Introduction

> What I am up against are commonplace situations and trivial dialogue. To write the *mediocre* well and to see that it maintains at the same time its appearance, rhythm, its words is really a diabolical task.
>
> Flaubert to Louise Colet,
> on writing *Madame Bovary*[1]

The Prose of the World

If there is one thing art cannot be and still be art, it is quotidian or common. From its cultic origins through the imperative of originality and up to the provocation of anti-art, art by definition differs from everyday life—whether by idealizing the world, distinguishing itself from craftsmanship, refusing to participate in the logic of exchange or, at its extreme, by so approximating the everyday that the question "is this art?" becomes the paradoxical mode of art's continuation. "The purpose of art," writes Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics,* "is precisely to strip away both the content and the mode of appearance of the everyday."[2] As simple as this task may sound, Hegel goes to great lengths to underscore the increasing difficulty of excising the quotidian from art's content and form. This is the case because prosaic reality—the nonheroic, unexceptional world of ordinary life with its ever-expanding network of utilitarian relations—has begun to define all elements of thought and expression. Art must, according to Hegel, perform the double and oppositional movement of simultaneously extricating itself from the everyday while stepping into the middle of life. The

middle of life since the eighteenth century, however, is nothing but the "present prosaic conditions," in which prosaic consciousness has assumed two dominant forms: either it reduces the world to mere relations of cause-effect, means-end, and "other such categories of confined thought," or in the form of "ordinary consciousness," it doesn't look for inner connections or reasons at all, "but is satisfied to perceive what is and occurs as merely an isolated thing, i.e., according to its insignificant capriciousness."[3]

While Hegel traces the ascent of prosaic consciousness to Rome and the Christian world,[4] it is particularly with the rise of the bourgeois subject and the modern state—when "prose has absorbed the entire content of Spirit and impressed its stamp upon it"—that art truly becomes "enmeshed in multiple difficulties."[5] In the post-heroic age of bourgeois relations, art not only has to tear itself free from the "ordinary perspective of indifference and capriciousness" but also must convert the "usual *mode of expression* of prosaic consciousness into a poetic one."[6] The more the world becomes prose (i.e., the *antithesis* of art), the more art is forced to address this reality (which is its conditioning world) and still survive as art. Leaving aside his famous, controversial thesis on the end of art,[7] Hegel's diagnosis of prosaic reality delineates one of the fundamental questions of art in modernity: how "to integrate the prose of real life" into artistic depictions without "thereby remaining stalled in the prosaic and everyday."[8] Long before Duchamp's *Fountain* and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* drove the question of the relation between art and the everyday to the extreme—enacting the capitulation of art to prosaic reality, recasting art as the very question of art—artistic practice in the age of prosaic reality had begun to develop ever new strategies for transforming everyday life into poetry.

Art turns to the ordinary and unspectacular not out of capriciousness, lack of imagination, or external factors, but due to an inner necessity. As in Adorno's canon of the forbidden, there can be no return to earlier, more poetic, more heroic days. When a mode, a figure, a style, a content, a genre, or a movement is exhausted, art moves on—and ever more rapidly since the eighteenth century's imperative of originality. In Hegel, after the first historical stages of poetic reality are eclipsed and the age of exceptional, world-historical heroes is over, Spirit must confront the reality of its present manifestation: a demythologized, prosaic world.

German literature from bourgeois tragedy to Realism has, therefore, not surprisingly shown a persistent fascination for common life, aver-

age situations, and rather mediocre protagonists, whether in the form of Lessing's "middle characters," the *Bildungsroman's* average heroes, or Realism's decidedly ordinary existence.[9] This study explores the strategies employed by German-language literature from 1750 to 1850 for increasingly attuning itself to prosaic life while trying to escape prosaic quality. In other words, it examines the diabolical dilemma articulated by Flaubert: how to write the mediocre well, that is, how to write the commonplace in such a way that it "maintains its appearance and rhythm," while also being more than merely common. This paradox of faithful yet exceptional models of mediocrity will be investigated along three interrelated aesthetic axes: the average audience, the average artist, and average life. In each case, the question is: how can something that by definition is "nothing out of the ordinary" be ordinary and extraordinary at once? In other words, how can there be an art of the average? The title of this study, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity,* describes then both a disjunctive and conjunctive relation. Read disjunctively, modern art must display the "exemplary originality" (Kant) that only a genius can provide and, thus, is fundamentally opposed to the world of mediocrity understood as the average, the prosaic, the unexceptional, the common, and the unspectacular. In the conjunctive sense, modern art increasingly turns to average life and tries to transform it so as to produce exemplary forms of mediocrity, an averageness that both maintains and transfigures itself.

