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Homo-Mercedes and Heimatlosigkeit:  
Arnold Stadler's *Ein hinreisender Schrottbändler*

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The 1999 award of the most prestigious of German literary accolades, the Georg-Büchner Prize, cast Arnold Stadler — an author previously on the periphery of the German literary industry — into the public eye. Born in 1954, Stadler was raised in the provincial town of Meßkirch in Baden-Württemberg — the Swabian hinterland that provides the setting to his early fiction. Prior to his receipt of the award, Stadler had already established himself as a major German language author with the publication of four novels, two short volumes of poetry and essayistic approaches to the work of other authors, such as Johannes Peter Hebel, Paul Celan and Adalbert Stifter. He is also the recipient of numerous distinctions and scholarships, including the *Jürgen-Ponto-Stiftung* award (1992), the *Hermann-Hesse-Förderpreis* (1994) and the *Marie-Luise-Kaschnitz-Preis* (1998). Despite these numerous awards and the endorsements of the German intellectual and public figure Martin Walser, Stadler's oeuvre remains underexplored by scholars. This article focuses on the novel *Ein hinreisender Schrottbändler* (1999) — the work for which the author was granted the Büchner Prize — and reads this text primarily as satire on the Berlin Republic. I draw particular attention to the major and recurrent themes in Stadler's prose, which include *Weltschmerz*, 'authenticity,' the concept of *Heimat* and the cultural effects of advanced capitalism and globalization upon the German province.

The German province retains especial significance in the author's oeuvre, although the author in no way seeks to 'glamorize' his Swabian provenance. Nevertheless, a strong degree of sympathy is incorporated for the "Menschen auf dem Land [...] Sein langsames Aussterben, die Schmerzlaute seiner Sprache, dass seine Schweine in die Städte verfrachtet und industriell ausgeschlachtet werden wie seine alten Wörter, die das Fernsehen längst überrollt hat" (Schreiber 160). Reviews of Stadler's earlier fiction, such as *Ich war einmal* (1989) and *Mein Hund, Meine Sau, Mein Leben* (1994), that have focused on the strongly autobiographic element of these works and the depiction of village life in the remote rural region of *Oberschwaben* have sustained the (mis)interpretation of Stadler's work as *Heimatdichtung*, a literary genre

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largely discredited by its association with the xenophobic propaganda of National Socialism. It is a categorization of his work that author is always keen to refute in interviews: “[Martin] Heideggers *Feldweg*-Text von 1949, das ist Heimatdichtung, furchtbar kitschig und fast ‘Blut und Boden.’ Ich fühle mich nicht derartig mit der Heimat verbunden. Man bringt fälschlicherweise, oft aus Unkenntnis, ‘Heimat’ mit ‘Land’ zusammen” (Schreiber 159). Many commentators point out that the core meaning of *Heimat* is notoriously difficult to translate, for the lexeme carries certain connotations that English translations, such as ‘homeland,’ ‘home’ or ‘native region,’ always fail to convey. The literary genre of *Heimatlidichtung* is a modernist development and is characterized by its articulation of a desire for ‘rootedness,’ the reverence of local tradition and insular security. The ‘golden age’ of *Heimat* art coincided, therefore, with the period of social, political and demographic change that resulted from Germany’s industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century.

Although the coalescence of the maternal *Heimat* and the paternal *Vaterland* into a xenophobic ‘myth of nationhood’ nurtured by National Socialist propagandists discredited the aesthetic of *Heimat* art, the concept remains, for Boa and Palfreyman, an extremely emotive constituent of the German psyche. In their *Heimat - A German Dream* (2000), the authors highlight the utopian and chiefly conservative nature of the concept, summarizing the central tropes of *Heimat* literature as a series of conflicts that set: “Country against city, province against metropolis, tradition against modernity, nature against artificiality, organic culture against civilization, fixed, familiar rooted identity against cosmopolitanism, hybridity, alien otherness and the faceless mass” (2). While Stadler’s texts echo with a mournful lament of the loss of local identity, organic community and regional identity, the author never enters the realm of nostalgia nor does it seek to idealize the German province as a “space of innocence” (Blickle 1) exempt from association with the National Socialist past. Indeed, as the author pointedly claimed in the acceptance speech on the occasion of his receipt of the Büchner prize, Stadler’s work resonates with the realization that the sense of mysticism that is associated with the *Heimat* concept has been *demystified* by the realities of Nazism and German perpetration of the Holocaust: “Es gibt Menschen, die mit eigenen Augen den Rauch gesehen haben, der zu Himmel über dem schönnamigen Birkenau stieg [...] Ich selbst sah einen Berg von Brillen, durch die einst Menschen die Welt sahen. Ja, dieses zwanzigsten Jahrhundert bot ein Leben in der

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Nachbarschaft von Verbrennungsöfen. Wo soll da noch Heimat sein!” (*Erbarmen* 25).

