



KURT EISNER

A MODERN LIFE

ALBERT EARLE GURGANUS

KURT EISNER: A MODERN LIFE

German History in Context

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*To Susan,
both Solveig and Iselin*

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
1. A Novel's Suffering Hero: A Youth in Berlin (1867–1889)	7
2. Aristocratize the Masses: From Berlin to Frankfurt to Marburg (1890–1893)	19
3. Refuge of All Idealists: Through Cohen to Kant toward Marx (1893–1896)	34
4. Dictatorial Megalomania: Lèse Majesté and Plötzensee Prison (1896–1898)	51
5. Making the Leap: Back to Berlin as a Social Democrat (1898–1900)	67
6. No Idle Dreamer: At the Helm of <i>Vorwärts</i> (1900–1902)	89
7. My Life's Purpose: Molding the Readership (1902–1903)	115
8. Never . . . a Less Fruitful Scholastic Debate: Intramural Strife—Evolution vs. Revolution (1903–1905)	138
9. Revolutionizing Minds: The Scorched Middle Ground (1905)	160
10. The Complete Parity of My Experiences: From Exile to Nuremberg (1905–1907)	185
11. The Most Genuine and Fruitful Radicalism: Taking the Lead at the <i>Fränkische Tagespost</i> (1907–1908)	206
12. So Suspect a Heretic, as Surely I Am: New Bearings in North Bavaria (1908)	224

13. Dear Little Whore: Personal and Professional Turmoil (1909)	243
14. To Find a Lost Life: From Nuremberg to Munich (1909–1910)	259
15. Something of a Party <i>Offiziosus</i> in Bavaria: Political Editor at the <i>Münchener Post</i> (1910–1911)	272
16. At Peace with Myself: Resettling into Family Life (1912–1913)	289
17. The Powerlessness of Reason: The World War Erupts (1914)	303
18. Wretched Superfluity: Divided Loyalties (1915–1916)	317
19. War for War's Sake: Political Alienation and Realignment (1916–1917)	332
20. The Most Beautiful Days of My Life: Leading the Opposition (1917–1918)	347
21. Our Power to Act Now Grows: From Prisoner to Premier (1918)	360
22. The Terror of Truth: Forging the Republic, Combatting Reaction (1918)	380
23. The Fantasies of a Visionary: Martyr of the Revolution (1918–1919)	400
24. Now Dead, as It Stands: Outcomes and Legacy (1919–2017)	425
Abbreviations	443
Notes	445
Sources and References	529
Index	543

Photographs follow page 288.

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IF ALL BEGINNING IS DIFFICULT, as we read in Goethe's first novel, then so too must be all ending. For just as ambitious design undertaken is invariably fraught with obligation, some debt of gratitude incurred in the endeavor goes unpaid at end, as we are parted from benefactors by fate and mortality. Still, the tallying in and of itself affords perhaps a measure of discharge and solace.

This book had its genesis in the midst of the Cold War when, drafting a master's thesis in the University of Chicago's Social Sciences Division, I read an agitational one-act play by Kurt Eisner from June 1914. Like him, I was put off by perfunctory economic and theoretically driven analyses of the Wilhelmine German workers' movement, which in their formulaic constructs discount essential, disparate cultural influences on component parties of the Second International. How, after all, might one adequately quantify the effect of, say, a Käthe Kollwitz print on the psyche of the semiliterate urban proletariat? Drawn thus to precepts of the Frankfurt School and pondering long what a Venn diagram of philosophical, political, and aesthetic values might meld, I determined to continue my graduate studies in a philology department where critical interpretive methodology plumbs abstractions of causality, code, and character. In Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of North Carolina then, three men in particular—Richard H. Lawson, Siegfried Mews, and Petrus Tax—encouraged an interdisciplinary approach to the examination of revolutionary ferment.

Funded by a *Sonderstipendium* of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), I decamped in fall 1981 for a year at Munich's Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität. My adviser there was Wolfgang Frühwald, who introduced me to Freya Eisner, granddaughter of my subject and an astute historian of the German labor movement. She was so kind as to make available Eisner's university journal, which revealed the coalescence of his social consciousness and engagement. The internal documents from Eisner's three months as head of the Bavarian Republic, housed at the Geheimes Staatsarchiv in Munich, illuminated the heroic attempt to convert theory to practice. James G. Hardin and Frank Trommler, editors

of the Camden House Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture, brought to print my dissertation on Eisner's political aesthetic and agitational fiction under the title *The Art of Revolution* (1986).

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the archives of the Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (IML) were soon opened to all comers, and the trove of Eisner's papers and manuscripts could be scanned firsthand. During summers and two sabbatical years I traveled repeatedly to the transforming capital to sort through the files, first at the IML, then at the Bundesarchiv-Lichterfelde. Additional sallies to the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis in Amsterdam, the Bundesarchiv-Koblenz, the Nürnberger Stadtbibliothek, the Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin-Centrum Judaicum Archiv, and the Leo Baeck Institute in New York filled in critical gaps. At every turn the research and writing were supported by generous grants from the Citadel Foundation and the DAAD.

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Above all I am grateful to my wife, Susan, who in the course of this project saw me at my best and worst and remained pillar and beacon.

INTRODUCTION

IN NOVEMBER 1918 in the Catholic stronghold of Munich a transplanted Jewish Berliner, just released from prison, led a nonviolent revolution that deposed the ancient Wittelsbach dynasty and established the Bavarian Republic, effectively ending both the Second German Empire and the First World War. The local head of the break-away Independent Socialists, Kurt Eisner, had been jailed for treason in February after organizing a munitions workers' strike to force an armistice. Before his incarceration he served as arts critic for the *Münchener Post*, organ of the Social Democratic Party, having been demoted from political editor for opposing the war. For a hundred days as Germany spiraled down into civil war and the victorious Entente powers deliberated their vengeance, Eisner fought as head of state to preserve calm in the South while implementing a peaceful transition to democracy and reforging international relations. On 21 February 1919, on the way to submit his government's resignation to the newly elected constitutional assembly, he was shot by a protofascist aristocrat. The senseless murder shattered a tenuous equilibrium, plunging Bavaria into the political chaos from which Adolf Hitler would emerge to herald a new epoch—one that culminated in 1945 with the citizenry of Dachau, their faces clouded by complicit ignorance and worse, burying the concentration camp dead on orders from its American liberators.

For many mired in the tradition of Catholic, monarchist Bavarian politics, including the resident Majority Social Democratic leadership, it was unthinkable that a diminutive Prussian intellectual of *mosaisch* heritage could mount an uprising that toppled one of Europe's most fixed ruling houses literally in an afternoon. But during the war an influx of North German labor had been channeled to Munich to drive the armaments industry, significantly radicalizing the urban proletariat. At the height of the British blockade the Wittelsbachs stood accused of war-profiteering by selling goods from the royal Leutstetten dairy at inflated prices.¹ The western front was breached, the German Army in retreat, and still the very parties that championed the kaiser's preserve called for a *levée en masse* for national defense. People were war-weary, hungry, disillusioned, malcontent. For the

length of his twenty-year career as a socialist publicist and theorist, Kurt Eisner had been acutely conscious of the watershed nature of the historical moment as conditioned by scientific and technological advances, social and political developments, frenetic colonial expansion of the European powers, and the concomitant military buildup. As early as 1905, in the wake of the first Moroccan crisis, he had warned in a cogent albeit unheeded jeremiad, *Der Sultan des Weltkrieges* (The Sultan of World War), that imperialism was leading inexorably to catastrophic conflict, the outcome of which would have the direst consequences for its losers. For that he was mocked by precisely those German comrades who in 1914 would abandon the Socialist International in their headlong rush to the colors. Now his time had come and he proved up to the challenge.

As a Jew, however secular, as a neo-Kantian ethicist schooled by Hermann Cohen himself, and as an aesthete, Eisner was ever an outsider within the Social Democratic Party, a party of outsiders, even after he had been handpicked by its cofounder, Wilhelm Liebknecht, to take his place as editor of *Vorwärts* (Forward), Europe's preeminent socialist newspaper. Eisner's credentials were impeccable. He was university trained and had learned his craft at Berlin's renowned Herold News Agency. He had authored a groundbreaking critique of Nietzsche, archantagonist to Marx. Moreover, Eisner was a charter member of the avant-garde People's Free Stage movement. He had an impressive track record of cultural and political activism. A conspicuous distinction was nine months behind bars for impugning His Majesty. Here was a man with a sharp eye and keen nose for privilege, excess, and malfeasance. Yet his greatest virtues came to be reckoned as flaws when he discerned within the Social Democratic leadership some of the worst traits of the ruling state. Confident in his talents and perspective, he declined to be guided by lesser lights—a grave transgression against party discipline. He proved ideologically suspect to some as well. No rigid historical materialist, Eisner envisioned social justice born of heightened consciousness, collective spirit, superior organization, and concerted moral action rather than of ineluctable economic determinism and a bloody reckoning. In his last decade he often spoke of “the religion of socialism.” Determined to maintain a centrist stance between warring factions at *Vorwärts*, he fell victim to a purge adumbrating greater violence to be visited upon Marxists by Marxists. The paper's reputation never recovered.²

In April 1919 Wilhelm Hausenstein eulogized Eisner as a slight, frail man who was at once a towering intellect, humanist colossus, one of Social Democracy's two great journalists (together with Franz Mehring), seminal social historian, and irrepressible political idealist whose vision and will

forged the Bavarian Republic. Readily recognizing Eisner's failings as lyricist and dramatist, his quixotic attraction to Napoleon as a cult figure, and the limitations of boundless faith in human reason, Hausenstein, himself a distinguished art critic, proposed that his friend's brilliant theater reviews for the *Münchener Post* be collected and published as exemplary for the genre.³ In his lifetime and afterward, whenever Eisner's adversaries sought to besmirch his achievement, they typically characterized him as a misplaced literatus meddling in politics, a highbrow operating beyond his ken in the real world. That their villain was indisputably a singularly incisive commentator, critic, and public intellectual ironically lent some twisted credibility to the charge.

But other comrades of diverse stamp—Ignaz Auer, Jean Jaurès, Julius Kaliski, Georges Weill, Hermann Wallfisch, Albert Südekum, Lily Braun, Gustav Landauer, and Ernst Toller—put a premium on Eisner's perspicacity and resolve. And in the end the most prominent of his chief adversaries in the party were reconciled with him: Karl Kautsky, Franz Mehring, Hugo Haase, and Clara Zetkin. In both camps there was the recognition that he identified and combatted the germ of self-destruction in Social Democracy's rise to power. Even when the party split over the war, few socialists regardless of stripe could conceive of the internecine struggle to come. Once the tottering Ebert government employed the army against rival Spartacists, whose leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were then murdered by *Freikorps* (Volunteer Corps) units, terminal malignancy set in. "The rift between the Social Democrats and the revolutionary workers was never healed," observes Louis Snyder. "To the proletarian radicals, the Social Democrats were 'Cossacks' and agents of the bourgeoisie. . . . Had the Social Democrats and Communists worked together in the critical days of early 1933, they might have eliminated the Nazi threat. But both sides refused, each preferring to take its chances with Hitler. It was a fatal mistake."⁴

To avoid like fratricide in Munich, Eisner elected to share power with the Majority Socialists, according to them greater representation in his government than to his own Independents and giving the freest possible rein to meetings and demonstrations of the Far Left. Again and again he publicly and privately repudiated all bloodshed. And yet Michael Doeberl's jaundiced history of the Bavarian Republic, written while Hitler began to consolidate his power base in Munich, skews Eisner's regime as Bolshevik, whereas the East German Marxist-Leninist Hans Beyer brands his overthrow of the monarchy and establishment of a provisional government of workers', soldiers', and peasants' councils as a half-baked revolution.⁵ Where lies truth?

Eisner had foreseen that the Wilhelmine Prussian-Junker militarist regime, spurred on by industrialists, businessmen, and speculators who stood to gain from the colonial venture in China and Africa, would readily foment war to secure what the kaiser enticingly dubbed “Germany’s place in the sun.” Bismarck, after all, had never shrunk from starting a fight in order to further his ends. As Bavarian premier, Eisner rejected another central German government dominated by Prussia in favor of a confederation of autonomous equals, a “United States of Germany.” And just as Ludwig II, fifty-two years earlier, had allied Munich with Vienna against Berlin, the Francophile Eisner sought ties with Paris in hope of permanently containing Sparta on the Spree.

