Introduction

Ernst Barlach's art, and the difficulties it caused him after January 1933, are mere details in the history of National Socialist Germany. In the history of twentieth-century art, on the contrary, his sculptures of 1933 and later, among them some of his most powerful figures, occupy an assured place. His literary work – he published his first play in 1912 – had slowed somewhat by the time Hitler gained power; a novel, *The Stolen Moon*, remained unfinished. But in essays and in his extensive correspondence with artists and others who sought him out as the dictatorship took hold, his reflections on art and its place in a degraded society rose to new levels of expressiveness. In Barlach's life, finally, his years in the Third Reich, which were also his last years, were discordant and tragic.

That Barlach's work became an issue for the cultural leadership of the Reich lent it a measure, however circumscribed, of political significance. To the regime's claim of control over the arts, Barlach responded by asserting, in statements and through his work, his

freedom to sculpt as he chose. His declarations of artistic independence took courage and heartened a few artists and members of the public; but inevitably, their resonance was limited. Barlach's intransigence might trouble officials, his work shown in a gallery or reproduced in a catalogue or book could reveal the hollowness of state-sponsored art and open a chink in the compact front bonding people, party, and Führer; but neither Barlach nor any other artist posed problems that the party and the police could not readily master.

If, nevertheless, National Socialism paid constant and anxious attention to the arts, and endowed them with a symbolic significance that the German people was never allowed to forget, it was for two reasons: the regime's insistence on uniform obedience to stated and even implied policy in public and private life; and the political and personal meaning that the arts possessed for Hitler. It was largely his doing that in the political conflicts leading to the Third Reich, the arts – and none more so than painting and sculpture – were used to identify the political and racial enemies of German resurgence. After Hitler became chancellor, he tried to shape the arts into a defining force of the new Germany. As the Reich head of press affairs, Otto Dietrich, warned a journalist who was planning to write on cultural matters: "Just because of the Führer's interest in the fine arts, the greatest possible caution is indicated in one's formulations."[1] But Hitler also knew that the arts were no more than auxiliaries in the political wars. Artists might persuade or confuse – they were not a power in their own right.

Barlach would have agreed. In a response to right-wing denunciations of his person and his sculpture in the 1920s, he described himself and artists in general only somewhat ironically as a "sliver," shaved off by vast forces of cultural and political change,

"a crumbling bit of nothingness, caught between earthquakes and torrents of lava."[2] But the same essay, in which he draws this apocalyptic image of disjunction and isolation, also demonstrates the close connection of the artist and his environment. The larger world, which rarely concerns itself with aesthetic matters, was after all sufficiently interested in Barlach's art to attack it; and he, in turn, responded with considerable energy. Although his work was not intentionally political, it marked some of the major issues in Weimar politics. In particular, his war memorials were drawn into party conflicts over the legacy of the World War. The confrontation of the artist with his critics reveals much about both.

That is also true of Barlach's relations with the Third Reich: of his rejection of its values and his efforts to work in the face of interference and hostility, and of the attempts of some National Socialists to silence him, while others tried to win him over to their cause. That men at the highest levels of the regime condemned Barlach for betraying his German heritage by creating art that polluted German culture, is typical of the brutality – intellectual no less than physical – that characterized National Socialism. The specific leads back to the general. Barlach's life and work bear on German history as the country passed from republic to Third Reich and moved toward war and extermination; the impact of National Socialism on Barlach, and his reactions to it, are of consequence to his biography and to the history of modern art.