Insofar as Stadler’s *Ein hinreisender Schrotthändler* returns its narrator to the province of his youth from the cosmopolitan city of Cologne, this text can be seen to flirt with a central convention of the *Heimatroman*, in which the protagonist returns to rediscovers a sense of rootedness and belonging within the landscape that provided the backdrop to his/her childhood. As this paper will seek to prove, however, *Ein hinreisender Schrotthändler* is most certainly *not* a Heimat novel in the traditional sense, but deals rather with the feeling of ‘homelessness,’ or *Heimatlosigkeit*, experienced by the retro-Romantic “promovierter Träumer” (123) — a malcontent in the postmodern world much akin to the “armes deutsches Überbleibsel” adrift on the “Wässern der Globalität” (Strauß 96) as Botho Strauß describes himself in a culturally pessimistic critique of the postmodern digital age. Hence, in the second, altogether more melancholic part of *Ein hinreisender Schrotthändler*, the narrator will learn upon returning to the Swabian province of his youth that the *Heimat* concept is mere illusion and that the German province retains, in the age of globalization, none of the mysticism with which it has been invested in Strauß’s most recent work. The province, Strauß avers in his 1998 essay *Zeit ohne Vorboten*, represents the single, ultimate tear — “die letzte Ritzung” (97) — through which the individual may transcend the matrices of digital communication systems that constitute the ‘secondary world.’ Strauß’s earlier Heimat novel, *Die Fehler des Kopisten* (1997), similarly posits the German province as an idyllic refuge from the ravages of urbanity and lauds the constant spatio-temporal availability of others and emotional intimacy of ‘face-to-face’ communication.

Both Strauß and Stadler incorporate an obvious critique of consumerist ‘mass culture’ into their writing. This essay claims that Stadler’s protagonist attempts to describe the pain the existence — for Strauß, the “Leidenschatz des Subjekts” (101) — in the attempt to recover a sense of his ‘authentic’ existence, lost in a consumerist *Spaßgesellschaft* whose inimical fear of pain, death and suffering is countered with ritualized displays of optimism and happiness. The preoccupation of Stadler’s protagonists with the pain of their ‘being-in-the-world’ — of *Weltschmerz* — invokes the existential philosophy of a figure whose influence upon Strauß is similarly pronounced: Martin Heidegger. Indeed, the aphorism “Der Schmerz ist der Grundriß des Seins” (52), which is attributed to Heidegger by the narrator of Stadler’s first novel, functions as the abiding *leitmotif* in this oeuvre. Stadler’s

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allusions to Heidegger are more of an associative nature than a concrete engagement with his philosophy and it is rather the *absence* of *Weltschmerz* from the modern lifestyle, typified most poignantly by his acquisition of his “schmerzstillender Mercedes” (51), that is thematized in *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler*. The desire to authentically communicate the pain of existence, the protagonist will ultimately discover, proves as hopelessly idealistic (and outdated) as his desire to discover *Heimat* in the southwest German province that is now more readily to be found ‘online.’

Most intimately connected to the discussion of ‘authenticity’ and pain in this text is the reflection upon autobiographic memory. The fluidity, fragility and ultimately finite nature of personal memory call into question its capacity as a reliable tool for the investigation of individual identity. Stadler’s protagonists reflect on the overall importance and value of private memory within a society whose ‘collective memory’ is determined by national, even global, narratives on the National Socialist past and the Holocaust. It is within the context of debates on ‘political correctness’ and the defense of individual memory championed, most notably, by Martin Walser at the end of the 1990s in his controversial *Friedenspreisrede* (1998) and the novel *Ein springender Brunnen* (1999) that memory is disussed in this paper. A fundamental line of inquiry in Stadler’s prose reflects on how authentic memory is in an age dominated by photographic representations of reality and in which physical monuments and museums have established themselves as the key *aide-mémoires* to the ‘politically correct’ version of Germany’s troubled past.

In its invocation of themes such as ‘political correctness,’ globalization and the consumer-oriented ‘mass culture,’ Stadler’s fifth novel literature appears unusually *zeitgemäß* for an author who has repeatedly stressed his disinterest in the socio-political ‘realities’ of united Germany. Perhaps even more striking is the text’s ostensible appropriation of its content from the tenets of contemporary so-called ‘lifestyle’ literature, with its conventional focus on parties, relationships and fetishization of brand name products. Hence, live-in lovers, marriage guidance counselors, psychotherapists, home-interior designers and estate agents constitute the cast of *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler*. The protagonist is a former 42 year-old teacher of that most “unerfreulichste aller Fächer — Geschichte” (10), forced into early retirement as a result of a seemingly inexplicable work-related illness. The narrator’s “Dauerkrise” (15) of a marriage is further jeopardized by the arrival of the eponymous scrap-merchant, Adrian, at the narrator’s home one May morning in 1998. In a mixture of misplaced goodwill and pretentious