This book then represents a biography against the backdrop of a great historical divide: the demise of hereditary feudal monarchy in Central Europe, the birth of the communist Soviet Union, and the emergence of “the classless society,” the United States of America, as a world power. The war begun in 1914 was renewed in 1939, as both Marshal Foch and John Maynard Keynes predicted—from diametrically opposed rationales—just months after Eisner’s assassination. In that sense the ill-fated Weimar Republic was merely a long ceasefire, as ample historians have alleged, and Kurt Eisner’s attempt to launch “a golden age of humanity” but a glimmer through the murk. Although Hitler interrupted Germany’s progression to republic, the cataclysmic Third Reich functioned to dispel the entrenched Wilhelmine notion of democracy as a fool’s paradise—espoused by no less a cultural icon than Thomas Mann. Thus thirty-one years of political turmoil and untold human misery drew to a close, and shortly thereafter a forty-year incubation period commenced in the two states risen from the ruins. Although Germany is now a full-fledged Western democracy and an indispensable linchpin of the European Union, elsewhere the tensions of a bygone era seethe unabated a century on. With Vladimir Putin’s expansionist incursions, with the architects of the 1995 Bosnian genocide yet on trial in The Hague, with Turkey perpetually rent by choice of word for the liquidation of its Armenian populace, the First World War is still being fought on multiple fronts.

In many respects Kurt Eisner was the personification of German modernity, a man who preferred scientific socialism to confessional faith, cosmopolitan community to nationalism; a consilient thinker who recognized the nascent twentieth century as a new dispensation, who marshaled the empiricism of Marx and Darwin against Nietzsche’s romantic individualism. He showed himself to be a staunch feminist in his first book. At the shaky inception of aviation he grasped its potential to transcend

borders. Eminently at home in the grimy metropolis, he was among the first political activists to strike out into the hinterlands via automobile. The continuum of Eisner's enlightened ideation, secular ethicism, and globalist vision is all too often lost in studies overwhelmingly focused on the last three months of his life as a politician at the expense of his quarter century as social pundit and cultural theorist.

Eisner embodied everything the Nazis' *Blut-und-Boden* (blood and soil) populist, racist nationalism opposed. Their campaign of defamation, coupled with that of Doeberl's ilk, so distorted his image that West German scholars readily accepted that Kurt Eisner was the alias of Salomon Kosmanowski, a Galician Jewish Bolshevik. Even after Franz Schade's *Kurt Eisner und die bayerische Sozialdemokratie* (Kurt Eisner and Bavarian Social Democracy, 1961) demythologized the ultramontane, monarchist, and fascist cant, the old lies still held sway in some quarters.⁶

Two subsequent book-length biographies in German provided further clarity. *Kurt Eisner: Die Politik des libertären Sozialismus* (Kurt Eisner: The Politics of Libertarian Socialism, 1979), by Eisner's granddaughter Freya, child of his eldest son, firmly fixes Eisner as a lifelong centrist in the fragmenting Social Democratic Party and stresses his philosophically grounded antiauthoritarian stance. In her discretion she is reluctant to detail his libertine lifestyle, the scandal of a socialist party mired in bourgeois morality. The first work to draw extensively on former East German archives, Bernhard Grau's Munich dissertation, *Kurt Eisner 1867–1919: Eine Biographie* (2001), offers a more balanced perspective of Eisner's prewar career, affording greater insight into his formative education, early literary ambitions, and the influence of Marburg's neo-Kantians. Yet Eisner's literary works as a journalist for Social Democracy—the reviews, essays, short stories, vignettes, one-acts, and *Sozialmärchen* (social fairy tales) that he regarded as integral to his mission of molding the mind of the masses—receive short shrift. Vital personal and professional relationships are omitted as well; no mention is made of Lily Braun, Georges Weill, Max Beer, Gustav Landauer, or Otto Falckenberg.

In terms of readership *Kurt Eisner: A Modern Life* has been cast for the broad band of English speakers with an interest in Wilhelmine politics and culture, the Jew in German society, turn-of-the-century journalism as practice and profession, European socialism and the labor movement, imperialism at its zenith, the First World War, the rise of fascism, and conceptions of modernity. Everything has been translated into English, most of it for the first time. Compared with past treatments, this study is more a chronological narrative—with equal emphasis on the personal and public realms—than a thematic overview of a prominent political trajectory.

As to outlook and underlying principle, the operable premises are, in the words of Marx, that “the world is recognizable and changeable” and, as Eisner demonstrated, that history is shaped to that end by individual commitment to collective action.

A NOVEL'S SUFFERING HERO: A YOUTH IN BERLIN (1867–1889)

IN 1867 ALFRED NOBEL PATENTED DYNAMITE, Joseph Lister introduced his phenol antiseptic, Johann Strauß composed the *Blue Danube* Waltz, Ibsen published *Peer Gynt*, Henri Fantin-Latour painted Manet's portrait. Livingstone explored the Congo, Tsar Alexander II sold Alaska to the United States, Garibaldi launched his second campaign to wrest Rome from the French. Emperor Maximilian died before a republican firing squad in Mexico City. The Austrian ruler, Franz Josef I, ascended the throne of Hungary to establish the Dual Monarchy. The Southern rebellion quelled, the government of the United States turned its attention to subjugating the Plains Indians. In English exile Marx completed the first part of *Capital*. Having made war on Denmark for Schleswig-Holstein and on Austria to consolidate Prussia's autonomy, Bismarck assumed the office of chancellor of the North German Confederation's twenty-two states, and his liege, King Wilhelm I, became their royal president. Under Bismarck's leadership Berlin stood at the ready to reclaim the prestige it enjoyed a century earlier when Friedrich II confounded the Continental powers to become "the Great." The invasion of France was in the offing.

An unlikely beneficiary of resurgent Prussia was a Jewish émigré who dealt by royal appointment in military regalia. Emanuel Eisner had been born forty years earlier in the Bohemian town Husinec, son of Hermann and Therese, née Gans. The family soon moved to Studenec in southern Moravia, where Hermann Eisner kept a tavern. Therese died in 1832, and upon his father's death young Emanuel learned the tanning trade before he and his brother Ignaz were taken in by relatives in Berlin and apprenticed in business. Together they opened shops in the early 1860s on Berlin's regal avenue Unter den Linden and in Danzig's bustling Kohlenmarkt, from which they supplied the Russian Imperial court with the insignia, buttons, braid, epaulets, ribbons, and medals that festooned

the officers' splendid uniforms.¹ On 5 October 1863 thirty-six-year-old Emanuel, widowed with two sons, wed Hedwig Levenstein, daughter of the deceased Jewish merchant Levin Jontoff Levenstein.² Two years later the brothers went their separate ways in business. Emanuel relocated his shop and residence to Friedrichstraße and added to his clientele the Prussian emperor and king, the duke of Braunschweig, and the prince of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt. He was thus employed when his wife bore him a son, Kurt, on 14 May 1867—a son destined to topple one of Europe's most prominent ruling houses.

Wilhelm Hausenstein, the Bavarian Marxist who embraced Catholicism and served as Bonn's ambassador to Paris in the 1950s, described Emanuel Eisner as a "respected merchant," his wife as "a charming old *Berlinerin* at heart disinterested in the world capital of Wilhelm II," the type painted by Daniel Chodowiecki in the last half of the previous century.³ She gave birth to four children: Paul in June 1864, Kurt three years later, Jenny-Paula in April 1870, and Martha in February 1872. Only Kurt and Martha saw their fifth birthdays.⁴ Emanuel and Hedwig's children were imbued with the values of Berlin's bourgeoisie. A portrait made of Kurt on 20 April 1870 by the Imperial court photographers Pflaum and Co. shows an attentive, long-haired child in a lace collar and dark woolen suit with bright piping.⁵ Two years later Carl Günther photographed the five-year-old boy with sister Jenny-Paula. In jaunty leather boots, knee-breeches with bows, matching velvet jacket, and a bow tie cinching his high white collar, Kurt strikes a cavalier pose, standing with his arm resting on the back of her fringed chair. The girl, in white and showing a fashionable coiffure, looks primly into the lens, a perfect salon hostess in miniature.⁶

Eisner's pampered early childhood "in the center of the asphalt culture" played against the backdrop of the North German Confederation's stunning victory over France in 1870, orchestrated by Bismarck to achieve German unification.⁷ Those Germans who had opposed the war, the Eisenacher Socialists, were ruthlessly suppressed, their leaders August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht charged with treason and jailed. Bismarck's new state was born of an uneasy marriage of convenience between the unabashedly reactionary Prussian Junker caste—the landed gentry and military elite—and the laissez-faire National Liberal Party, the constituency of which was the ambitious middle class. The proletariat's place in the new Reich, historian Peter Gay notes, "was to work hard and be obedient."⁸

The economy fueled by war sputtered in 1873. The two workers' parties, the General German Workingmen's Association (*Allgemeiner Deutscher*

Arbeiterverein) of Ferdinand Lassalle, which had backed war with France, and the Social Democratic Labor Party (Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterpartei) of Bebel and Liebknecht, first vied to organize labor, then merged in 1875 as the Socialist Labor Party of Germany (Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands). In the wake of German victory over France and the subsequent economic downturn, Emanuel Eisner's business declined to the point that in 1877 he affiliated with Jewish commercial magnate Eduard Sachs, for whom he would work the rest of his life.⁹ In 1874 Emanuel had placed his son in the lower school of Berlin's nascent Askanisches Gymnasium to begin the classical education that would prepare him for university and a professional career, a goal to which but few sons of his class and creed could aspire.¹⁰ The boy seems to have been well suited to his parents' plans. In retrospect he readily admitted to believing what he read in "the wretched liberal press." Referring to the two attempts in 1878 on Kaiser Wilhelm's life by gunmen whom Bismarck demonized as revolutionaries, Eisner recalled how the progressive bourgeoisie regarded the Left: "At that time I myself considered them a horde of wild criminals." Despite an "instinctive aversion to all patriotic humbug," he lit candles in the window to celebrate Wilhelm's survival.¹¹ By the fiction that the second assailant had Socialist accomplices, Bismarck convinced the Reichstag to outlaw the party altogether.

A formal, three-quarter portrait shot in August 1883 when Eisner was sixteen shows an earnest youth with a high forehead and hair combed back, thin lips, a full chin, protruding ears, and a melancholy gaze directed past the camera.¹² The young man performed creditably at school. After eight and a half years at the gymnasium he qualified for university on 13 March 1886. His final report records good marks in German and choral music; satisfactory in Latin, Greek, French, English, mathematics, physics, and athletics; and mostly satisfactory in history and geography. His behavior was deemed commendable, his diligence good.¹³ The prior report, from Easter to St. Michael's Day 1885, indicates that his Latin essays and Greek recitations showed promise and that he was an attentive pupil.¹⁴ An essay from February 1884 on the theme "How a Noble Man Thinks and Acts (according to Sophocles's *Aias*)" affords insight into the sixteen-year-old's sensibilities: "The precept of loving one's neighbor certainly achieved its most noble expression in Christianity. But who actually lives by this rule? In this regard we are just as pagan as the ancient Greeks, only we speak our mind with less candor and spontaneity. . . . With regard to honor we are less ideally minded in our practical century than the ancients."¹⁵ Felix Fechenbach, Eisner's personal secretary during

the Bavarian Republic, writes in his biography that Eisner's unconventional views brought him into conflict with his teachers, who sought to suppress in particular "his opinion on matters of religion." He remarks as well Eisner's sensitivity to social injustice, focused by walks through the workers' quarter on Berlin's northside, where he saw the need of the proletariat and "as the son of well-off parents felt partly responsible for the misery of the have-nots."¹⁶ By his own word Eisner roamed the forest of the Tiergarten on rainy fall days to exult or to dispel his gloom and threw himself into piles of leaves in ditches along the Charlottenburger Chaussee "to cool all the raging passion."¹⁷

His literary bent was manifest early. He was enthralled as a child by the puppet theater, the germ of a pursuit he would cherish throughout his life.¹⁸ In a notebook given to him by his aunt Eveline Levenstein, he copied odes by Horace, a scene from the first part of Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, aphorisms from Keats in French translation, the choruses of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, entries from Friedrich Hebbel's diaries, and his own translation of Longfellow's "Excelsior." He evidently circulated the notebook among friends, for on 2 April 1880 his cousin Ella Crohn inscribed in it a poem she had written.¹⁹ He began to compose aphorisms and poems himself, then graduated to stories and plays. In 1885 he reviewed for a Berlin literary journal the work of three forgettable contemporary poets: Hugo Frederking's *Der Born der Liebe* (The Font of Love), Adolf Brieger's *König Humbert in Neapel* (King Humbert in Naples), and Heinrich Seidel's *Idyllen und Scherze* (Idylls and Jests).²⁰ In a notebook that he titled "Musings of an Unworldly One," dated spring 1886, Eisner included a poem that evinces his waning Jewish faith:

Religion is a gentle hack,
plies steady its pious trot;
ride it, who's in thinking slack,
it unseats him not.