1 Hitler

When Hitler became chancellor of the Reich in January 1933, and the National Socialist revolution began to bend the machinery of the German state into instruments of intimidation and repression, Ernst Barlach was among the artists who expected difficulties in the times ahead. "We feel we are sitting on a volcano," he wrote to a friend as the republic was dying. "The nationalist terror will probably outlast me . . . storm signals everywhere."[1] In the years immediately preceding, several of his sculptures had become targets of nationalist criticism; pressure from right-wing organizations led to the cancellation of a publicly funded project; in 1931 National Socialists protested his design for a war memorial in Hamburg. The objectors, who did not hesitate to deface one of his monuments, were motivated in part by the message his work conveyed, or was thought to convey, in part by its stylistic characteristics. Public opinion on the right condemned him as a modernist, whose work revealed an offensively un-German spirit. That Barlach also wrote plays, which were respectfully received

by the avant-garde, added to the image of an artist who rejected native values and veered into alien realms.

Official interference with his work came gradually. As the regime consolidated its power and started on the road to radicalization the pressures on Barlach increased. He experienced neither physical violence nor imprisonment, and even in the regime's early years many people were treated worse than he. But attacks on his work by party leaders and denunciations in the press intimidated some of his public. Agreements to exhibit his sculpture and to stage his plays were broken, and he soon learned that the protection of the law against violating contracts and publishing false charges no longer applied. In time, matters became worse.

To understand Barlach's situation, and the conflict with the leaders and cultural functionaries of the Third Reich to which it led, it is necessary to look at both sides: Barlach's personality, and his life and work before 1933 on the one hand, the motivation and methods of his opponents on the other; at his efforts to achieve clarity in his work, in the face of a coercive system that used myth and densely circular reasoning to justify repression.

Because Barlach was not a Jew and had not been politically active in the Weimar Republic, the new men in power might have shrugged him off as an unimportant survivor of an earlier age had Hitler not attributed deep ideological meaning to the arts. In particular, he regarded modernism in painting and sculpture – which to him meant any significant departure from conventionally perceived reality, other than its idealization – as a virus that not only metaphorically but in reality attacked the racial substance of the German people. The republic had betrayed Germany's true values; National Socialism would restore them. Hitler's interest in the arts, far from being a marginal luxury he permitted

himself, touched the core of his politics and demanded political expression.

By the 1920s, when he was writing *Mein Kampf* after the failed Munich putsch, Hitler had fused the ideas of his adolescence and early maturity into a world view that despite its delusions and historical absurdities became a powerful political weapon. Its comprehensiveness matched the grandiose scale of his ambitions. Repeated assurances of his respect for the law notwithstanding, he did not think or act like other politicians, who promote themselves in association with a particular program or interest, but pursued unlimited power to reshape a country and society, which otherwise, he claimed, the immutable laws of history condemned to ruin. These laws centered on two poles: race and conflict. Race made conflict inevitable and spread it to every area of human activity. Conflict gave race its deepest meaning, that of the struggle between good and evil.

Races formed at the dawn of time with qualities and values that became unchanging, Hitler declared in an early speech, the main points of which he was to repeat in countless variations for the rest of his life.[2] If a race possessed certain qualities, which are transmitted to the individual through his blood, it could create a state with which to defend itself against competitors and enemies. "On the other hand, a race that lacks these qualities must be destructive of races and states, whether the individual is good or evil."[3] But the power of the state rested not only on military and economic strength, it was also dependent on the cultural potency of society. In gray prehistory, the Nordic races, "which we designate as Aryan," founded "all subsequent high cultures. . . . We know that Egypt was raised to its cultural heights by Aryan settlers, as were Persia and Greece. The settlers were blond, blue-eyed Aryans, and we know that apart from these states no other cultural

states were founded anywhere on earth." Inferior and mixed races, and most of all the Jews, were unable to develop "independent, great, creative cultural states."[4] Over many centuries the Jews were nomads, scattered as parasites among superior races across the globe. But their rootlessness made them an international power. Their loyalty is attached to a borderless nonstate, the survival of which places all other states and races in mortal danger. They corrupt the social and cultural values of those among whom they live, dilute their racial substance, subvert their institutions, and destroy their energy. Everywhere the life force of the superior race is threatened by its malignant counterforce, the Jews, whose destructive work gains support from mongrel races across the world.