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'political-correctness' that recalls the (ill-fated) decision of the protagonist of Max Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (1952) to invite a perfect stranger into his home for a meal, the similarly Samaritan narrator of Stadler's novel instead invites the non-German speaking Adrian to draw himself a bath in the couple's luxury apartment. The event proves to be the first in catalogue of catastrophic events concerning the protagonist and his spouse, for the enigmatic houseguest soon begins, quite overtly, to conduct a sexual relationship with the narrator's wife before robbing them and murdering their pet cat. His gesture of goodwill exposed as hopelessly naïve and preposterously 'politically correct,' the protagonist returns to the Swabian province of his youth with an appetite for an "oberschwäbischen Seele" (150) — a Swabian savory delicacy that functions as a metaphor for the remnants of the local and the spiritual German 'soul' in the deracinated Berlin Republic. The second part of the novel has an altogether more melancholic tone as the anonymous narrator learns that the vestiges of organic, village community described by the narrator of the earlier *Ich war einmal* (1989) have all but been extinguished from the village of Kreenheinstetten.

Stadler's *Ein hinreisender Schrotthändler* functions as a satire on post-unification Germany. Set in the transitional period between the governments of Kohl and Schröder, the planned reforms of the Red-Green coalition dominate conversation in the marital home. Gabi, the narrator's wife and a successful surgeon, refuses to listen to her husband's unrelenting efforts to narrate the story of his life, rolling her eyes at his anecdotal accounts of Swabian village life while attentively seeking updates on planned expenditures in the health care budget. Tellingly, the conversation between the married couple centers on their recently purchased "Abschreibungsobjekte in Apolda" (54) — a tax-evasion investment brokered by their private financial advisor. The narrator's wife has similarly 'bought into' and internalized the hype surrounding the over-exposed Chancellor elect, Gerhard Schröder, for whom she develops an obvious attraction and whose name she even calls out during sex with her husband (12). It is a detail that underlines the psychic and spiritual disengagement of the couple. Their marriage, the narrator claims, is "eine Geschichte, von der ich nur die eine Hälfte kenne" (219), rendering the isolation of the modern lifestyle. If, as the narrator insists it is, this relationship is to be understood as "geradazu typisch für unsere Zeit" (16), then the status of the modern German marriage is akin to a business-like "Joint-Venture" (16) only undertaken by the more prudent, tax-aware element of German society.

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The Stadler oeuvre highlights the apparent triumph of capitalism over mysticism in the age of globalization, a phenomenon concisely defined by the political analysts David Held and Anthony McGrew as the “growing magnitude, speeding-up and deepening impact of interregional flows and patterns of social interaction” (4). The narrator of Stadler’s *Feuerland* (1992), who ventures to the remote province of Patagonia in search of a world untouched by modernity, is depressed by the prevalence of the paraphernalia of global capitalism even at the very ‘end of the Earth.’ Chevrolet automobiles, television advertising campaigns for the Coca-Cola corporation and famous Parisian perfumes remind the traveler that his longing for *Heimat* is simply wishful thinking in the fully enlightened earth. The narrator of the later *Mein Hund, Meine Sau, Mein Leben* (1994) similarly laments the gestation of typically American consumerist values within the spiritual heart of Roman Catholicism. The Eternal City, the narrator dismays, has come to emulate the icon of American capitalism that is Manhattan. *Ein binreissender Schrotthändler* transfers the focus on the effects of globalization upon Stadler’s rural kinsmen to the left-leaning, enlightened residents of the German urban center. The impact of brand-name products of international renown upon the narrator and his wife is strikingly apparent. A description of a successful shopping excursion to a Hugo Boss factory outlet lasts over three pages and while the narrator marvels at the stylish cut of his new waffle-brown sports jacket (69), his wife seeks to impress their enigmatic houseguest with her own eveningwear that is exclusively designed by Escada (13). Gabi’s bedside reading material does not extend beyond the *Bellevue* furniture catalogue and holiday brochures, her fantasy stimulated instead by the latest accessories from Rolf Benz (104), the designer preferred by the couple’s own ‘interior designer’ hired to fill the spiritual void contained within the walls of their roomy, yet tellingly un-lived-in, apartment (9).