Philosophy though is a spirited steed,
storms beyond rein and rail;
whoever can't control its speed
will soon be on his tail.²¹

A few weeks before his nineteenth birthday he penned a dramatic sketch, "Railway and Resort," a tragic story of two young lovers desperately alienated from their milieu, reflecting a growing conflict with his father,

who was troubled by his son's libertine thought and increasingly bohemian inclination.²²

On 28 April 1886 Kurt Eisner enrolled as a student of philosophy at Berlin's Friedrich Wilhelm University. In his first semester, from April to October 1886, he read logic and the history of philosophy but also attended classes on nineteenth-century German literature and the dramatist Lessing, the latter taught by Richard Meyer, a young docent who would distinguish himself as one of the nation's foremost literary historians.²³ On break at the Baltic resort Prerow, Eisner wrote in his journal entry for 13 August of a sleepless night and an exhausting journey—six hours in the train, five on a steamer—following “a frightful scene” with his father. Overwrought, he confesses that the notion of a “divine benefactor” strained all credibility: “I no longer care to believe in a dear God.”²⁴ After two days' rest and relaxation he celebrates in panegyric style the poet's calling. “O could I but commit all my feeling to words, were I able to cast the silent singing of the soul, the shadowy, ethereal song of the spirit in earthly rhythms!”²⁵

Second semester, October 1886 to March 1887, Eisner's focus shifted from philosophy to German philology, with courses in grammar, medieval literature, lyric, and Berlin's literary culture in the eighteenth century. He delved into psychology and heard the nationalist, anti-Semitic historian Heinrich von Treitschke lecture on political theory from Plato to the present. From April to October 1887 he read German romanticism with Goethe scholar Erich Schmidt and philosophy with Friedrich Paulsen, an adherent of Kant and the English utilitarians. The economics of Adam Smith and courses in experimental psychology and aesthetics rounded out his schedule. He began to compile sources and take notes for a dissertation, to be written under Schmidt's direction, on the romantic Achim von Arnim, poet and collector of folksongs.²⁶ On holiday before classes were to resume in October, Eisner returned on 16 September to Prerow. On this visit he set down impressions of a journalist for the German Conservative Party's daily paper, *Die Kreuzzeitung* (The Cross Newspaper): “Meyer constantly addresses by title: Gracious Lady! He knows too as a gallant cavalier how to lay forth lives and fates in most skilled reporter fashion for the gracious lady of the Patzenhofer beer family.”²⁷

In his fourth and most ambitious semester, Eisner registered for nineteenth-century drama and German classicism with Schmidt, Meyer's courses on comparative literature and the Old Saxon religious epic, Treitschke's history of parliamentary government, Hegelian Georg Simmel's recent philosophy and the natural sciences, physical anthropology

with Emil du Bois-Reymond—who was wont to open his lectures with facetious psychoanalyses of peoples and cultures—and Paulsen's lectures on Spinoza. Although Treitschke, Du Bois-Reymond, and Simmel enjoyed considerable standing in the intellectual community and exerted significant influence on their disciplines, none left his mark on Eisner. On the first two he passed judgment: "Today one speaks exclusively of laws—historical laws and laws of nature, whereas one ought to speak of Herr von Treitschke's and Herr du Bois-Reymond's legal delusions. In every little *studiosus* today there glimmers a great solon. And in the war of science the lover of doubleclad truths intuits even historical laws of nature."²⁸ Later Eisner would belittle Treitschke as "the great trumpet of the Hohenzollerns."²⁹ Eisner's attraction to Kant through Paulsen set him at odds ideologically with Simmel, whose student Georg Lukács would become the codifier of Marxist-Leninist aesthetics, yet another lawgiver of sorts. Paulsen's course on Spinoza influenced Eisner so deeply that on 7 November he began to write a novel on the Jewish philosopher's life, a project that would engage his interest for the better part of two years.³⁰

His fifth, sixth, and seventh semesters, from April 1888 to October 1889, were devoted entirely to philology and European cultural history. He studied Gothic, Old High German grammar and verse, Renaissance and baroque literature, and continued his doctoral research. On 30 August 1888 he borrowed Arnim's *Die Gleichen* (The Equals) and the fifth volume of Musäus's *Volksmärchen der Deutschen* (Folktales of the Germans) from the Royal Library.³¹ At the family's third-floor apartment at Blücherstraße 62 in southwest Berlin, he filed hundreds of pages of notes for his thesis, "Achim von Arnim as Publisher, Adapter, and Imitator of Older German Poetry."³² He was supported by a quarterly allowance of 40 marks from the Jewish Students' Auxiliary. Its board approved the grant in mid-December for the first half of the new year.³³ His extracurricular belletristic interests, however, detracted considerably from his work, and he would later regret spending so much time "between chestnut grove and Opera Square."³⁴

In early October 1888, for example, he took an afternoon off to rough out a comedy of ten scenes set in contemporary Berlin. The characters include thirty-year-old Professor Ernst Wellner; his twenty-five-year-old nephew, Dr. Leberecht Wellner, who bears a striking resemblance to the author; Hedwig Schackow, the daughter of another professor; the cultivated Isolde Schulze; her friend Marietta Syruppi; and Privy Councilor Weisbier.³⁵ Eisner's abiding interest had become theater, yet his experiences at the capital's playhouses frequently left him cold. On his first

visit to Berlin's elegant Lessing Theater, just before Easter 1889, he saw Ludwig Anzengruber's *Meineidbauer* (The Perjury Tiller) and fulminated afterward against the lavish gimmickry of the sets and the frivolity of the audience, who joked and flirted between acts, laughed at the intense dramatic moments, and failed to applaud good acting. Earlier he had attended what he deemed a good performance of Anzengruber's comedy *Die Kreuzelschreiber* (The Cross Signers) in an almost empty theater. Some officers seated beside him dismissed the piece as inordinately dull and rued a wasted evening. After his experience at the Lessing Theater he vowed not to return and declined a friend's invitation to see there a staging of *L'Affaire Clémenceau* by Alexandre Dumas *fils*, featuring the actress Lili Petri, whose hair was so long, the friend declared enticingly, that one would have stepped on it when she loosed it for bed.³⁶

In spring and summer 1889 when Eisner's political consciousness began to jell, the catalysts were literature, culture, and theater. He read Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Zola's *Germinal*, naturalist manifestos that depicted the rotten core of bourgeois society.³⁷ He scanned the socialist press and noted that its papers and journals demanded more from their readers than did the average paper "for the cultured circles." Mulling this anomaly, he was one of a handful present in the Music College's concert hall the evening of 1 May, International Workers' Day, for a talk by Hermann von Maltzan titled "The Establishment of German People's Theaters: A National Mission." The speaker urged that stages be erected for the masses and patriotic works played that might bolster national pride and unity as well as combat the pernicious influence of Social Democracy. To Eisner's glee, Maltzan envisioned a clientele resembling spectators at a racetrack: diverse social classes sharing a common interest. Another aristocrat in attendance, Ernst von Wolzogen, whose comic novel *Die tolle Komteß* (The Mad Countess) was published that year, questioned whether the masses were sufficiently schooled to comprehend drama. A discussion ensued and then, prompted by remarks from the playwright Ernst von Wildenbruch, whose nationalist drama *Die Quitzows* (The Quitzows) had premiered in Berlin in November, the audience founded an association to realize Maltzan's ideal. "And thus," Eisner observed, "Berlin, which I think has twice as many associations as inhabitants, has yet another."

Afterward, the student of literature and philosophy wrote an account of the meeting, critiqued the positions he had heard stated, and offered a counterproposal. His article, "The Establishment of a People's Theater: Berlin's Social Debt of Honor," was published that summer in *Die Gesellschaft* (The Society), Michael Georg Conrad's arts journal.³⁸ Eisner began by contesting the desirability of turning the stage into a "nursery

school for patriots." National consciousness, he asserted, is rooted in "love of family, the land and those who dwell on it, language, art, history, satisfaction with the existing social structure, and last and least allegiance to the current form of government and the administration." Unfortunately, national pride was too often bound up with the deprecation of foreign cultures. To his mind, the matter of conveying art to the masses was a social rather than national issue: "Art should not mold the German, but the man, who may then happen to be a German." As to Wolzogen's estimation of the common man's capacity for art, Eisner countered that having witnessed at Easter the enthusiasm of working-class children, despite streaming rain, for a sidewalk puppet show starring Kasperl, he believed them to understand at least as much of what they saw as the bourgeois patrons of the Lessing Theater. He reasoned that "what a child can do, so too can the uneducated man of sound mind."

Moreover, if the common man is expected to fathom the often absurd mysteries of religion, why should he be oblivious to the universal truths revealed by great art? The church was outmoded in any case and could no longer satisfy modern man's needs and desires, for "we want paradise on earth, not in heaven." There is a good deal of metaphorical talk about "spiritual sustenance," Eisner observed, but few realize that the phrase has literal significance. Citing ascetics such as Spinoza, he argued that when the mind and soul are sated, the flesh requires less. Intellectual stimulation would assuage the need of the materially poor. Knowledge had swelled beyond the confines of scripture, political and social ideals were fundamentally at odds with the old patriarchy. Science and art had superseded faith. Since science yet overwhelmed the mind of the masses, direction would derive from art. Proclaiming that "of all spiritual sustenance living drama is the most strengthening," Eisner advocated the people's theater as successor to the church.

To the end of raising the popular temple, he suggested that Berlin be divided into parishes that would jointly build or rent a theater. Tickets could be allotted at minimal cost to the parishes on a rotating basis, with some reserved for vocational students, teachers at the elementary schools, and factory workers. Berlin's theater for the masses might economize by eschewing luxurious appointments, ornate sets, and elaborate costumes. He called on idealistic actors, actresses, and artists to aid the cause and accept as their recompense a decent wage and the honor of serving the people. As to repertory, the audience should be challenged with works classical and modern, tragic and comic, German and foreign. He named Anzengruber and Raimund as exemplary playwrights for such an undertaking. Germany's capital, for all its modern

amenities, had yet to give the world a cultural ideal, Eisner declared, “but an institution that elevates, fortifies, and consoles the poor—that would be our city’s eternal claim to fame.”

The essay proved prophetic. At the time it went to press, the Free Stage Society (Verein Freie Bühne), a bourgeois initiative headed by director Otto Brahm and actor Maximilian Harden, planned private productions of banned avant-garde drama in rented theaters for subscribers. The play selected to inaugurate the first of its three seasons was *Ghosts*, performed on 29 September 1889. It was followed by Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (Before Sunrise) on 20 October. In its brief life the Free Stage became the champion of naturalism, staging works by Arno Holz, Anzengruber, Tolstoy, Bjørnson, and Strindberg. Eisner’s membership card for the 1889–1890 season entitled him to seat thirty-six in the right wing of the second balcony at the rented Lessing Theater.³⁹

Lee Baxandall writes that “the founding of the Freie Bühne stirred great interest among the more culturally conscious workers and middle-class intellectuals who ranged themselves politically with the workers.” The Berlin trade unions did indeed purchase joint subscriptions for their members, but by and large the Free Stage “remained a theater belonging to an elite.”⁴⁰ In an article for the 23 March issue of the Social Democratic paper *Berliner Volksblatt* (Berlin People’s Paper), which became *Vorwärts*, Dr. Bruno Wille proposed a People’s Free Stage after Eisner’s concept, an institution for “the education of the people through art, in which the word ‘education’ is not meant in the sense of a patronizing offering ‘from above’ but rather as self-education through participation of those who invigorate themselves by sharing with others.” Wille envisioned the People’s Free Stage sponsoring Sunday afternoon performances, concerts, recitations, and lectures in rented theaters at an entrance fee of 50 pfennige.⁴¹ In response to his call over a thousand people assembled on 8 August to found Berlin’s Freie Volksbühne. Kurt Eisner emerged as one of the enterprise’s leaders.