The Werther Complex

As if at once a résumé of the state of affairs and a harbinger of things to come, the first great work of German literature, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* (1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*), manifests one of the tensions between exemplarity and mediocrity that will be the subject of this study and the fate of modern German letters: the unequivocal demand for artistic genius coupled with a decided affection for everyday life. After producing, in his own words, "a well-ordered, very interesting drawing" (not exactly the lexicon of original art), Werther continues in his famous letter dated May 26, 1771, to his friend Wilhelm:

> Nature alone is infinitely rich, it alone forms the great artist. One can say much in favor of rules, about the same things that one can say in praise of bourgeois society. A person who cultivates and forms himself according to rules will never produce something distasteful and bad, just as one who allows himself

to be modeled through laws and prosperity can never be an unbearable neighbor, never a remarkable villain. On the other hand, all rules will destroy—regardless of what one says—the true feeling of nature and the true expression of the same! You say "That is too harsh! Rules merely set limits, trim the rank vines." Good friend, should I provide you with a simile? It is with art as it is with love. A young heart hangs on a girl, spends every hour of his day with her, wastes all his energy, all his money in order to express to her in every moment that he gives himself completely to her. And a philistine comes along, a person who holds public office, and says to him: "Fine young man! To love is human, only you must love in a human way! Divide up your hours, some to work and the remaining hours of leisure you can dedicate to your girl. Count your money, and what remains after your needs are met you can use to give a gift to her—only not too often, like for her birthday or her saint's name day," etc. If a person follows this advice, it will produce a useful young person. And I myself would advise every prince to place such a person in a committee. But if he follows this advice in his love, it is over; and if he is an artist, it is over with his art.[10]

Werther is a member of the new educated middle class in Germany, who, as an aspiring young artist, straddles two worlds: normal bourgeois life and the exceptional demands of art. In language that Hegel will assume as his own in the *Aesthetics,* Werther explicitly declares that bourgeois life (prosaic reality) has nothing to offer art (poetry). In fact, everything that defines and enables the bourgeoisie—rules of conduct, laws, a measured economy of restraint, the cultivation of usefulness—contradicts and, indeed, destroys artistic production. Art, on the other hand, produces as nature does; it doesn't imitate nature but competes with it. Art knows no measure but aspires to offer a measure, a model itself. Therefore, nature alone possesses the manifold richness to form an artist, who is called by nature to be a genius. The task of the artist is not to become "a useful young person" but to reject the very notion of usefulness, conformity, and measured restraint. The choice is simple—a good bourgeoisie or a good artist—and apparently without a middle ground.[11]

At this early moment in the epistolary novel, Werther makes his decision and places all his bets on art. Taking leave of both normative aesthetics and bourgeois life (which he implicitly identifies through their common admiration of rules), Werther decides to follow the one rule of modern, genial art—namely, its freedom from rules[12]—and therefore to assume a position antithetical to everyday life and its norms and laws. Art and everyday life cannot be integrated, for to compromise with the demands of bourgeois life—although rendering

a person "useful" and a "good neighbor"—spells the end of art. Art is excess, an economy without limit; the regiment of bourgeois life (calculating, dividing up, partitioning) refuses exhaustion in the name of longevity. A good citizen rations his or her capacities (love, energy, and money) at the expense of passion. The comparison between art and love in this passage is significant for *Werther* as a whole, since it also explicates the novel's solution to the dilemma between the fundamental opposition between art and everyday life: art has to fall in love with the quotidian.

