STATE OF THE ART OR ART OF THE STATE?:
GDR LITERATURE IN THE 1980S

In 1984 the GDR celebrated the thirty-fifth anniversary of its founding. While it was an occasion for a certain degree of nostalgia, a contribution in June by Klaus Höpcke, Deputy Minister of Culture with special responsibilities for literature, voiced a more alarming allusion to the past when he attacked those who believed that literature should have the function of 'criticising' society and went on to demand more works which presented 'the typical' and the 'positive hero'. Concepts like these, the standard armoury of the 1950s, had been thought long since dead. His words were echoed by Erich Honecker in September and by Kurt Hager in his review of cultural policies before the SED's Eleventh Congress in 1986. In the event, however, Höpcke, Honecker, and Hager have been almost totally ignored. A feature of the 1980s is the gap which has grown between cultural politicians and writers. The former may admonish and exhort, they may prevent works from being published in the GDR, but they have only limited powers to mobilise writers on behalf of policies and ideas and practically none at all to influence the way they write.

1. 'Tatkraftiges Handeln für den Sozialismus bewirken', Neues Deutschland, 13 June 1984, p. 4; see Manfred Jäger, 'Wieder gefragt: Der positive Held. Höpckes Griff in die Mottenkiste der 50er Jahre', Deutschland Archiv, 17, No. 8 (1984), 794-96.


But in any case the cultural politicians themselves have not always been consistent. While in 1986 Kurt Hager demanded from East German writers a greater awareness of the positive qualities exhibited by the working classes in the GDR and rejected Dieter Schlenstedt's modification of traditional socialist realism into a 'sozialistischer kritischer Realismus', a few months earlier he had been widening the concept of the 'cultural heritage' to embrace the avant-garde of the twentieth century, precisely those elements which since the GDR's beginning had been condemned as 'decadent' or 'formalistic'. In practice this reappraisal of an alternative cultural tradition to the socialist one has been more fruitful than the appeals for socialist realism. In the last decade East German publishers have produced a succession of editions of works by the bourgeois avant-garde: James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* appeared in 1980, Marcel Proust's *Der Gleichgültige* in 1981. Franz Kafka is an especially striking case. Not only were a two-volume edition of his narrative works and a handsome edition of the *Amtliche Schriften* printed in 1983 and 1984 respectively, but the centenary of his birth was marked on the 28 June 1983 by a one-day conference organised by the Zentralinstitut für Literaturgeschichte at the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin and the following year the June issue of *Weimarer Beiträge* had a photograph of the writer on its front piece and published three of the papers from the conference. The publication of Peter Weiss's novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* in the GDR in 1983 was an important impulse, inasmuch as the novel itself takes issue with the official socialist rejection of the cultural avant-garde in the 1930s, and attempts a synthesis of political and cultural revolutions. In the summer of 1986 a play by Samuel Beckett was performed in the GDR for the first time, *Krapp's Last Tape* at the

6. 'Tradition und Fortschritt', *Sinn und Form*, 37, No. 3 (1985), 437-56.