Eisner’s journal entries of the time reflect growing dissatisfaction with Prussian autocracy. Of the king who rejected out of hand constitutional infringements on his power and in 1849 spurned the imperial crown offered by the National Assembly, he wrote: “Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s statement that the king rules easily and justly because he ‘overlooks’ everything contains an apt double entendre. Which prince would not tiredly allow the scepter to sink if he did not overlook the horrible, ominous, and insoluble in his task—a blind man on a mountaintop regarding the world below.”⁴² The twenty-two-year-old recognized early the

arrogance of the new Prussian king and German emperor who ascended the throne in June 1888 and would soon pit Germany against Britain in a fateful contest for colonies and supremacy of the seas. On 21 September 1889 Eisner noted: "According to Wilhelm II the sole purpose of history seems to be to glorify the current ruler."⁴³ A month later Eisner equated Paris's Eiffel Tower with the future and humanity, Berlin's Victory Column with the present and barbarism.⁴⁴ The entry for 29 October reveals the extent of utilitarian influence: "Culture's mission is to banish chance by law. The word 'happiness' must be struck from the dictionary of human thought and replaced by 'one's due.'"⁴⁵

In later life Eisner proved the sort of charismatic intellect who attracts a coterie of admirers and disciples. His circle of intimates during his years at university was small but gifted. His closest friend was fellow student Richard Baerwald, who became a leading scholar in the field of parapsychology, authoring studies on clairvoyance, spiritualism, and autosuggestion. For eleven years, beginning in 1887, he corresponded with Eisner on topics ranging from Mozart to politics to "fine young ladies."⁴⁶ A letter written from England on 4 December 1889, in which he derides "our German brute-force economy with its police system," attests that at that time he shared Eisner's sympathy with the fourth estate and antipathy to the government.⁴⁷

Among the women to whom Eisner felt drawn was his cousin Margarete, daughter of Ignaz and Fanny Eisner. "I repeat for you now," she wrote on 13 January 1888, "what I told you recently: you are free, no chains bind you to me. . . . I know too that some brighter day a memory of the moments we shared in happiness will steal upon you." They remained on friendly terms. Grete eventually married a Jew of Russian descent. Their son Ernst Boris Chain, born 19 June 1906, would teach at Oxford and share the Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine in 1945 for the discovery of penicillin.⁴⁸ In 1889 Eisner became acquainted with three sisters, Doris, Lisbeth, and Toni, children of landscape painter August Hendrich, who had moved from Freienwalde an der Oder to Eberswalde, a scenic village northeast of Berlin.⁴⁹ The eldest daughter, Doris, fell in love with the student, but he preferred Auguste Ludowika Elisabeth, six months his junior, blonde, and "childlike" in her emotions.⁵⁰

She was an anxious young woman whose refined tastes were well beyond her means. She had already tried to attach herself to an elderly scholar in order to escape the poverty of her home, where importunate creditors left empty-handed and threatening. She unsuccessfully sought work in Berlin's shops and factories, then settled into menial cottage industry, finishing goods in her room for a pittance. "Never," Eisner

recalled, “have I met a person so disheartened and stunted, who cried out so passionately from the depths of a tormented soul for peace and—goodness.” On the first evening they met, she confided to him that she could no longer endure her lot, that she would prefer life in a bordello to the drudgery of her existence.⁵¹ In a black suit, starched white shirt, and formal tie, he sat by her at dinner on her twenty-second birthday in early November 1889, amid a swirl of gaily dressed young people, and guessed that she would surely have a beau. While the party drank a toast to “What we love!” Eisner determined it was she whom he would love.⁵² On 13 November he recorded in his journal that his life had been uprooted, his old existence doomed, and fancied himself “a novel’s suffering hero.”⁵³

Twelve years later he reminisced: “Love is easily found in the mists of autumn evenings. . . . I can only recommend to every innocent and yearning soul between seventeen and twenty-two to fix on this time of fall when secret love that must remain concealed longs to grow into iron-forging fate. Be advised by one with experience.”⁵⁴ Elisabeth Hendrich was unlike anyone he had ever known and thoroughly receptive to his ideas—a veritable lab school for his social theories. That fall and early winter he prepared for her a “Christmas book for my love,” to which he gave the telling title “Loving and Teaching.” The dedication reads:

I inscribe this book to you that all my thought
inhabits your soul as its own address,
that, shaping, it may there dwell, in love well caught,
and, thus content, give rise to happiness.⁵⁵

In it he copied musings, aphorisms, poems, and stories from earlier journals, meant to affirm his love, reveal his personality, and mold her thinking. He recommended texts she should read, confessed his feelings of alienation, and unwittingly foretold his own fate in the poem “Martyrdom,” in which the wise man sinks down in the dust, bearing the ignorance and insensitivity of millions like a “crown of thorns.”⁵⁶

Lisbeth answered in verse of her own—decidedly romantic in mood, imagery, and form—printed in the 15 December 1889 edition of the *Berliner Salonblatt*, a society magazine:

If you perchance as a bright star,
in the evening sky did blaze,
then would I be a little bloom,
untouched, alone in forest gloom
and up to the heavens gaze. . . .⁵⁷

Eisner was by then midway through his eighth semester, enrolled in courses on Old Saxon grammar, *Parzival*, and Goethe's first draft of *Faust*, living in his own rooms at Friedrichstraße 10, and financially strapped.⁵⁸ His mother wanted him to enter and rejuvenate the family business in military accoutrements, a prospect thoroughly odious to him. Old Emanuel took a dim view of his interest in the painter's daughter; only a marriage into money would allow him to pursue comfortably an academic career.⁵⁹ Kurt Eisner made his choice. At the turn of the year he withdrew from university, abandoned his thesis, and took up work as a correspondent and editor for the recently established Herold News Agency directed by Ludwig Klausner.⁶⁰

ARISTOCRATIZE THE MASSES: FROM BERLIN TO FRANKFURT TO MARBURG (1890–1893)

EISNER STARTED WORK AT THE HEROLD in January 1890. His duties were to gather news, file reports for dissemination to newspapers throughout Europe, and write lead stories. He covered sessions of the Reichstag, the powerless popular national assembly commonly characterized as a debating club, and the equally farcical Prussian Landtag. The issue of the day was Kaiser Wilhelm's new course, the defining component of which was *Weltpolitik*, described by Walther Rathenau as a "dilettante foreign policy."¹ Bismarck had never seen the need for Germany to look overseas for colonies when Poland lay so near, but Wilhelm, obsessed with national prestige and supported by wealthy interest groups such as the Pan-German League (Alldeutscher Verband), the Navy League (Flottenverein), and the Colonial League (Kolonialverein), was determined to secure Germany's place in the sun. Years earlier in 1881 Bismarck had unwittingly drafted his own pink slip when he remarked that he had no interest in colonial expansion.² Although he softened his stance in the mid-1880s to accommodate public opinion, his commitment was never more than halfhearted. Consequently, Wilhelm dismissed the septuagenarian icon, demanding, receiving, and accepting Bismarck's resignation between 17 and 20 March 1890.

Eisner was assigned to cover the chancellor's departure from the capital on the twenty-ninth, one of a select group of journalists to ride with the old man as far as the Spandau station on his return to Friedrichsruh. The Herold's new retainer recalled the crowd that serenaded Bismarck at Berlin's main station, his banter with reporters who stood on the desolate platform at Spandau, the stern face of "the great misanthrope," and the indifference of workers boarding the train to Berlin. Eisner was surprised to see two days later how his account had been sentimentalized in a major

foreign paper: “Gone was the rigidity of injured pride, and the melancholy exile’s two great tears streamed like silvery pearls.”³

Eisner and Lisbeth Hendrich became engaged in mid-autumn 1890. Much of his leisure time was spent in Berlin’s libraries researching his articles and reading the yet obscure Friedrich Nietzsche. Struggling against the allure of Nietzsche’s “anarchy of the elect,” Eisner began to cast a critique. In the spring he had three vignettes and a long poem published in *Die Gesellschaft*. The vignettes, “Pictures in the Style of Max Klinger,” depict dark, sexually charged street scenes of proletarian women.⁴ “May Night: A Leaf of Life,” a love poem in blank verse—a departure from the ponderous contrivance of earlier attempts—weaves a lyrical spell in the first verses but deteriorates into metaphysical cogitations. The opening of the second strophe celebrates the universality of intimacy:

Pressed body to body, we listen to the night.
On a secluded balcony entwined with wild grape
we look out into the dark,
and into the breath of sacred quiet flows
from our souls love’s own ardent breath.⁵

Personnel changes at the Herold made Eisner’s job difficult, prompting him to consider his options. He resigned in late spring 1891, together with his immediate chief, Alexander Buchholtz, over growing differences with the Herold’s management. In a letter of recommendation Buchholtz attested that Eisner “rendered outstanding service to the bureau through his great diligence and enthusiasm as well as extraordinary circumspection and skill.”⁶ Eisner wrote on 26 June from the Hendrich home at Pfeilstraße 4 in Eberswalde, asking Eugen Sierke, editor of the *Braunschweiger Tageblatt* (Braunschweig Daily Paper), for help finding another job in journalism.⁷ In a subsequent letter he outlined his education and experience, mentioned his recent engagement, and declared: “Politically, I have no dogmatic party convictions and respect the honest observer’s critical judgment. As to economics, I believe in the future of socialism.” His stated ambition was to devote whatever free time he might have to literary pursuits.⁸ He supported himself by freelance work but worried how long it might be, having “given up a good, comfortable, and lucrative position out of ideal considerations and moral scruples,” before he would be financially secure enough to marry his “little blonde joy.”

On Sundays they made excursions into the countryside, strolling over the plains north of the city. On such an outing he and Lisbeth rested on

a hillock and watched three young storks circling above. One of the birds swooped low, causing Lisbeth to wince. Eisner joked that she had nothing to fear; the storks were too young to bear her off. Within a week he himself was shaken by a frightful experience of his own. A young emigrant couple and their infant son returned destitute to Berlin from the United States. The relatives from whom they expected help shunned them. After a week, with funds exhausted, they turned to Eisner, whom they had known earlier as one who sympathized with the poor. At twenty-four, their benefactor was slight, his reddish hair thinning, and, as he freely admitted, “subject to moods, of fragile health and fragile nerves.” No sooner had they settled into his second room than the overwrought woman fell ill. Their miserable straits confronted the idealist with an unwelcome, deromanticized insight into the responsibilities of marriage and impressed on him the absolute necessity of a regular income.⁹ The opposition of Eisner’s parents to his liaison with a gentle girl from a poor, bohemian family, if anything, strengthened his resolve.¹⁰

In early fall he left Berlin to begin work as a copy editor for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the premier Left Liberal newspaper, the German daily most widely read abroad and recognized at home for its expertise in foreign affairs. Its founder was Leopold Sonnemann, a leader of the preunification People’s Party (Volkspartei) who sought to forge consensus between bourgeois democrats and workers but who opposed exclusively working-class political initiatives and organizations.¹¹ Eisner’s new position, which entailed proofing everything from news articles and editorials to advertisements and lottery results, certainly broadened his journalistic experience, but soon became onerous.¹² A man whose interests lay in philosophy and the arts must have chafed at checking the accuracy of the monthly report for investors in May’s Consolidated Gold Mining Company Ltd. of Johannesburg, prices of Havanas at Carl Ladendorff’s smoke shop in Pforzheim, or J. Wehl’s stock options in North American railroads.