The protagonist is similarly materialistic, measuring his existential worth against the financial value of the model of the Mercedes-Benz automobile that he currently owns: “Anhand des Automodells, dass nun das Maß aller Dinge in Kreenheinstetten war, wurde auch der Mensch beurteilt” (167). The individual’s equation of his sense of self-worth with the value of the automobile that he or she drives is again inferred as the protagonist informs his psychiatrist that *he* is parked outside, when it is in fact his vehicle that stands on the side of the road (52). Referring to his friends’ sons as ‘high-performance’ versions of their parents (168), the depiction of growing dependence of Homo-Mercedes upon the machine once again invokes Heidegger. In

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the philosopher's contemplation of *The Question concerning Technology* (1953), Heidegger articulates his concern at the reduction of the human subject to a mere *Bestandteil*, in technology's autonomous quest for mastery over mankind (353). The most basic expressions of 'authentic' human emotions, it transpires in Stadler's text, are facilitated or enhanced by technological progress. The somber, pedestrian procession of mourners to the funeral service of a childhood acquaintance, the narrator discovers upon his return to the province of his youth, has been 'outdated' following his friends' acquisition of "Geländefahrzeugen" (24). Indeed the narrator's marriage to his wife was hastened, we are informed, by his future mother-in-law's offer to present the happy couple with a commemorative Volkswagen Golf GTI on their wedding day (24). In a recent essay on the allegedly diminished status of Christianity in the modern world, the author describes Germany as a nation "in der es mehr ADAC-Mitglieder als Gläubige gibt, in der der Ikea-Katalog längst die 'Heilige Schrift' überrundet hat und in der der Fernsehapparat an der Stelle des Altars steht" (*Das zweite Gebot* par. 6) A trained theologian and former student at the papal seminary in Rome, the themes of religion and spiritual yearning, or *Sehnsucht*, are recurrent in his Stadler's fiction. In *Ein hinreisender Schrotthändler*, Christianity amounts to little else than an undesirable and potentially inflammatory marker of ethnicity. The discussion of the Christian deity, the narrator claims during dinner with guests at the hotel where he and his wife had honeymooned some 20 years earlier, is nothing short of a conversational *faux pas*: "Zum Glück habe ich nicht begonnen, von Gott zu sprechen [...] Von Ficken hätte ich sprechen können, das war nun möglich, ein gesellschaftsfähig gewordenes Wort, nicht aber von Gott" (34). This citation highlights the author's bitter contempt for the liberalism of contemporary social mores that permit the discussion of casual sex at the dinner table, even with the aid of vocabulary as crude as *ficken*, but which marginalize the 'taboo' subject of religion. The scene is repeated (and its importance thereby reinforced) later in the novel during the birthday dinner of his interior designer. On this occasion, the narrator's call for the hostess to recite the Lord's Prayer is tellingly interpreted as a joke by the other guests (84).

Like religion, the notion of 'authentic' love is similarly dispelled as fiction in a novel in which jealousy and suspicion are the primary emotions that the protagonist and his wife harbor for one another. The couple are, most symbolically, depicted as rival magnates, competing against each other in a game of Monopoly (13) — the board-game in which extortion and private gain are simply the rules to which players

must adhere if they are to succeed. While the characters' repeated mispronunciation of various London landmarks exemplifies the humorous tone that is most evident in the first section of the novel, the Monopoly scene also serves to enhance the apparent irrelevance of 'Germanness' in cosmopolitan Cologne. The German language, the very basis of cultural identity, is tellingly renounced within the walls of the narrator's home on account of his English-speaking houseguest's inability to understand his hosts' mother tongue. The pidgin English spoken by the protagonist and his spouse further underlines the impossibility of 'authentic' communication that the narrator, as he admits in the epilogue to his tale of the charming scrap-merchant, has always desired: "Und ich sehnte mich nach einem Menschen, mit dem ich über *alles* hätte reden können" (208, italics in original).

'Political Correctness' has proved a key theme in the public discourses that have helped shape the development of the fledgling Berlin Republic. *Ein hinreissender Schrottbändler* playfully reflects upon modern, middle-class Germany's efforts to provide an example in enlightened, left-liberal political thought. The need to speak only the vocabulary of the liberal social circle to which he and his wife belong confuses the grammar of his own spoken German. Hence, when contemplating public attitudes towards homosexuality in Germany, the narrator is at pains to preserve his 'politically correct' appearance: "Wahrscheinlich sage ich doch nicht 'schwulenfeindlich,' sondern 'intolerant,' 'wenig liberal' oder 'politisch nicht korrekt'" (106). The narrator's inability (or reluctance) to articulate his thoughts only with prior consideration of the unwritten rules that govern social interaction is clearly manifest in his attempt to introduce into a conversation between friends a discussion of the aesthetic and philosophical merits of Hölderlin and Heine. The attempt is doomed to failure, it is inferred, on account of the nationalist sympathies elucidated in their writing and the conversation swiftly returns to the latest findings of a UNESCO commission and global warming (43).