Werther, an aspiring young visual artist, possesses a decided, indeed insatiable affection for the quotidian life that stands in opposition to art. The "Werther complex"—as one could call it—is to view bourgeois life as the antithesis of art and yet to fall in love with it (madly, limitlessly) all the same and thus transfigure its prosaic structure into poetry. Werther's amorous fantasy is set aflame not by an exceptional person, a like-minded artist desiring extremely and desiring extremes. Rather, the "most stimulating play" he "has ever seen"[13] is the mundane image of a mother figure slicing bread for children—an unexceptional scene repeated daily in almost every domestic milieu.[14] Werther, however, is enraptured. His erotic fate is sealed when, a few minutes later, Charlotte delineates her rather ordinary taste in literature: "My favorite author is the one who allows me to rediscover my world, in which things happen like they happen to me, and whose story is as interesting and dear as my own domestic life, which, of course, is not a paradise but all in all a source of unspeakable happiness."[15] Werther, his heart racing, comments upon Lotte's literary taste with a line that, for an aspiring young "genius," could be read as ambivalent but is solely positive: "I struggled to conceal my emotions about these words."[16] Charlotte's criteria for good literature are notable insofar as they reflect the (rather prosaic) taste of the new bourgeoisie that will reappear throughout this study: the desire, first, to identify with a familiar milieu, with a world that is ultimately one's own and, second, to place a premium on domestic life, which is not paradise but nevertheless constitutes the very concept of the world.

In this scene's triangulation of desire, Werther looks to Lotte with an inexhaustible passion while Lotte looks to literature to find a language, a mirroring representation that gives a voice to her world. Werther's desire knows no limits, while Lotte's desires are limited to the repetition of her experience of the world. Roland Barthes rather unflatteringly calls Charlotte "quite insipid" and "a colorless object [. . .]

placed in the center of the stage and there adored, idolized, *taken to task*, covered with discourse, with prayers."[17] But this is the point of the novel viewed from the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity: the original art of the genius is to transfigure mediocrity, just as Werther's desire transfigures the bourgeois life that runs counter to art.

Although Werther, in his unbridled and uncontainable passion, assumes a position opposite bourgeois life, what he ultimately desires is to take the bourgeois Albert's place. Werther doesn't desire something other than the bourgeois order; he wants his place in it, at Lotte's side. He doesn't want to elope with Charlotte and "leave it all behind" or find a utopia of "another condition" (Musil); rather, in Barthes's words, he wants to be "pigeonholed," "to enter into a system."[18] Therefore, as excessive and uncommon—or uncommonly common[19]—as Werther's desire is, what he desires is utterly common. Charlotte, however, ultimately decides for a life that reflects her taste in literature: the domesticity and bourgeois world embodied by Albert, who constitutes the antithesis of art in Werther's sense.

One could say, then, that the ultimate test of the modern artist is to lend an aesthetic nimbus to what resists and opposes art the most—everyday, mediocre life. Goethe, the author of *Werther*, passes the test with flying colors. The novel is a tour de force in showing how literature can transfigure ordinary life and thus, as Barthes has shown, offer a paradigm of the lover's solitary discourse. The literary figure Werther, however, fails. Or rather, he succeeds as a genial lover (in his ability to adorn a "colorless object" with the most vibrant colors) but not as an artist. Werther, it seems, loves like an artist, but produces art like a bourgeois.[20] If the first Werther complex is to abhor the banality of bourgeois life and fall in love with it all the same, the second Werther complex describes the "artist" himself and illustrates a further dilemma of mediocrity and exemplarity: If the genius is an exceptional and rare figure, most artists in the age of the prosaic bourgeoisie are, in fact, not artists, precisely because they were not born geniuses. They may make "art" and may even make good money from it, but without the spark of genius their products, from a strict aesthetic perspective, do not belong to art.

Werther dedicates himself to the exceptional state of art—in opposition to bourgeois life and its norms, laws, and contained economy—without perhaps fully realizing that he is not a genius. By his own delineation of the strictures of art, Werther's self-assessment of his

drawing ("well-organized, very interesting") belongs more properly to the bourgeois economy's lexicon than to the expression of aesthetic singularity. And after he falls for Charlotte, his drawing falters even further. In a letter to Wilhelm from July 24, 1771, Werther admits that "little is happening" with his drawing skills: "I don't know how I should express myself. My powers of representation are so weak; everything is swimming and hovering in front of my soul so that I can't achieve a basic sketch."[21] An unbridgeable divide lies between Werther's artistic aspiration and its execution. As Thomas Mann wrote, Werther is just like the young Goethe—"minus the creative talent that nature bestowed to the latter."[22]