On 11 October 1891 Eisner wrote to his parents from his new lodgings, a third-floor flat at Goetheplatz 3. He began the lengthy letter with a call for reconciliation, voicing his desire for “the clear, cheerful relationship that should exist between parents and children.” He assured them that he had not written sooner only because of the demands of his grueling schedule. Every other week he worked the night desk. His hours on this shift were from two to four in the afternoon, five to seven in the evening, and then from ten at night to quarter of four the next morning. During the “recovery week” he worked only four hours each afternoon. The work itself was dull, and the paycheck of 166.66 marks per

month was barely adequate given Frankfurt's high prices. He hoped to supplement his income by contributing articles and reviews to the paper's arts section. Here each acceptance fetched 50 to 100 marks. Perhaps his superiors would recognize his talents and further him accordingly. It was doubtful though, for professional jealousy had poisoned the spirit of collegiality: "No friendly tone exists here at all. Each slanders the other, each intrigues against the other." Little wonder that he complained of suffering from chronic gastritis. Discouraged as he was at work, Eisner relished excursions into Frankfurt's surrounding countryside. He related that on the previous Sunday he had taken a cruise on the Rhine from Mainz to Biebrich and then stayed the night just outside Wiesbaden at the villa of family friends, Herr and Frau Reinglass. He closed with an offer to send money, were Emanuel and Hedwig in need.¹³ Later in the month Eisner confided to his fiancée the suspicion that his advancement was being hindered by political considerations and judged his superiors "frightful fellows."¹⁴ He found an outlet for his creative energy in publishing on the side in literary journals and began filing reports for *Die kleine Presse* (The Little Press), a Frankfurt paper with a regional readership.¹⁵

In November and December his anti-Nietzsche, *Psychopathia spiritualis: Friedrich Nietzsche und die Apostel der Zukunft* (Psychopathia spiritualis: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Apostles of the Future), was serialized in *Die Gesellschaft*.¹⁶ He called his first book "a scene from the drama of my intellectual self-liberation and self-realization" (99) and readily admitted that it was no exhaustive, systematic analysis but rather a compilation of "rambling aphoristic remarks" (iv) on the maladies of the age. In addition to Nietzsche, he treats the nationalist racism of Julius Langbehn, social Darwinism, and rampant laissez-faire capitalism. The first comprehensive critique of Nietzsche published in Germany, *Psychopathia spiritualis* chronicles the coalescence of Eisner's thinking.

The former student of literature and philosophy readily confesses the draw of Nietzsche's "brooding profundity, dazzling spirit, audacious wit, and . . . joyful, almost boyish roguishness" (6), but he also discerns the chaos of a mind seething with contradictions. He likens *Zarathustra* to *Faust* in both its poetic grandeur and unsuitability as a practical guide to life (8). Eisner recognizes that Nietzsche, regardless of his denials, is a direct intellectual descendent of the Schlegel brothers and Tieck, romantics who "created an aesthetic world of self-indulgence in opposition to a prosaic, altruistic moral philosophy" (9). From Friedrich Schlegel in particular came the selectively idealized Hellenism. In true romantic fashion Nietzsche glories in the mystical, the orgiastic abandon of the cult of Dionysus, the oracular office of the poet speaking to and for the initiates.

In Nietzsche's first book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*), "one perceived the classically educated, imbued philologist in the recognition of the Apollonian, but only with the maenadization of Hellenism, with the Dionysus fanaticism, did he arrive at his true self" (14). Absent here is the 'classical equanimity' (14) upheld by Winckelmann and Goethe.

As singular as Nietzsche's Hellenism is, Eisner deems his notion of "oriental Aryanism" (14), personified by Zarathustra, even more suspect. Had Nietzsche any understanding of Indian culture, he would know the artificiality of his distinction between a Semitic slave ethic and Aryan master ethic. Indeed, India's defining, central value is human *development*. But the desire for truth is, after all, one of the values Nietzsche questions. "For Nietzsche truth is a woman, and he loves it the way a modern misogynist loves women" (26). This point arouses Eisner's fervor. How could one realize the will to power, how could one lead, if one did not know "what is, what to fear, and what to despise" (27)? Conversely, Eisner has no delusions about truth as an absolute. "Truths are born, they live, grow, and die when their time has come" (29). Nietzsche, he charges, demonstrates his truths through syllogism: the great truths cannot be proven, what I tell you cannot be proven, hence it is true.

Here Eisner pauses to reflect on what Nietzsche divulges of himself in his writings. By nature supercilious, unfeeling, and severe, Nietzsche therefore seeks to depict his vices as the superman's virtues. What he wholly lacks personally, *joie de vivre*, he lays claim to in his philosophy.¹⁷ In like manner he espouses the "emancipation of the flesh," a corollary to the primacy of the 'will' over Schopenhauer's 'idea' and a fundamental component of the master ethic (47). The glaring contradiction of the quintessential intellectual yearning for the physical, the syphilitic misogynist commending licentiousness, would best "be explained medically" (52).

In love with the painter's daughter and secure in his sexuality, Eisner finds Nietzsche's misogyny repugnant and objects to the witticisms that ridicule all women, without regard for individual qualities or character, as commonplace. In this wise the Social Democratic leader August Bebel shows himself in his writings on women to be as genteel and aristocratic as Nietzsche is vulgar and plebeian. Moreover, the effect of Nietzsche's conceits on his young admirers is grotesque: "They behave wantonly in celebration of unadulterated manliness and deserve at best the attribute manlike" (52). As an example, Eisner cites Nietzsche's disciple Ola Hansson, who candidly acknowledged using Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis*, a study of perversion and violence, as inspiration for his *Alltagsfrauen* (*Everyday Women*), a collection of graphic novellas. That none misapprehend, Eisner disclaims prudishness in his judgment of

Nietzsche. The only moral law that should obtain as regards sexuality is that we should consider immoral any act harmful to the family, society, a gender, or a race.

At the heart of Nietzsche's misogyny and Judeo-Christian slave ethic Eisner discerns the superman's dictum "Harden yourself." In his discussion of anti-Semitism in Nietzsche's camp, Eisner reveals something of his own bearing toward his heritage. He alludes to section 195 of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (*Beyond Good and Evil*), where Nietzsche sees in the negative connotation of the Hebrew word for "world" the germ of the slave ethic. He shows how Nietzsche ascribes the ills of the modern era—compassion, conscience, altruism, and Christianity itself—to this curious linguistic phenomenon. Just as Nietzsche indiscriminately attributes all traits he deems negative to women as a sex, so too he defames the Jews as a race. When racial generalizations are tested by science, Eisner argues, they invariably break down. The statistics yielded by cranial measurement, for example, demonstrate that variations within a racial grouping are as great as those alleged to set it off from others. Moreover, biblical scholars document substantial vestiges of the pagan past in Mosaic texts, rendering Nietzsche's sample somewhat less than racially pure. And recent research suggested that the Greeks borrowed culturally from the Phoenicians, a Semitic people. Such revelations might serve as a purgative for those who "suffer from an unbelievable race constipation" (39–40).

Before racial fatalism, Eisner exhorts, we must "save ourselves with the Kantian leap of necessity into the world of practical reason" (40) if we wish to live productively. In fact, what constitutes race on the cusp of the twentieth century is radically different from what it once was. "Communities sharing a milieu of life and interest form races; contemporaries, colleagues, and members of the same class represent nations. Today's Parisian stands closer to today's Berliner than the Berliner to his German brother in Kuhschnappel: metropolitan milieu. The 1891 Frenchman is more like the contemporary German than the latter is to his compatriot of the year 1500: temporal milieu. The Gallic professor is more closely related to his German colleague than to a Gallic swineherd: occupational milieu" (44). With an equally straightforward argument Eisner dispatches the social Darwinists and their application of natural selection to human society, "individualism as the right of the stronger" (77). If people are capable of acting in concert to mitigate the havoc of natural disasters by establishing insurance agencies, surely they can act against man-made evils as well. Here too he employs statistics to expose fallacy: the richer a society, the lower its mortality and

birthrate; hence poverty is not, as social Darwinism holds, a natural mechanism to limit population.

At this point in his critique, Eisner turns to Julius Langbehn, one of the apostles of his subtitle, whose book *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator) advanced “Germanness” as a *unio mystica* between the land and its inhabitants. He lampoons Langbehn’s fixing the Elbe River as the physical and spiritual border between the ‘warm’ and ‘cool’ (40) peoples, politicians, poets, and painters, as well as his notion of racial degeneration, exemplified by Jews who have their side curls trimmed and refuse to keep kosher. This kind of “conceptual nonsense” (41), fomented by Nietzsche and furthered by his disciples, Eisner writes, is criminally unconscionable.

The true path to the future, the way to the superman, according to the young journalist, lies in a political philosophy that turns Nietzsche on his head. Nietzsche, he explains, is the culmination of one of the two seminal intellectual currents of the nineteenth century—romanticism; the other, rationalism, gave rise to Marx. “In socialism I see a clear, realizable goal; in Nietzscheism I sleepwalk in search of a blue flower” (86), Eisner declares, referring to the poet Novalis’s enduring romantic symbol. For all his brilliance, for all his damning criticism of Western values, Nietzsche lends no direction. In his scorn for the *hoi polloi*, democracy, and altruism he fails to grasp that socialism aims at the unfettered development of the individual by abolishing artificial restrictions on productivity. The way forward is to “aristocratize the masses” (79) rather than subjugate them. As a political organization of the workers’ movement, Social Democracy “should strive at least for this goal” (81).

To come to a clear understanding of Social Democracy, Eisner ventures, one must set aside political and philosophical biases and consider the basic social issue. Ultimately the consequence of the workers’ movement is less the enfranchisement of the fourth estate than “the realization of the ideal of collectivism, of practical regulation of production and consumption” to supersede the capitalist system “eternally tottering between boom and bust, between gluttonous plenty and starving want” (84). Socialism represents a world order engineered to preclude the right of might and the rule of chance. He believes that although socialism is inherently rational and scientific, it also has ideal, even religious components that wed exultant secularism with social justice and Christian charity. The Kantian, ethical component of Eisner’s political conception would color his thinking throughout his life and lead to fateful clashes with party ideologues, most of whom made their way to Marx via Hegel.

As greatly as Eisner supported socialism's ideal, he was hardly blind to the faults of the Social Democratic Party. The radicalism of the Berlin membership, the bumbling parliamentary faction, and the personal animosity in debate—particularly that of Franz Mehring, coeditor of the party journal *Die Neue Zeit* (The New Age), who “acted as if he wanted to win the title of North German Champion of the Insult”—damaged the party's credibility even among those sympathetic to its cause. In the last pages of his critique Eisner warns that romanticism exerts a powerful pull on ambitious, rebellious youth. Only recently a number of young party members had bolted to form their own League of Independent Socialists (Verein unabhängiger Sozialisten). He notes that the language of their leader, Bruno Wille, rife with allusions to Nietzsche, betrays their inspiration. The prophet of “an anarchy of the elect” remained “the most dangerous and seductive opponent of Social Democracy” (88).

