, bracketing with characteristic Austrian irony, droll and angry at once, should be mentioned here: Hans Weigel's paragraph "What Less Do You Want?" (“Was will man weniger?”) (Dor 20), a brief but devastating exposure of Waldheim's abysmal pettiness and mediocrity, and Oswald Oberhuber's flyer showing a photograph of Waldheim with the caption "Would You Buy a Used Horse from This Man?" (“Worten [sic] Sie von diesem Mann ein gebrauchtes Pferd kaufen?”) (Dor 130), an allusion to Waldheim's membership in the Nazi riding club, of course. So that this conflict is not seen as a schematized confrontation of left with right, we note that Weigel was a cultural conservative, a vehement anticomunist who had earlier initiated and sustained a boycott against Brecht's plays in Viennese theaters.

5 “My rage is very great, although it is usually not directed at an object” (qtd. in Friedl 99). As an exception, Jonke mentions (99) that he was referring to Ronald Reagan when describing the “President of the New World” in one of his novels (Erwachen zum großen Schlafkrieg); the radiance of the president's artificial grin suddenly causes his face to burst into flame.

6 Two examples illustrate more than one point. Aichinger and Bachmann were still being received rather warily in Austria decades after they had been acclaimed in Germany as great artists of craft and conscience and become members of the esteemed Gruppe 47. Because Aichinger was young when she published Die größere Hoffnung in 1948, she could be dismissed with a pat on the head by ideologically hostile critics in Vienna as a talented but naive little girl too prone to overreaction (Schmidt-Dengler 47-48), and she was not awarded the Austrian State Prize for Literature until 1995, scandalously late in her career (Kaukoreit and Pfozer 300). For Bachmann, it would be easy to document how remarkably often her Austrian male critics referred to her as insane, fit only for a mental institution, and the like, while similar judgments from Germans are ordinarily not forthcoming. Whatever the case of such assessments in Bachmann's actual behavior, those quick to label her leave equally problematic—but male—writers alone or even dignify them as “tortured.”

7 The recasting of history as myth is not a thing of the past in Austria; one novel from 1990 can illustrate the new tendency of mythologizing to confront through irony what it used to avoid through solemnity. Readers who know German would delight in Inge Merkel’s Das große Spektakel; with exuberant, elaborate Baroque wit, Merkel faces the Nazi past and the Waldheim scandal (not to mention all the rest of Austrian history) by reinterpreting the history of the West since ancient times in light of the archetypal myth of the magna mater.

8 Esslin has elsewhere convincingly demonstrated, point by point, the enormous debt of the theater of the absurd to ancient Greek drama; again, he shows that what seemed the last word in experimentation and novelty in 1952 was a profoundly engaged adaptation of Greek theatrical ritual and content to the contemporary world.

9 The same year as Gautier’s Émaux et camées. Note the same proclamation of artistic form and scope through mention of miniature objects in stone, Gautier’s highly wrought and crafted, Stifter’s left in a state of nature, Gautier’s clearly revealing the skill of the artificer, Stifter’s purporting to be unworked, presented as found.

10 We can recall in this connection that the reclusive Austrian geneticist Gregor Mendel was active at about the same time as Stifter, studying small variations to deduce the general principles of heredity.

11 The highly admiring reviews on amazon.com testify to the quiet but powerful impact of Indian Summer on English-language readers.

12 By pure chance, English has a geometric term, square, to describe such open spaces; the corresponding term in German, Platz, is more generic and has no geometric reference.

13 Aware that there is a categorical difference between the life and the work of an author, it could still be asked, as a sad commemoration, whether the fearful conditions of their time might not have changed the man, as much as the man might have changed the conditions.

14 By pure chance, English has a geometric term, square, to describe such open spaces; the corresponding term in German, Platz, is more generic and has no geometric reference.

15 And with characteristic Austrian embracing of paradox, mathematician Kurt Gödel showed—through mathematics—that no system can be proven from within itself to cohere; in an infinite regress, coherence can only be proven by the next more complex system—arithmetic through algebra, for example. I am grateful to my student Mary Marks for her work on Gödel in our course on Austrian culture.

16 Merkel has one of her characters visit Sir Horace Walpole’s estate, Strawberry Hill, where she observes gardeners weeding, diverting streams, and replanting whole stands of trees for specific “wild” effects, even while Walpole is telling his guests in their presence that the grounds are purposely left in a state of nature (224-35).

17 Among many examples, two great arias by Mozart make especially clear textbook illustrations of rondo-variation form: Fiordiligi’s “Deh, perdono” from act 2 of Cosi fan tutte, and Vitellia’s “Non più di fiori” from act 2 of La clemenza di Tito.

18 Jonke is often compared with the French exponents of the nouveau roman, but this aspect of his art—extraordinary fidelity to minute realism combined with highly wrought form—to the point of extreme artifice—has more in common with the writers of the Oulipo group in France, especially Georges Perec.

Works Cited