Werther himself thematizes this very problem. In one of his first letters (May 17, 1771), he comments on the apparent death of a childhood friend, a young woman with whom he seems to have shared his first intense bond. Werther writes: "Wasn't our relation an eternal weaving of the finest feelings, the sharpest wit and its modification to the point of bad habit [*Unart*]—everything marked with the stamp of genius?"[23] Werther's choice of words—"stamp of genius"—is symptomatic of his artistic production as a whole. The word *genius* only appears twice in *Werther*, the second instance a few days later in the previously mentioned letter to Wilhelm dated May 26, 1771, where Werther resolves to listen only to nature as his artistic mentor, for it "alone forms the great artist." After declaring his allegiance to an aesthetics of genius and disparaging norms as good for bourgeois society but destructive for the "great artist," Werther references "the stream of genius" and laments that this subterranean force "rarely" manifests itself.[24] The fact that Werther feels only the "stamp of genius"—that is, only calls this stamp his own—and despairs the rarity of the genuine "stream of genius" is telling. As a singular talent to produce what others cannot, genius is precisely that which defies any notion of a type or mold, is something that cannot be repeated and mass produced. What Werther—ultimately a mediocre artist—experiences is the bane of not being blessed by genius but merely sensing its stamp, which ultimately doesn't belong to genius at all.[25]

Literature, Exemplarity, and Mediocrity

One of the premises of this study is that the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity is a particular problem of literature (as opposed to, say, sculpture or music)[26] in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

and, moreover, that Germany and German letters occupy a special position within this dynamic. Goethe and Schiller comment on literature's almost singular attraction for nongeniuses on the level of production, when they—both writers—note that "in all ages it is clear that the conditions for the visual artist are desirable and enviable."[27] Because of costs, materials, and training that exceed a typical (university) education centered on letters, the visual and musical arts require a process of specialization that, to put it somewhat crassly, presupposes more than the mere qualification of literacy and "a story to tell." This problem increases astronomically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the rise of the educated middle class. Between 1750 and 1810, a mere sixty years, an unprecedented boom in literary and dramatic publications occurs: Germany went from averaging 12.5 dramas and 7.3 novels per year (1750–60) to a remarkable 102 dramas and 170 novels per year (1800–10).[28] One can quite properly speak of a revolution of the literary sphere that is conditioned, on the one hand, by the educated middle class as consumers and producers and, on the other, by the advances in printing that allowed such production at lower costs.[29] One of the particular instigators of the massive expansion of the literary market is what Goethe and Schiller dub dilettantism, which is a form of the second Werther complex: to be passionate about art, to actively participate in it, but ultimately to lack the spark of genius that would first allow one to be an artist. Among the primary causes for the explosion of dilettantism around 1800, observe Goethe and Schiller, is the "immediate transition from the school class and university to attempts at writing [*Schriftstellerei*]."[30] The proliferation of literary texts has two interrelated consequences: on the one hand, the world of artistic letters assumes a new importance for the cultivation and definition of the educated middle class (which is its predominant audience). In fact, the very identity of the ascendant bourgeoisie was tied not only to education but also to its appreciation of the fine arts. On the other hand, the man of average talents (i.e., nongenius) is not limiting his passion for literature solely to its reception or consumption but is taking an active role in its production. This is not to say that (following Jochen Schulte-Sasse's study on trivial literature) a second, parallel literary form of adventure, romance, and entertainment literature isn't also responsible for this enormous explosion of the literary market; this is clearly the case. However, as Goethe and Schiller argue in their notes on dilettantism, high art in the age of the bourgeoisie and market-

place is equally experiencing an influx of "artists" à la Werther—that is, those who want to be artists but, lacking genius, aren't artists at all.

It is therefore not an exaggeration to maintain that literature more than any other art form both constituted and carried the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prior to the development of the modern mass media in the twentieth century, literature alone allowed the common person to consume and produce art on a historically unheard-of level: every educated person could try his or her hand at writing, and, as already seen with Charlotte, literature was consumed to offer a language, a mirror of the world that one inhabited, a reflection of one's domestic life. Therefore, literature occupied a privileged role for both representing and educating the common person in the age of prose. Only in the twentieth century did the visual arts, followed by the mass media of radio, film, television, and the Internet, overtake literature as the embodiment of the dilemma of mediocrity, both as a question of quality and as the main vehicle for representing ordinary life.