When the second installment of Eisner's critique appeared in December, he was making ready for a visit to Berlin. On the eighteenth his adoring sister Martha wrote that the family, obviously proud of his literary success despite his political leanings, had taken great pleasure in his last letter, “especially at the news that you will spend Christmas with us.”¹⁸ After the holiday his mother fretted that he was not saving enough of his salary, and his father fervently hoped that he would complete his degree. At dinner three weeks after New Year's, they urged Lisbeth to work her influence on him. “Wouldn't it work, darling,” she wrote the same night, “can't you submit a dissertation to a small university, as you once planned? . . . Do it, love, but don't overtax yourself—little by little, in time it will be done.” Emanuel sweetened the pot with an offer of 500 marks if his son would heed the good advice.¹⁹

Back in Frankfurt Eisner was enjoying the success of his avocation. Wilhelm Friedrich, the Leipzig publisher of *Die Gesellschaft*, reprinted *Psychopathia spiritualis* as a book. An advertisement inserted in the journal's March issue announced its availability in octavo at a price of 2 marks. “Here for the first time Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical Weltanschauung, which today stirs the entire cultured world, is subjected to a rigorous but just critique by a congenial mind. . . . This profound text highlights current social conditions, the race question, prevalent social Darwinism and its perverse application.”²⁰ The work generated predictably partisan reviews. In *Die Neue Zeit* Franz Mehring disputed the threat Nietzsche posed to socialism, as his appeal was limited mainly to gifted bourgeois youths with literary aspirations. Mehring was unimpressed by Eisner's command of historical materialism and economics yet recommended *Psychopathia spiritualis* as a useful introduction and insightful

guide: “In the penetrating critique of Nietzsche, the text affords a most graphic and instructive picture.” Mehring reckoned its author just over halfway down the road to socialism and concluded that “one can wish nothing better for Herr Eisner than that he soon arrive at the goal of the way he has taken with insight and courage.”²¹ The anthroposophist and pedagogue Rudolf Steiner acclaimed the study and then wrote personally to Eisner that his own goal was “to establish ethical individualism scientifically and, of course, completely independent of Nietzsche.”²²

Encouraged by the book’s reception, Eisner posted it to Danish critic Georg Brandes, Nietzsche’s early champion, whose lectures in Copenhagen in April 1888, reported by Denmark’s leading paper, brought Nietzsche to the public. Nietzsche himself had sent Brandes a copy of *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, only to be ignored until *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*On the Genealogy of Morals*) arrived and struck the Dane’s fancy. In the latter Brandes found, as he wrote to Nietzsche on 26 November 1887, “much that harmonizes with my own ideas and sympathies, the depreciation of the ascetic ideals and the profound disgust with democratic mediocrity, your aristocratic idealism.” Within half a year Brandes was signing himself “your faithful reader and admirer.”²³

Receiving no acknowledgment, Eisner wrote again to Brandes, who responded on 7 June 1892 that each day he received a number of such books whose authors were all desirous of his judgment. “Since you demand so zealously to hear my opinion, I will permit myself to send you a couple of hurried remarks. For more I have no time.” Had Eisner bothered to read his articles, Brandes chided, this annoyance would be unnecessary. Equating *Zarathustra* with *Faust* was “tastelessness.” Eisner had oversimplified Nietzsche from imperfect understanding. In her article for *Die freie Bühne* (The Free Stage), Lou Andreas-Salomé explicated more clearly than Eisner the progression of Nietzsche’s ideas. “Your psychology appears to me to be lacking when you ascribe Nietzsche’s struggle to the moods of the day.” Brandes condescended to agree with Eisner on one main point in his “limp (and a bit boring) work”—the wrong-headedness of Nietzsche’s bearing toward socialism. But Brandes protested associating Nietzsche with the likes of Langbehn: “Why in the world do you lump the great man together with the pitiful numskulls who parrot him?”²⁴

In a critique of *Psychopathia spiritualis* for the May issue of *Die Gesellschaft*, C. Vedente of Leipzig praised Eisner’s style, psychological insight, and criticism of social institutions but faulted him for treating Nietzsche’s disparate thought as a unified whole and for advancing his arguments through sentimental analogies rather than thorough

proofs.²⁵ Eisner, evidently stung, remonstrated against being maligned as an “intellectual cripple” who failed to see the obvious contradictions in Nietzsche’s oeuvre, but the adjective “sentimental” provoked genuine personal offense, for he interpreted it as a charge of effeminacy: “I am obdurately against what one calls female character traits. I have always endeavored to cultivate in myself the human. . . . I am so unfortunate as to have no secret nerves and no antithetical sexual impulses, and if my head were not assaulted once and awhile by a migraine, I would doubt seriously whether this body part deserves to be called modern at all.”²⁶

In a review printed in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 18 May and rerun in the Sunday supplement on the twenty-second, Eisner critiqued the fourth and final part of *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*), published in 1891.²⁷ The review bears the haunting title “From the Literary Remains of One Still Living” and imparts the moral of the proud superman laid low, a dazzling mind gone dark. What he can teach us above all, Eisner writes, is tolerance. Only by examining Nietzsche’s work with the tolerance that he himself disdained could one appreciate the brilliance of his prose, the depth of his thought, and “the ecstatic yearning for joy and life’s fullness” without succumbing to Nietzsche’s monstrous prejudices, enervating cultural despair, and “absolute nihilism.” Still, Nietzsche struck a chord of discontent with the spiritual poverty of materialism. “The hypertrophic development of three human activities—politics, trade and industry, technology—has led to a neglect of those human activities that we customarily summarize by the name ‘soul.’” The want accounts for Zarathustra’s appeal.

At the end of the month Eisner wrote to his publisher, cited favorable reviews of *Psychopathia spiritualis*, and requested an increase in his honorarium for both the book and future essays for the journal. Wilhelm Friedrich answered on 10 June that although he was well aware of the critical success, sales did not yet justify a second edition. He considered the terms binding until demand merited another run, and future articles would be accorded the highest rate of 3 marks per printed page.²⁸ The book’s following certainly whetted Eisner’s literary ambitions. Using the pseudonym Reinhard Fern, he authored a vignette, “Feverish Night: An Impression,” describing the mental anguish of a young man who must pawn a silver watch given to him by his father.²⁹ Under his own name Eisner presented in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* a two-part survey of recent German literature, in which he pays tribute to Theodor Fontane, whose novel *Unwiederbringlich* (Irretrievable) had appeared the previous year, as “the honorary member of the moderns,” and passes over Maria von

Ebner-Eschenbach to pronounce Maria Janitschek “the strongest poetic power among the literary women.”³⁰

During the spring Eisner’s circle in Berlin was diminished by the death, after long illness, of Lisbeth’s sister Doris. Grete Eisner commiserated in a letter of 29 April that although she had prepared for it, Doris’s death had affected her deeply.³¹ Eisner and Lisbeth determined to marry in the summer. She wrote to him the evening of 3 June about the decor of their Frankfurt apartment.³² On the nineteenth Eisner announced in a letter to his mother that he would return home in July “to go through the necessary formalities in Eberswalde that will make it possible for Lisbeth to return together with me to Frankfurt.” He was determined to marry as soon as possible, he advised, and no objection on his parents’ part would deter him. Doris’s death clearly played a role in his decision. Lisbeth’s life at home was oppressive and pernicious, he confided to Hedwig. “I have the duty of liberating her from it.” And marriage would stabilize his own existence: “I desperately need the peace attendant to a chosen fate. . . . Above all I require a comrade so that I can continue my literary activity. With my first attempt I scored a success beyond any expectation. . . . This winter I will try to find the time and frame of mind for a drama.” He foresaw that within a year or two he would seek a better position that would permit him to contribute more substantially to his parents’ support. Until then Lisbeth would help him endure his lot.³³ On 19 July 1892 they wed in a civil ceremony at the Eberswalde town hall.³⁴ In Frankfurt they took two furnished rooms on the fourth floor of a boarding house at Große Gallusgasse 5.³⁵

Settling into married life, Eisner continued to earn his bread through the fall and winter at the *Frankfurter Zeitung* while enhancing his reputation in the serial press. In a note to a colleague whom he sensed to be a kindred spirit, he confessed that he had suffered the while in Frankfurt from lack of personal intellectual stimulation and voiced concern that his “socialist political sensibility” had isolated him from the paper’s management.³⁶ So successful was he at his extramural pursuits that his employers suspected that he was slighting his duties and feared that he could compromise their confidential sources. Even while he was drafting one of his reports for *Die kleine Presse* in his office at the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Eisner was informed by management that he had no further prospects at the paper.³⁷ He resigned effective 10 April 1893 and began the search for another job.³⁸ On his first day out of work he wrote to Franz Mehring to ask his assistance. “Having sampled the noble mind in its most sublime form, as it exists only among people purported to be Democrats, I am finally free of my service to the house of the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. . . . Can

you, dear Sir, advise me how one can indulge one's willingness and ability to work without subjecting oneself to derision and ridicule?"³⁹ On the twenty-first he wrote to a potential employer at another paper that he had resigned his position in Frankfurt for personal reasons and spelled out his terms, "a monthly salary of 175 marks (besides a share of the profits)."⁴⁰ In a letter of 12 May, Maximilian Harden, now editor of the prestigious journal *Zukunft* (The Future), offered to meet with Eisner in Berlin on the coming Wednesday afternoon.⁴¹ But no job materialized.

While searching for a new niche, Eisner made do with freelance work. Under a pseudonym, assumed that he might write freely without jeopardizing opportunities for employment, he became a regular contributor to *Das Magazin für Litteratur*, a venerable Berlin weekly edited by Fritz Mauthner and Otto Neumann-Hofer. He chose the pen name Sperans, or "Hoping," in all likelihood in affirmation of the Kantian axiom that the logic of hope is synonymous with the logic of social action. Eisner must have felt at home in the journal's pages; other collaborators included his professors Erich Schmidt and Richard Meyer, student chum Alfred Kerr, and former foil Ernst von Wolzogen. Joining Eisner as a political observer and social critic for the journal was Gustav Landauer, a fellow Jewish, leftist intellectual who would become his closest political ally, speak his eulogy, and ultimately share his grave.

Eisner's inaugural effort, an article titled "Militarism," was accorded front-page top billing on 20 May.⁴² Here he examined the military appropriations impasse that prompted Chancellor Caprivi to dissolve the Reichstag and call for new elections. The German military, Eisner wrote, the ranks of which were filled by men whose former station in life was generally worse than their potential fate on the battlefield, was a feudal anachronism that served as bodyguard to the privileged classes rather than as national defense force. Accordingly, "the representatives of the propertied and educated classes, the Right and the National Liberals," supported the measure. That the other great European armies were similarly constituted augured nothing good: "The great world war of the future is in its cave cringing its claws." Only the Social Democrats had voted en bloc against the bill, for their party enjoyed the luxury of being able to wait; its day was coming rather than passing. Eisner put himself squarely behind the Social Democratic demand for a citizens' militia, "the free people in arms with no purpose other than defending national independence," for such a military would be a democratizing force in German society and a boon to its cultural ascent.

The niche Eisner sought opened in late May when Paul Bader, founder and editor in chief of the *General-Anzeiger für Marburg und*

Umgebung (General Gazette for Marburg and Vicinity), called him to Marburg an der Lahn, a university town in the central state of Hesse. Bader too had worked early in his career at the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and moved toward the Social Democratic camp.⁴³ When Eisner arrived to take up a temporary position as political editor, Bader was engaged in a personal campaign against the incumbent Reichstag deputy representing Marburg-Kirchhain-Frankenberg since 1887, Dr. Otto Böckel, whose popularity in the villages of the district had earned him the nickname “the peasants’ king.” Head of the Antisemitic People’s Party (Antisemitische Volkspartei) and owner of the rival *Reichsberold* (Imperial Herald) in Marburg, Böckel had galvanized a constituency by championing legislation to secure credit for peasants and protect small business and trades. Bader pitted his paper against the Antisemites and declared a protest candidacy to gauge opposition to Böckel.⁴⁴ Together with Johann Becker, a local printer who wrote occasionally for the *General-Anzeiger*, Eisner stumped for Bader in Böckel’s strongholds. During a strategy session at Becker’s home, the printer informed Eisner of Böckel’s weakness for “village beauties.” Becker’s son Matthäus later recalled their conversation and his mother’s amusement. “He’s become a papa again in a neighboring village,” Becker remarked. “And why not?” Eisner responded, “He’s channeled all his physical energies into expanding his electoral base!” On a foray into a village the two found themselves before a particularly hostile audience. Böckel’s men had put out the word that a Jew was coming to calumniate him. Becker was a shepherd’s son and spoke the dialect, but it was Eisner who quieted the catcalls with his wit: “I have heard the rumor that has been spread about my companion Johann Becker, and therefore I now solemnly assure you that he is not Jewish.”⁴⁵

Sperans presented in early June a commentary on the inherent weaknesses of each of the parties.⁴⁶ The Conservatives, who were losing their appeal to agrarian workers, attempted to obfuscate the issues by fanning up anti-Semitism wherever it smoldered. “For every Jew approximately,” Eisner observed, “there is an anti-Semitic faction . . . , ranging from those . . . who cannot forgive the Jews for *crucifying* Christ to those who regard Israel as a world-historical calamity for *producing* Christ.” The Center Party was badly fragmented between its democratic and ultramontane elements. The National Liberals, the party that had gloried in German unification and the struggle against Rome for Germany’s cultural identity, now pandered to special interests. The old Progressive Party, renamed the Radical Party in 1884 after realignment, was Bismarck’s perennial adversary, lost its *raison d’être* with his departure, and could not determine “whether its archenemy stands to the left or right.” The party with the

least to lose and the most to gain in the voting on 15 June was the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands). Three years after its return from outlawry and exile, Social Democracy boasted a loyal, disciplined base of support among workers and a complement of bourgeois auxiliaries, but Bruno Wille's youthful faction was certainly capable of disruption. Having posited socialism as the political extension of his utilitarian philosophy and, indeed, having written in its support, Eisner nonetheless balked at joining the party, opting instead for irregular status. "We who take pleasure in needing to represent no interest follow this development too with serene curiosity."