As Walser, Strauß and Bernhard Schlink have all suggested in the 1990s, the root of what Walser has termed the "Tugendterror der 'political correctness'" ("Über freie und unfreie Rede" 473) that may or may not continue to dominate and foreign is the legacy of a past which refuses to pass away. The approach to the theme of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in this novel is of a more playful and allusive nature than Walser's attack on a hegemonic, left-liberal memory industry that insists upon a 'politically correct' manner of thinking about the past. Stadler has

thereby avoided the opprobrium that was directed towards Walser following his controversial *Friedenspreisrede* of 1998, an address in which the author comments disparagingly upon the alleged instrumentalization of public memory of the Holocaust by political parties. No immediate reference to the Holocaust is made in Stadler's *Ein hinreissender Schrottbändler*, although an allusive expression of sympathy with the core sentiment of Walser's *Friedenspreisrede* (1998) is certainly incorporated. The first such allusion towards the subject of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or the attempt to publicly come to terms with the National Socialist past, arrives at an early stage of the narrative as the protagonist contemplates describing his past to his psychotherapist in order to 'cure' him of his neurosis and obsessive reflection upon his provincial upbringing: "Ich sagte Gabriele auch, daß ich dies alles auch einmal Nillius erzählen wolle, um es und mich *aufzuarbeiten*, sagte ich, 'aufzuarbeiten' — wollte ich eigentlich vergessen oder erinnern, erinnern, um vergessen zu können — oder umgekehrt?" (34).

The suggestion in this passage here is surely, echoing Walser's sentiments expressed in his *Friedenspreisrede*, that a desire to confront the past in order to alleviate the burden of guilt in fact obstructs 'authentic' investigation of the past through personal memory. The kind of investigation of faddish, superficial investigation of the past that is indicated here is very different, for example, to that pursued by Martin Walser in *Ein springender Brunnen* (1999). In accordance with Walser's assertion that *Zeitgeist* should always be seconded to aesthetics in the art of story-telling (*Sonntagsrede* 50), this novel renders an autobiographically-inspired account of childhood in Walser's native Bodensee region of southern Germany, in a way that challenges conventional, approaches to investigating the Nazi past. Whereas Walser's method of investigating the past aestheticizes subjective experience in language, the kind of *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* pursued by Stadler's narrator is altogether different, connoting the narrator's faddish desire to 'freshen up' his memory of the past. The verb is, however, similar in meaning to the verb *tilgen*, which, of course, implies the abolition of financial *Schuld*, or guilt, and thereby implies the narrator's desire to confess to his past. Considered in such terms, the narrator's persistent reflection upon his childhood past amounts to a certain form of psychological guilt redeemable, as his psychiatrist suggests, only through "Elektroschocks und Freud" (16). In this reading, the exposure of the memory of one's past amounts to little else than a salacious confession to a psychiatrist that has taken the place of the Catholic priest. Exploring the individual *Gedächtnis*, the protagonist infers, amounts to quasi-religious *Geständnis*

during an episode in Nillius' office: "Als ich auf seinem schäbigen Sofa in dieser Behandlungskemenate zu liegen kam, abgedunkelt, fast schon benebelt, fiel mir mein Beichtvater ein, alle Beichtväter meines Lebens" (92).

Despite his desire to share his individual memories of his past with others, cultural memory of National Socialism inhibits the narrator's ability to converse with non-Germans abroad and inhibits the narrator's expression of his own, subjective identity when abroad: "Jeden Mißklang beim Sprechen des Hochdeutschen vermeiden, das führte zwangsläufig dazu, daß ich praktisch nicht mehr 'ich' sagen konnte, vor allem im Ausland nicht" (66). So stigmatized by his German heritage is the protagonist that he claims (in English, of course) to hail from the "Black Forest, Switzerland" (17) when checking-in at a hotel with his wife. His identity is wholly confused, even simulated and indicative of the split-personality disorder with which he is diagnosed in the last part of the novel. The narrator is a walking contradiction. Having taken a Protestant wife from Hamburg, he must regard himself as an amalgam of southern, Catholic provinciality and northern cosmopolitanism. He has adopted his wife's keen eye for fashion and yet is disheartened by the strong degree of importance which the modern German allegedly invests in brand-name products. He is seen to disguise his heritage in the attempt to project a favorable public appearance and yet reproaches his acquaintances for conveniently allowing their attention to their heritage to lapse when the question of individual memory is raised. Thus, while the narrator prides himself on the 'rootedness' of his provincial kinsmen — "wir wußten noch, wo wir lebten und gelebt hatten" (27) — the narrator's wife fails to recall the respective birthplaces of her four great-grandparents.

The second, more melancholic section of the novel thematizes the *Heimatlosigkeit* of the narrator in the Berlin Republic with the suggestion that the narrator is alone in the perceiving the erasure of local identity and tradition as a wholly negative side-effect of urbanization and modernity. The funeral of an acquaintance facilitates his physical retreat from the urban center into the province. His experiences in the province underline his status, as the interim title of the second part of the novel suggests, as a "promovierter Träumer" (123) — a fantasist who is destined to discover that the reality of the German modern-day village contrasts with the version of rural existence imagined by the narrator in the present. The residents of Kreenheinstetten, the narrator discovers upon his return to the village, in fact share in the alleged aspirations of post-war German society to erase the memory of the historical bond to