This scheme of history, cobbled together from scraps of nineteenth-century racial theses, Gobineau's identification of Greeks as Aryans, and social Darwinism, summed up for Hitler the timeless truths of society and politics and provided the basis for his analysis of the condition of Germany after the lost world war. In the age-old division between racial good and evil that he proclaimed, Germans were victims. For over two thousand years their neighbors had divided them politically and weakened them with infusions of alien blood. The betrayal of the army in 1918 by Marxists and cowards and the imposition of a republic were only the latest steps in a long process of corruption. Yet the country's Aryan core persisted. Eliminating the Jews from German life would bring about its regeneration. Restoring their racial purity would turn the Germans and their national community into a true *Volksgemeinschaft*, which is also a *Kampfgemeinschaft* – a community of warriors. Its historic task was to conquer land in Eastern Europe and Russia so that the German people could survive and grow. The twin processes of healing the race and expanding its

territory would succeed if Germany entrusted itself to a leader who was prepared to wage war against the internal enemy as well as against foreign rivals. He would lead National Socialism to power, purify and reeducate society, and forge the nation into a weapon that ensured German permanence in the world.

It indicates the confusion and moral dislocations agitating Central Europe after the war, that many Germans could welcome or at least tolerate these fantasies on the course of world history. Once taken as fact or as metaphoric summaries of basic historical phenomena, Hitler's shopworn but for that reason familiar racial delusions coalesced into a consequential sequence, stretching from past to present and future. His message was infused with new, unusual energy because he linked his definition of politics as racial conflict to the promise – which always superseded his assurances of legality – that political power in Germany could be achieved by revolutionary, violent means. That this, at least, was not verbiage, but an article of faith on which Hitler and his followers acted, was demonstrated by storm troopers' beating up critics at party rallies, the murder of political opponents, and the attempted putsch in Munich, which resulted in the martyrdom of fallen party members, as well as other symbols: the "blood banner" carried at the head of the demonstration, and the "blood medal" awarded to surviving marchers, symbols on which National Socialism fed until its last days.

Hitler's emphasis on the "cultural state" in his enumeration of the main political forces in world history again points to his association of art and politics. No doubt, the bonding of culture and the state was a rhetorical device. It gave his message of power politics an impressive idealistic sheen. But Hitler's habitual references to high culture in politics, and as politics, also reflected the ideas of the rebellious adolescent and failed art student, who had sought

the drama of ruler and ruled, of force and betrayal, in works of art. Not every powerful state is a cultural state, he taught his listeners and readers; but even a state that shielded a superior race would not survive unless it nurtured a culture that reflected the character of the race. He saw culture both as an indicator of a people's racial health and – if it expressed the true qualities of the race – as its stimulus. A political benefit accrued: Culture and the arts could raise a people's energy and vitality. Consequently, he concluded in his already cited speech of August 1920, the Jew's efforts to destroy German culture were particularly dangerous: "We know what he has done in art, how painting today is a travesty of everything we call genuine feeling."[5] He continued with comparisons drawn from the media of his deepest sympathies, sculpture and music: "Do we really believe," he asked, referring to a sculpture by Max Klinger, surrounded by Gustav Klimt's murals, which had been the centerpiece of the famous 1902 exhibition of the Vienna Secession, "that, for instance, Klinger's statue of Beethoven doesn't reflect an inner experience and true feeling, or that a Beethoven symphony isn't also a reflection of an inner experience, a genuine inner experience, in contrast to the other kind, which is superficial and fraudulent, and put on this earth for the purpose of gradually eradicating healthy attitudes, and of gradually whipping people into a state in which no one knows whether the environment is mad or he."[6] An odd technique, one may think, to arouse a mob in a beer hall by imputing mythic political values to a classical symphony and a modern, multimaterial, polychrome sculpture. The immediate impact of Hitler's words may be doubted; not so their deep meaning to the speaker, for whom Klinger's *Beethoven* and its carefully modulated setting were forerunners of the total design centered on the great man that in later years was to mark his public appearances.