In the elections the Social Democrats polled almost 360,000 votes more nationally than in 1890 and gained nine seats. The National Liberals lost 180,000 votes but gained eleven seats by apportionment. The Conservatives, Center, and Radicals all lost representation. The Antisemites received 3.4 percent of the total vote.⁴⁷ In his district Böckel was returned to the Reichstag, easily besting all opponents.

Following the fourth Evangelical Social Congress, held in Berlin in early June, Eisner analyzed the phenomenon he termed "frock socialism," the clergy-led, patriotic workers' movement launched by Prussian court pastor Adolf Stöcker. The article appeared in *Das Magazin für Litteratur* two days after the elections.⁴⁸ A prominent anti-Semite, Stöcker had founded the Christian Social Labor Party (Christlich-Soziale Arbeiterpartei) in 1878 to combat godless socialism and its causes. He believed that capitalism and industrialization, bankrolled by the Jewish lending houses, had wrought intolerable suffering among the poor, whose cry of anguish in turn had called down upon Europe the scourge of Jewish-inspired socialism.⁴⁹ Although Stöcker's party was thoroughly reactionary, it was assailed by the Right as well as the Left, and eventually most of its constituency turned to Social Democracy: "The eternal prospect of heaven as the supreme insurance agency against old age and infirmity became too monotonous for people—they were, after all, Berliners—and thus Herr Stöcker, in the end, had recruited and drilled soldiers for the enemy."

The Evangelical Social Congress was a forum for Stöcker's ideological spawn, whose plans for social reform from above Eisner likened to "soup-kitchen beneficence and Christmas gifts for poor children." Pastor Friedrich Naumann of Frankfurt, whom Eisner praised as "one of the few clergy who understand their time," used statistical data to dispute the assertion of Court Pastor Braun of Stuttgart that the gap between rich and poor had narrowed in the areas of education and standard of living, and condemned his patriarchal outlook as conducive to the suppression of

the individual. To those like Stöcker who regarded Naumann as a dreamer ahead of his time, Eisner answered: “No one can understand his own time who does not have a presentiment of the future, who is not already at home there intellectually. Only from the distance of the future does one get a clear view of the present.” Conversely, Eisner warned that Social Democracy, devoted as it was to Enlightenment ideals, must not discount the power of the spirit, as the politicized clerics did the skeptical mind, for “we also have a soul, an irrationally roving soul” that requires free range.

Later that summer Eisner had more advice from Sperans’s print pulpit for the party leadership after its electoral gains. Those radicals shunning parliamentary participation as capitulation to the system were reactionaries clinging to retrograde tactics. “In parliamentarism everyone has at present a way to win political power. Whoever fails to use it is a fool. Alley revolutions are a means of earlier times, at best still suited to Russia.”⁵⁰ It was a remarkable observation, made two years in advance of Engels’s own adjuration in his preface to Marx’s *Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850*.⁵¹

Eisner reported to his mother on 20 June that his four-week trial at the *General-Anzeiger* was done and that he had been invited to stay on. “The position here is ideal, actually: relatively little work, good pay, complete freedom of action, nice people, and moreover the opportunity and time to work at the university.” He was encouraged too by the reception of his weekly articles for *Das Magazin für Litteratur*.⁵² The next week he wrote that he had signed a two-year contract stipulating an annual salary of 3,300 marks and four weeks’ vacation. It was nearly double his starting pay in Frankfurt, and Marburg was far less expensive. He added a postscript: “I will now be able to complete my doctorate here.”⁵³ Appearances were important. In a letter of 25 July he instructed Lisbeth to buy for their new abode a full complement of furniture in the style she had already ordered from Dittmar in Berlin. “I simply cannot disgrace myself now when all Marburg awaits my things (everything I do interests all Marburg) by owning up that I have none.”⁵⁴ For the new furnishings the rising leftist luminary saddled himself with debt.

CHAPTER THREE

REFUGE OF ALL IDEALISTS: THROUGH COHEN TO KANT TOWARD MARX (1893–1896)

THE LEFT LIBERAL JOURNALIST Hellmut von Gerlach remarked that Eisner, in his four-year tenure as political editor of the *General-Anzeiger*, won for the publication “a significance extending far beyond the range of a provincial paper.”¹ Hesse had been annexed by Prussia after siding with Austria in Bismarck’s war for Schleswig-Holstein; in its intellectual capital Eisner gloried in deprecating the Prussian arrogance and ambition personified by the German emperor. In lead articles for the paper, Berlin weeklies, and the liberal daily *Vossische Zeitung* ([Christian Friedrich] Voß Newspaper) he achieved his earmark style “somewhere between Heinrich Heine and Kurt Tucholsky.”² In light of Eisner’s coruscating wit and irony historian Allan Mitchell surmised: “Had he not been the editor of a provincial newspaper, he might well have earned his living by writing for one of Berlin’s political cabarets.”³ Eisner’s years in Marburg were in many respects the happiest of his life, a period of both respite and preparation, alive with the promise of family, friendship, intellectual growth, and meaningful work. A regular income freed him from the anxiety of the past, Lisbeth gave birth to three of their children there, and Eisner was drawn into the circle of intellectuals around philosophy professor Hermann Cohen, master of the neo-Kantian Marburg School whose thinking shaped a generation of “reform” socialists. The association with Cohen, his colleagues, and students channeled Eisner’s already strong philosophical and political inclinations; “he began to define his socialism as a Kantian ethical socialism.”⁴ And through his political involvement with Bader he learned the practical application of his ideas.

Hermann Cohen had succeeded his patron Friedrich Albert Lange, enunciator of ethical socialism, as philosophy chair at Marburg in 1876. Once Eisner was settled, he determined to take advantage of his proximity

to the great Jewish scholar who, continuing Lange's work, was in the process of explicating systematically that socialism has both its moral justification and philosophical fundament in Kantian ethics rather than in Hegel's ideal metaphysics or Marx's historical materialism. Cohen believed that philosophy, not science, is the vehicle for studying ethics, and that man—specifically, the individual and his associations—is the focus of the discipline. The principles that govern the conduct of individuals in their dealings with others are ethics, and moral values determine politics and economics rather than vice versa.

From these premises Cohen developed a practical philosophy. He held that each individual belongs to a number of groups, or pluralities. The pluralities together compose the totality that is the state. The highest good is achieved when the wills and actions of the disparate pluralities are unified to further the interests of the whole. The individual or group guided exclusively by self-interest is immoral. The power state (*Machtstaat*) emerges when selfish will subverts the highest good to the benefit of a particular group or groups. Consistent with Kant's categorical imperative that one's actions should be governed by principles that might serve as the basis for a universal code of law, the legal state (*Rechtstaat*) conversely represents the interests of the whole by safeguarding the interests of each individual. Consequently, the legal state is democratic and cooperative, based on universal suffrage and equal access to public education; in it "private property is limited to personal property" and "the production of economic goods becomes a truly collective task and responsibility."⁵ The best chance for Germany's transformation from power state to legal state, Cohen reasoned, lay in the Social Democratic Party. Whereas Marx judged morality to be irrelevant to historical development and viewed Kantian ethics as socially conciliatory and detrimental to the revolutionary character of the proletariat, Cohen deemed Marx's "eruptive revolution" unnecessary in a society with rudimentary democratic mechanisms and immoral in that violence and terror were fundamentally inconducive to the highest good.⁶

Having studied Kant with Paulsen in Berlin and having espoused in *Psychopathia spiritualis* many of Cohen's precepts, Eisner now began auditing Cohen's popular lectures. Adolf Koester, another of Cohen's students while Eisner was in Marburg, later recalled the familiar scene of the diminutive professor in a large hat, strolling with cane in hand beneath the chestnuts along Gisselberger Chaussee, a train of collegians in tow with whom he discussed the unity of all knowledge.⁷ Eisner came to know Cohen well. They often walked home together through Marburg's winding streets, speaking of Judaism, philosophy,

politics, art, and events of the day.⁸ Eisner also made the acquaintance of Cohen's confederates, most notably philosophers Paul Natorp and Rudolf Stammler, social scientist Franz Staudinger, and historian Karl Vorländer. With Natorp he shared an abiding affinity for Condorcet's belief in man's inherent goodness.⁹ On the occasion of Cohen's seventieth birthday in July 1912, Eisner wrote in tribute that the sage's thinking had molded the very "essence of my being."¹⁰ In the end, though, they disagreed on one critical question: the inevitability of revolution in the progress toward a just society.

In Marburg, as elsewhere in Germany, a sharp contrast existed between town and gown. While the university had become the international center of neo-Kantian socialism, Marburg proper remained "a Conservative, National Liberal, Antisemitic idyll." Bader's campaign against Böckel had distinguished him and his new staffer as "dangerous rabble-rousers."¹¹ In addition to his work for the *General-Anzeiger*, Eisner continued to contribute to the serial press. In an article titled "A Corruption Trial," appearing in *Das Magazin für Litteratur* on 11 November 1893, he took aim as Sperans at the manifestations of anti-Semitism brought to light by the sensational trial in Hanover of a Jewish gambler named Abter, who with an accomplice had cheated a young officer, Lieutenant von Plessen, out of 30,000 marks. The case was being tried as surely in the press as in court.¹² A characteristic portrayal emerged of "Jews and Junker" in which the former were demonized, the latter sanctified.

Citing sensational examples of anti-Semitic opinion on the trial—among them the call for "forcible expulsion from our country" of the entire race—Eisner ridiculed the logical inconsistency of rejecting criticism from those who regarded the officer corps as profligate on account of the habits of a few, only to indict then a sizable national minority on similar grounds. The need for scapegoats he considered symptomatic of spiritual malaise in the bourgeois soul. "Literary dross of the sort I noted above does not occur in proletarian publications: perhaps the matter-of-fact insipidity, the overbearingly prosaic enlightenment are boring, but the striving for knowledge, reason, and clarity always compensates for it. . . . Whereas one in the fourth estate seeks, perhaps wrongly but always by clear laws, to construe, differentiate, and structure the things of the world, whereas one possesses here in historical materialism a worldview of genuine substance, there one reels dog-drunken between chance symptoms and wild generalizations, in desperate, senseless fear of intellectual infections, to entice the other over to his side."

Abter was found guilty of usury. Eisner had no quarrel with the verdict, but in an observation that amply evinces Cohen's influence, he

pointed out that German law recognized only the financial damages that derive from games of chance, that violations were punished as crimes against property; in Austrian, English, and Italian law, however, these offenses were judged as crimes against public morality. To those who called for legislation to protect youthful officers from victimization at the gaming table, he impishly proposed a “national credit bank for paying gambling debts incurred in accordance with one’s class and rank” and then asked what law would protect the honest poor from exploitation at the hands of the bourgeois nobility-of-property.