the National Socialist past. Upon his return to the province of Kreenheinstetten, the narrator is aghast to discover that Rosemarie, his childhood sweetheart, answers his questions in “perfektem Hochdeutsch” (151), though with an annunciation of certain words that reminds him of the oratory of the former Chancellor, Helmut Kohl. The once blonde and pig-tailed Rosemarie disguises her pseudo-Aryan appearance by dyeing her hair a fashionable “schwarz-rot” (145) — a look that was ubiquitous on the streets of Germany at the end of the 1990s. Whilst she had once (at least in the narrator’s memory) epitomized the sense of ‘rootedness’ and emotional attachment to a particular region with which the *Heimat* concept is traditionally associated, Rosemarie is now the proprietor of the local real estate agency and actively involved in the ‘selling-off’ of Swabian soil to outside investors. Even the village cemetery — the resting place of the narrator’s ancestry — is not spared the effects of modernization, for the *Heimatfriedhof* has recently been landscaped to incorporate a car-park replete with his childhood friends’ identical off-road vehicles (138).

She is married to another of the protagonist’s childhood friends, Hugo, a local entrepreneur who owns the local fitness centre and a Mitsubishi car garage (170). There is little to distinguish this ‘normalized’ provincial village from the urban centre. Hence, whilst browsing a publicity brochure for a Hugo’s “Fitness-Studio” (184), the extent of the hybridization of the German language is revealed to have eradicated any trace of the dialect language fondly recalled by the narrator: “Ich las: bodyshaping, Waschbrettbauch, Bauch spezial Programm, Fitneßkalender, washboard, powerstep [...]” (184). So redundant is the provincial dialect that the traditional phrase with which the residents of Kreenheinstetten greet each other — a symbolic ‘password’ into the community — is misunderstood by the protagonist upon his entering the local inn (144).

The genealogical constitution of Kreenheinstetten is wholly altered and typical of a historical shift towards a multiethnic society in post-war Germany. The post-war transformation of the German province that was signaled in *Ich war einmal* (1989) by the arrival of “Heimatsvertriebene” (51) — refugees displaced by the destruction of war — is similarly pronounced in *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler*. The urgent need to accommodate persons displaced by the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s has brought about the arrival of Bosnian refugees in Kreenheinstetten (172). The duration of their stay is clearly a contentious issue amongst local villagers, and one resident gripes that it is not impossible to imagine that a member of the Bosnian element of

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the community should die and be buried “auf unserem Friedhof” (172) beneath a grave-stone adorned with Islamic iconography. It would, of course, be erroneous to suggest that the xenophobia of the rural villagers is in any way reflective of a possibly nationalistic, right-wing sentiment expressed here by Stadler. This is surely the kind of xenophobic sentiment to which Stadler refers when, as cited above in this article, the author describes *Heimatlidung* as synonymous with the racist *Blut und Boden* propaganda of Nazism. It is significant, therefore, that the sentence “die Heimat wird immer weniger” (173) is uttered by a resident only recently returned to the Swabian village following a lucrative job placement in the United Arab Emirates!

The intimation in Stadler’s fiction is not, then, that ‘die Heimat wird immer weniger,’ but that it was never there to begin with. As national identities collapse into each other in the age of Marshall McLuhan’s ‘global village,’ any sense of local identity appears as pure simulation. The recently repatriated villager, in fact, resembles the enigmatic Adrian (whose name invokes his Adriatic provenance) in being something of a political chameleon. Dressed initially in an Adidas tracksuit adorned with ‘schwarzrot-goldenen’ (217) side-stripes, the dashing-devastating scrap merchant quite literally adopts the political colors of the nation in which he seeks political asylum. As is the case with so many other aspects of contemporary German life depicted in the novel, Adrian’s ostentatious display of philogermanism is purely transitory. He soon swaps his thread-bare sportswear for a Hugo Boss suit and is later depicted on the slopes of the Matterhorn in a ski-outfit that unmistakably constitutes the colors of the French *tricolore* (55).

As a parody of Germany in the 1990s, Stadler’s novel certainly holds a critical edge, though this criticism is not so much aimed at the intricacies of Red-Green reform and the Habermasian ‘constitutional patriotism,’ or *Verfassungspatriotismus*, of critically enlightened German society, but rather the loss of ‘authentic’ communication and cultural tradition in the emancipated and politically-conscious *Staatsnation*. The breakdown of emotional interpersonal communication, both spoken and literary, is at the core of Stadler’s novel. The narrator’s words of condolence to the recently bereaved Rosemarie sound, implicitly, as hollow and clichéd as if taken from “einer Szene aus einem amerikanischen Vorabendfilm” (145). Similarly, the effectiveness of Gabi’s response to the narrator’s questioning of her love for him derives its forcefulness from her having appropriated it from a “Liebesfilm-dialog” (20). The synthesis of life and television is confirmed in Gabi’s illustration of her lovelessness, staring forlornly through the window of