While literature as the bearer of the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries certainly applies to other nations, Germany occupies a unique position vis-à-vis other European countries and traditions. Whereas England and France were even more dramatically experiencing the emergence of the bourgeoisie, their middle classes were bound largely to commerce; the German middle class, in contradistinction, had little but education, government positions, and art to hold onto, which renders the art world particularly important in Germany for the bourgeoisie's self-definition. This is compounded by the fact that Germany is a "belated nation" (Plessner) not only in political terms but also in literary ones, since it is the one European nation not to have experienced a golden age prior to the rise of the middle class and the market in its modern form: Italy had Dante and Petrarch, Spain had Calderon and Cervantes, France had Molière and Racine, and England had Shakespeare and Milton. German letters were therefore faced with the unique task of trying to establish something like a "classical literature" during the very age when prosaic reality and market forces began to exert a previously unheard-of influence on literature. With the emergence of middle-class society, the marketplace, and the growing dependence of artists on the public, one notices an emphatic and irreversible entrance of the average person into the art world. Despite the aesthetics of

genius, the modern art system is largely determined not by the naturally exceptional person, but by the interests, proclivities, and taste of the average, middle-class recipient. Artists may have freed themselves from the patronage of the court, but this new independence is countered by the exposure of art to the dictates of public taste and the marketplace.[31] Germany, in other words, confronted a double task: to establish itself as a literary nation of European quality at the very time when success began to be measured in sales.[32]

Goethe and Schiller underscore this particular German dilemma in the collection of notes and charts on dilettantism that will be the main focus of this book's third chapter: "The fact that the German language began to be used as a poetic language not through the work of a poetic genius but merely through mediocre minds must encourage dilettantism to also try its hand at art."[33] Goethe and Schiller, of course, ignore the influence of Luther in forming the German language as a literary language (and as a unified language), but their point is well taken: Until the 1760s there was no attempt at a German national theater (a project that failed until the nineteenth century); and, in fact, the courts generally performed French plays and Italian operas. When it came to appealing to a tradition, the only models were French and English. The great poetic debates up to 1775 were, therefore, dominated by the question of whether French Classicism (Gottsched) or Shakespeare (Breitinger, Bodmer, and then Herder and Goethe) should be the model for a "German" drama. Until Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* there was nothing in German literature that could be said to have reached the status of "world literature."[34]

Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the Werther effects—in addition to the new dress code (blue coat, yellow vest, and boots with brown sheaths) and a European-wide rash of suicides à la Werther—was a third Werther complex, torn between exemplarity and mediocrity. *Werther* spurred the immediate proliferation of literary imitations, from those that wanted to profit from its success (including the 1775 *The Sorrows of the Young Wertheress,* a record of Lotte's otherwise unrecorded and equally emotional letters to Werther) to parodies that sought to beat back its popularity and provide an alternative, happy ending (e.g., Nicolai's *The Joys of Young Werther*).[35] As a language without a literary tradition of European repute, German letters as a whole can be described as suffering from what Werther himself diagnoses: the "stamp of genius." The attempt to continue, copy, or adhere to the tradition of exemplary models runs, however, diametrically opposed

to the demand of artistic originality that begins in Germany around the time of *Werther's* publication.[36] Following Kant (as will be delineated in chapter 1), original art is only exemplary as a model of judgment not of production. Therefore, the century-old tradition of exemplarity, in which great works of art are to serve as standards for production (since they offer norms and maintain tradition), is ruptured in the eighteenth century. In the age of innovation, the exemplarity of a work of art lies in its originality, and only this imperative of innovation is to be followed, not the exemplum itself.

From Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism

This study focuses on German-language literature from 1750 to 1850, a period in which the tension between exemplarity and mediocrity in art was played out primarily in the world of letters. Chapter 1, "Exemplarity and Mediocrity," begins by explicating aesthetics' long-standing abhorrence of mediocre quality, in which average art is in many ways worse than artistic failure (which can still be sublime). It then differentiates this universal rejection of mediocrity by investigating a key reversal in aesthetic thought that takes place with the break from normative aesthetics (Aristotle, Horace) in the eighteenth century and the development of a genial notion of art (Kant). Whereas art in the wake of Aristotle's and Horace's respective *Poetics* was largely conceived as a series of rules and exempla to be followed (i.e., exemplarity served as the basis for artistic production and the maintenance of tradition), modern art is defined by originality, which reinscribes exemplarity solely as an effect of original art and decidedly not its presupposition. Therefore, while normative aesthetics strictly circumscribes the procedures, genre distinctions, and subject matter of art and thus locates mediocrity partially in the inability to follow the existing standards and genre determinations, modern art under the imperative of originality reverses this criterion: mediocre art is now imitative, derivative production. Modern exemplarity no longer consists in adhering to canonical texts and established procedure but in establishing a new rule for aesthetic judgment via originality.