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the couple's hotel room "wie im Film" (21). The modern lifestyle of Stadler's depiction is so far removed from authentic 'being-in-the-world,' or Heideggerian *Dasein*, that it appears as a pallid imitation of televisual entertainment that is, in kind, an imitation of existence. The "Passionsmangel" (62) that Botho Strauß describes as endemic to modern German culture in his controversial 1993 *Anschwellender Bocksgesang* appears, therefore, equally pronounced in *Ein hinreissender Schrothändler* (1999). Like Strauß, Stadler laments the "Verbilligerung des Zwiegesprächs durch Fernsehen" (68) and poses the question as to whether the individual truly profits from the neutrality of a society in which 'jeder Meinende den anders Meinenden [verstehet]' (69). The protagonist's attempt to instigate debate over dinner draws only platitudes from his conversation partner: "Außer 'ja, ja,' 'stimmt genau,' 'gewiß' hatte er [Rihm] gar nichts gesagt. Das 'ja' war eigentlich eine Zustimmung zu allem, was ich sagte" (41). The narrator, by contrast, claims to enjoy controversy, for this demands the conviction of belief and passion so desired by the narrator: "Ich liebte den Streit. Ich brauchte die Widerworte" (41). A traditional German *Streitkultur*, nurtured by the discourses of writers, intellectuals and public figures, appears redundant in a society that "zu eine der tolerantesten überhaupt herangewachsen [ist]" (67).

The coded public advertisements of persons seeking salacious sexual encounters, the protagonist despairs, are the only forms of contemporary literature "die wahrgenommen wurden" (103). The narrator's "Selbstbeschreibungversuch" (103) in the column of a lonely-hearts newspaper thus fails to attract any correspondence. The attempt to narrate the pain of his 'being-in-the-world' fails not only because he is unable to find a person who wishes to know of "wie weh es tat, wie einst, als ich vom Dreirad gefallen war" (219), but also because the protagonist's acknowledges that his 'authentic' pain is purely simulated. Through the careful management of irony and a typically postmodern self-reflexivity, the narrator's attempt to narrate the pain that ensues from being cast out from the comforts and security of 'home' into the anonymity of the modern consumer society ultimately acknowledges the impossibility of ever rendering an 'authentic' expression of this pain through writing. This is a realization reached also by earlier narrators in the Stadler oeuvre, who are also often the putative composers of the novels. In the 1994 *Mein Hund, Meine Sau, Mein Leben*, for example, the narrator cites the very inventedness of language itself and the need to write in standard German (as opposed to his Swabian mother tongue) as prohibitive in his pursuit of an 'authentic' expression of pain through

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language. The purest and most authentic expression of his pain, such is the paradox faced by the aspiring novelist of *Mein Hund, Meine Sau, Mein Leben*, defies articulation in language and manifests itself as a wordless scream: “*Ich schrie und war da. Lag da und schrie und lebte. Schreien und leben war eins*” (143, italics in original). In the later *Der Tod und ich, wir zwei* (1996), the narrator’s efforts to convince the reader of his genuine melancholia are assuaged by the sales-oriented demands of the literary industry. *Der Tod und ich, wir zwei* parodies the struggle of the writer to remain subjectively ‘authentic’ within the German literary industry. “Ich authentisch – rest egal” (206) is the advice offered by the narrator’s literary agent as he contemplates how best to ‘authentically’ recount the profundity of his *Elend*. The agent’s formula for successful literature reduces authenticity to a simplistic, almost Orwellian maxim that fails to truly comprehend the universal authenticity to which the writer aspires. The version of authenticity promoted by the literary agent in this novel differs from that pursued by the narrator, it appears, as the writer is dissuaded from allowing *too* much melancholia into a tale of a life of successive failures: “Das Scheitern darf aber vom Leser gar nicht bemerkt werden!” (207).

*Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler* is similar to the earlier *Der Tod und ich, wir zwei* in that the authors of both novels employ persistent irony and self-consciousness to reflect their (and Stadler’s) awareness that it is no longer possible to write without sardonic detachment about *Weltschmerz* in the postmodern era. Hence, the narrator of *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler* is prone to self-citation – “Die Welt war voll von schön gewesenen Frauen’ (Arnold Stadler, *Feuerland*)” (24) – self-consciousness, such as when the narrator alludes to the last ‘neun Seiten’ (44), or hopes that *his* “Buch” (107) will be stolen, guaranteeing at least one reader, and, finally, playful dissimulation: “und es tat mit leid, kein Schriftsteller zu sein, der seinen Schmerz veröffentlichen könne, der sich in eine andere Geschichte hineinschwindeln konnte, ohne sich zu verraten” (73). This typically postmodern self-reflexivity, coupled with the text’s incorporation of brand-name products and focus upon the superficial *Alltäglichkeit* of existence in the Berlin Republic, enhances the novel’s perhaps unlikely similarity to the work of a younger, media-savvy generation of writers whose work also reflects upon the superficiality of relationships and existence in the postmodern era. Thus, while Stadler appears united with Strauß in his criticism of the homogenizing trends of popular culture, there exists a thematic similarity between *Ein hinreissender Schrotthändler* and the novel regarded by critics as the seminal text of the so-called “Generation Golf” — a generation of young