Chapter 2, "The Average Audience (Lessing on Bourgeois Tragedy)," examines the first great entrance of the common person into the heart of the "highest" art form, tragedy. Breaking from the tragic tradition, in which only world-historical figures are worthy of a tragic fate, bourgeois tragedy stages "completely common" heroes (Lessing)

to provide a maximum of identification for the average viewer. The main focus of this chapter is Lessing's *Hamburg Dramaturgy* and his correspondence with Nicolai and Mendelssohn, in which he rejects sublime heroic tragedy and its affect of admiration in favor of common figures and the affect of compassion [*Mitleid*]. Two crucial reversals are at stake in Lessing's conception of bourgeois tragedy: first, in rejecting sublime, public heroes in favor of common, domestic protagonists, bourgeois tragedy aesthetically enacts the end of the age of heroes and the advent of the age of the common man. Second, in delineating the sole tragic effect as compassion and defining the "best human" as the most compassionate, Lessing establishes theater as the educative arena for converting an average audience into an exemplary public. Lessing's bourgeois tragedy ultimately concerns less the staging of common life and more decisively the production of an exemplary audience precisely through its affective identification with other nonheroic types. For Lessing, it is not the exceptional but the common hero who becomes the instigator of exemplarity.

Chapter 3, "The Average Artist (Goethe and Schiller on Dilettantism)," investigates the aesthetics of the genius through the lens of Goethe's and Schiller's literary and theoretical writings. Not only does their work continually reflect on questions of genius and mediocrity—particularly in Goethe's *Werther* and *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* as well as their fragmentary, collective project on the dilettante (which has received scant attention in English)—but they also recognize that the modern art system demands in equal parts an aesthetics of genius and an aesthetics of dilettantism. Recognizing the growing suffusion of the bourgeoisie's self-definition and the world of art, Goethe and Schiller view the rise of the amateurish artist not only as a new threat to art but also as a previously unheard-of possibility: the genuine aesthetic education of society. The nongenius's investment in art allows for a hands-on education that should ideally lead to a renunciation of artistic practice and a resulting refinement of taste that first creates the conditions for encouraging and supporting the production of "great" or "classical" literature. For Goethe, the genius is no longer a solitary Prometheus who creates in defiance of god and man alike, but rather a figure of exception that nonetheless is dependent on the taste and cultivation of the average citizen. The common, nontalented person is therefore excluded from artistic production, but is included as a connoisseur who is essential for the development of the genius. In the end,

the fate of modern art lies not only with the artistic genius but more decisively with the dilettante.

Chapter 4, "Average Life (Grillparzer, Stifter, and the Art of Prosaic Reality)," addresses realist attempts to redefine greatness by inverting aesthetics' traditional hierarchies. After juxtaposing Hegel's thesis on the "end of art" together with Heine's declaration of the "end of the Goethean artistic period," this chapter examines how Realism surrenders the demand for genius and embraces an age of epigones, of those who come too late. The realist artist is not defined as a genial exception, but as an observer and quasi-scientific investigator of the ordinary, the everyday, and the small. Franz Grillparzer's aesthetic-hermeneutic project posits an invisible, unbroken thread from the lives of the nonfamous to the great mythological figures and claims that one can only understand the famous on the basis of the ordinary. Grillparzer's goal is no longer to transform or excise the everyday, but to examine it in its particularity so that up close one rediscovers the quotidian as the hermeneutic key to understanding the human as such. For Adalbert Stifter, it is precisely the small and mundane in their collected and collective force that provide an insight into true greatness, which is found only in the regularity of natural and moral law. Appealing to a statistical sense of the normal distribution, Stifter views the momentous as smaller than the small, since an overwhelming experience deviates from the norm and thus only serves to distract one from what he calls "the gentle law," the law of regularity that lies at the base of the common and exceptional alike. Developing a statistically inflected poetics of the ordinary, Stifter attempts to reorient the poles of aesthetic thought by placing the utterly common as a figure of normality at the center of art. Such a realist immersion in average life constitutes a unique aesthetic attempt at poeticizing prosaic reality by declaring the prose of the world to be poetry itself, since only the nonexceptional rhythm of average life can reveal what is always there—"the gentle law" of sublime regularity—but otherwise cannot be perceived.