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authors apparently unburdened by the National Socialist past, prone to nostalgia for the former West Germany and demonstrably apolitical. Christian Kracht's *Faserland* (1995), although widely received (and, initially at least, discredited) as pop literature, which, far from unambiguously endorsing the world of brands and designer labels it depicts, in fact exposes the dilemma of the sensitive individual sickened by his own participation in consumer society and yet bereft of any alternative set of values which might promote integrity. The novel describes the existence of a generation of young people, like Kracht, born in the decade from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, who in complacent and hedonistic fashion embraced the fads, artefacts and commodified personalities of Americanized popular culture — a phenomenon which has recently come to be closely associated with globalization. Further 'globalized' characteristics of the generation were its rampant individualism, its fetishization of the consumer products of American neo-liberalism, and the celebration of surface over substance, depth and political engagement.

Kracht's postmodern dandy, with his penchant for Barbour-branded overcoats, and Stadler's Mercedes-fetishist are united in their depiction of the absence of *Heimat* and their allusion towards the decrepitude of Germany's cultural traditions. Essentially parodying existence in contemporary Germany, both novels allude towards the decline of a specifically German identity and the obliteration of 'authentic' existence within the 'normalized' nation. The narrator of *Faserland* vomits violently and repeatedly in the text, invoking the void within the individual in a German society characterized by corporate identities, over-identification with logos and the hybridization of the German language. Stadler, like Kracht, describes a painful, existential 'uprootedness' and the erosion of local, regional identity as "eine Widerstandsleistung gegen die Uniformierung und den totalitären Zugriff der Glotze" (Schreiber 159).

The protagonist of *Ein hinreissender Schrottbändler* is ultimately aware that he, like Stadler's earlier protagonists, has failed in his attempt to communicate render an 'authentic' account of his pain. Not even the pain of his Heideggerian 'being-in-the-world,' of physical injury at the hands of Adrian and the traumatic memory thereof is of any permanence. "Nichts lässt man uns," the narrator despairs in a sentence that functions well as an epigraph to the text, "nicht einmal den Schmerz, und eines Tages wird alles vergessen sein" (216). Whereas the protagonist concedes defeat in his attempt to reengage with the authentic *Grundriß des Seins*, Stadler might be seen to experience a

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momentary glimpse of a secondary form of pain that does not so readily resist communication to the reader. This is the pain, as is memorably recorded by the narrator of Stadler's earlier *Feuerland* (1992), that is experienced in no longer being able to experience suffering authentically in the rationalized, demystified and consumer-orientated global society: "Mich zerriß es vor Schmerz, daß es mich nicht vor Schmerz zerriß" (144). The attempt to transcribe the vacuum that lies at the heart of his narrator's existence, who successfully suppresses his pain via his "schmerzstillender Mercedes" (51) and the plethora of entertainments and distractions that constitute the so-called *Spaßgesellschaft*, intensifies the author's awareness of the own temporality and contingency of his own existence — of his existential *Heimatlosigkeit*. Despite the narrator's concession in the closing lines of his novel that "ich war derjenige, der alles nicht beschreiben konnte" (184) — there may be some profit to be elicited from narrator's futile effort to compose his account of *Weltschmerz* for his readership. If the pain that represents the dwelling of authentic existence — the foundational *Grundriß des Seins* (52) — is no longer accessible, a secondary pain that rooted in the recognition of the loss of pain and the sensation of *Heimatlosigkeit* is exposed to writer and reader alike. "Die schönste und wichtigste Wirkung eines Buches," writes Martin Walser in a eulogy to Stadler's first three novels, "ist, dass wir beim Lesen empfinden, wir läsen nicht mehr in einem anderen Leben, sondern im eigenen" ("Am Schönsten" 77). Although, paradoxically, Stadler's fiction implies the failure of communication, Stadler succeeds in expressing his yearning, or *Sehnsucht*, for 'authentic' experience. The author's work echoes both with a yearning for *Heimat* and the realization that the utopian concept is pure illusion. *Heimat*, as Ernst Bloch describes in the oft-cited final sentence of his *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1954-57) describes the concept, remains "etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin doch niemand war" (1628). In a globalized world of decreasing impossibilities, of growing interconnectedness and a culture geared toward instant gratification, Stadler invokes the utopian ideals of *Heimat*, existential 'authenticity' and the desire for the retention of the local in order to highlight the gulf that separates these dreams from reality and, in doing so, preserves a form of 'authentic' longing distinguishable from the consumerist desires of the modern consumer society.

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