In an article for the 18 November issue, “Boycotted Elections,” Eisner contemplated the meaning of the Radical Party’s demise in the lower house of the Prussian Landtag, members of which were elected by the three-class suffrage system devised in 1851 to preserve the privilege of the Junker squirearchy.¹³ The three electoral classes were determined by tax rate; the effect was that the rich had one hundred times the representation of the poor. In 1890, for example, when the national Reichstag, elected by universal and equal male suffrage, had thirty-five Social Democratic deputies, the Prussian Landtag had none.¹⁴

Over thirty years the number of Left Liberal deputies had dwindled to a fraction of their former total. The decline had nothing to do, Eisner observed, with people becoming more conservative, for the Reichstag elections proved the contrary. Rather it merely reflected changing circumstance. Bismarck’s volatility and willingness to use repression against his adversaries necessitated a bourgeois party that would defend middle-class freedoms—a disgruntled party of loyal opposition, as it were. Without Bismarck bourgeois radicalism served no purpose; with no strong man to play them off against each other and then run roughshod over them individually, the other parties of property—the Conservatives, National Liberals, and Antisemites—sufficed as advocates of special interests. The Radical Party was simply passé. Bismarck’s successor, Count Caprivi, allowed for a realignment of political energies. “The historical merit of Capriviism is its programmatically implemented tedium. It afforded the repose to dwell on the essential in modern culture: one could finally learn to think and perceive socially.” Consequently, the Prussian Conservatives, uneasy with foreboding, were celebrating a hollow victory, for “the majority of the people . . . expressed their opinion clearly and unmistakably by *boycotting* the elections.”

The masses had become too conscious of their potential power to be “content with the scraps of political rights.” They were stirring to rise to a new day. The electoral system that deprived them of a voice in affairs of state was “immoral” and would prove the undoing of those

who profited by it. Cohen's influence shines through Eisner's criticism of Prussia's ills and through his optimistic view of the ineluctability of social justice through increased democracy: "Constitutionalism rests on the principle that the people's voice should be heard. Parliaments do not exist to provide a definitive explanation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* by majority decision; then one would be able to justify suffrage based on education. Their purpose is even less to grant to the propertied, in addition to their other advantages, that of legislative influence; only an age warped by proprietary mania can justify that. Parliaments should be a virtual replica of the people's frame of mind. Whatever they desire and crave, whatever foolish and wise, beautiful and ugly seethes and surges within them, the people's duly reconstituted representation should express. And reason will prevail, necessity will emerge victorious!" In a very few years the optimism would be tempered by bitter experience, and Eisner would realize that progress toward social justice could not be linear across time, rather that social justice would derive only from a new dispensation.

A cordial letter from Alfred Kerr evinces the effect Eisner's pseudonymous writings were having in the capital.¹⁵ Kerr, who in the 1920s became counterpoint to Herbert Ihering, Brecht's chief proponent, had studied together with Eisner under Meyer and Schmidt. Through trenchant reviews for the arts serials and press, Kerr was rapidly establishing himself as one of Germany's eminent theater critics. On 25 November 1893 he wrote to his former classmate to exchange news and ask a favor. He reported that he had attained his doctorate; he knew that Eisner had left Germanics, wondered if political economy was now Eisner's field of study at Marburg, and inquired as to future plans. His request was at once simple and unusual: "A lady in my acquaintance (I do not dissemble when I say she is a 'sensitive' woman) has fallen in love with one of your Sperans articles (which I find understandable) and asks that I deliver the head of the author, not like Herod in uncultivated times, rather with all the comfort of the modern age, in a photograph." Kerr's letter must have found Eisner preoccupied, for on the twenty-second Lisbeth had borne a son, called Reinhard.¹⁶

In the same week a remark addressed to August Bebel, leader of the Social Democratic delegation in the Reichstag, by Prussian finance minister Johannes Miquel drew a fanciful response from Eisner in his review of a nonexistent book.¹⁷ As a twenty-year-old student during the Revolution of 1848, Miquel sympathized with the Left and corresponded with Marx. He changed his colors to become a leader of the National Liberals and served the party as a deputy in three national parliaments—Prussian,

Confederation, and Reich—before Wilhelm II named him to a ministry. In equal parts idealist, realist, and intriguer, Miquel achieved a longevity that his adversaries could but envy. He outlasted Bismarck by urging Wilhelm to eschew confrontation with hostile elements in the bourgeois parties and espouse instead a “policy of inclusion” (Sammelpolitik). “The great task at present,” he wrote in 1890, “is, without prejudice or embarrassment because of past battles, to gather together all the elements that support the state and thereby to prepare for the perhaps unavoidable battle against the Social Democratic movement, which is often misunderstood and still almost always underestimated.”¹⁸

On 27 November 1893 Miquel promised Bebel before the Reichstag that he would write a book someday containing a criticism, drawn from his own experience, of socialism’s basic premise. Seizing upon this announcement, Eisner declared that having seen the manuscript, he offered an assessment. “Herr Dr. Miquel has written a kind of biographical novel in this book. It is an imposing pamphlet against his youth, indeed against youth in general, it is a polemic against fantastic yearning and rapturous hope. Never before has an author intoned with such fearless audacity: youth is a vice that must be surmounted.” Proceeding from Miquel’s belief that man’s longing tends not to commonality but rather to individual wealth as a validation of self-worth, Eisner pronounced Miquel’s novel similar in theme to Keller’s *Der grüne Heinrich* (Green Henry), a rambling account of a young man’s struggle to find himself—he never does, but he gets rich in the process.

Eisner praises the work’s style, comparing it to the national finance code in brilliance. He assigns it the title *Green Johnny*, in recognition of its biographical elements, and prints an excerpted chapter, “Change of Fortune,” in which the young protagonist realizes the true purpose of life. He acquires an account book and turns in self-recrimination from the study of the great revolts of history and his correspondence with rabble-rousers. The transformation is complete when a copy of Radical Party leader Eugen Richter’s *Sozialdemokratische Zukunftsbilder* (Social Democratic Visions of the Future) falls into his hands; from it he learns that poverty and misery are merely manifestations of one’s own pessimism. Johnny has beheld God, His name is Rothschild, and the gospel is “free competition.” He turns his back on his old friends to dedicate himself to the unfettered pursuit of self-worth.

On 31 December Eisner’s retrospective on the closing year appeared in the *General-Anzeiger*. He concluded that “the world yearns for new forms, new ideas, new systems” and that the point had been reached where it was time to take bearings “in order to blaze new trails.”¹⁹

“The Second,” published 6 January 1894 in *Das Magazin für Litteratur*, dealt with another leading politician, Chancellor Caprivi, but in a more favorable light than Miquel had been presented.²⁰ The essay’s title refers to Caprivi’s unenviable position as the empire’s second chancellor. Comparison with his predecessor was inescapable, yet Caprivi’s harshest critics were those of his own Junker caste who believed his trade policies afforded them too little protection. The detractors took greatest exception to the chancellor’s view of the state as guarantor of the common good—a view Eisner regarded as enlightened beyond any expectation. In a speech that won him the undying malice of his brethren, Caprivi remarked: “Economic interests are always based more or less on egoism . . . whereas the state places demands on the willingness of its citizens to make sacrifices, on their idealism. The more the parties become entwined in economic life and its interests, the more it must be government’s duty to represent the more ideal interests.”

Perspicacious and circumspect, frank and forthright, colored with a tinge of “ideological liberalism,” Caprivi had a distinct flaw in the eyes of his cavaliers: he was not Bismarck, he lacked Bismarck’s resourcefulness. “It is delightful indeed,” Eisner quipped, “to look on, for example, as a Bavarian baron who, by hanging a sign at the gate to his palace grounds, bars entrance to ‘dogs and Jews’ brusquely demands . . . the Reichskanzler to be resourceful.” A personality cult had emerged after Bismarck’s retirement that ascribed to him the grand design to a host of triumphs that were in fact merely the workings of history. Thus it was that a man who was more honorable, thoughtful, and devoted to serving the whole people than was his predecessor was doomed to stand in his shadow, a fate Caprivi himself recognized.²¹

Upon the appearance of a new weekly, the *Mittwochsblatt für unsere vaterländische Gemeinsamkeit* (Wednesday Paper for Our National Community), put out by Moritz von Egidy as “complement to the dailies of all present-day parties,” Eisner commended the editor’s idealism and desire to effect a reconciliation between society’s dissonant factions.²² The effort to create social harmony and prosperity through reason and beneficence was reminiscent of New Lanark, the industrial commune established by British utilitarian socialist Robert Owen. How starkly Owen’s view of man clashed with that of his Prussian contemporary Friedrich von Gentz, who wondered how the masses were to be ruled if they became comfortable and independent! The Junker invariably saw his own dominion threatened by others’ success. Demonstrating that his Kant was tempered now by Marx, Eisner rejected Egidy’s premise and urged the former Prussian officer swayed

by religious conviction to choose a side, for “truly there is no reconciliation between them and us.”

In early March Eisner appended a personal note to an article on political guile: his infant son, whose eyes were larger than his mouth, looked “as if he believed in a world of great deeds and great reason, in a human existence full of purity and truth, happiness and goodness.”²³ A few months later a horrible crime of despair at a Berlin residence that shocked the most inured reporters caused the new father to reflect on the human toll of class conflict.²⁴ A master housepainter named Seeger, ruined by a swindle in the building trade, killed his wife, four children, and himself. In the tragedy of the housepainter, Eisner read also the dilemma of an entire subclass. As an independent artisan, Seeger was “a lesser entrepreneur ground under by the ups and downs of the capitalistic mechanism.” His meager livelihood depended on work subcontracted by a greater entrepreneur, who in turn prospered or suffered according to the caprice of the market. Having witnessed his own father’s business woes, Eisner knew firsthand the specter of insolvency and displacement, “the unspeakably sad, lifeless misery of the sinking petite bourgeoisie.” For the independent tradesman the thing he feared most, displacement into the proletariat, actually would be a step up. The working class was imbued with an optimism foreign to the lower middle class. The belief in the inevitability of labor’s triumph represented a “joyful ideal and a hope born of faith, or even, if one prefers this expression, a new religion.”

In June 1894 Paul Bader and his associates changed the name of the *General-Anzeiger* to the *Hessische Landeszeitung* (The Hessian Regional Paper), a banner recalling the title of the socialist tract *Der hessische Landbote* (The Hessian Herald), published by dramatist Georg Büchner in nearby Gießen exactly sixty years earlier. Philipp Scheidemann, who over the course of a quarter century would rise from printer to Social Democratic prime minister in the first government of the Weimar Republic, was then a compositor in Marburg, served as district chairman of the German Printers’ Union, and contributed occasional articles to the *Hessische Landeszeitung*. In his memoirs Scheidemann writes of his association with Eisner and Bader, neither of whom were party members at the time: “These two men are due my great gratitude, for they led me to places that up to then had been virtually closed off: they opened the doors to literature and kindled my appreciation for diverse fine arts.” With Eisner he discussed Gerhart Hauptmann’s naturalist play *Die Weber* (*The Weavers*) and began to attend Cohen’s lectures. Scheidemann felt at home in Marburg and refers to the six years there as his brightest.²⁵ The Eisners’ roots in Marburg deepened with the death of Lisbeth’s

father, the painter August Hendrich, at age fifty-four on Christmas Eve in Eberswalde.²⁶ The next month Eisner joined the Marburg Civic Association, an affiliation followed by membership in the local Comenius Society, an organization dedicated to cultivating the pansophist principles of the Moravian theologian and educator.²⁷

In late winter and early spring 1895 Eisner became increasingly concerned about encroachments on intellectual freedom. For journalists in Wilhelmine Germany the threat of jail was ever a grim reality, and now the Reichstag contrived anew to muzzle particularly the Social Democratic press. The Center Party had introduced a measure to expand the purview of the sedition bill of the previous December to include atheism as a form of subversion punishable by imprisonment, “whereby, apparently,” Eisner quipped in an article for *Das Magazin für Litteratur*, “the soul should be given opportunity to convince itself somewhat earlier of its immortality.” He invoked Spinoza’s call for total freedom of thought and speech, issued in 1670, against this current assault on intellectual life and warned against entrusting the national conscience to a judiciary composed of “old boys from the dueling fraternities” who, by virtue of passing an exam or two, now ruled absolutely over the fate of others. Noting that the courts had interpreted the *lèse-majesté* law broadly, to the discomfort of even the solidly bourgeois press, he demanded “complete freedom of every artistic, scholarly, and journalistic expression of opinion that is brought to heel by *none*.”²⁸ In a spoof edition of the *Hessische Landeszeitung* dated 26 February, the editors announced that rather than continue to publish an independent newspaper, they would convert it forthwith into an organ of whichever party was most closely aligned with the government and eschew henceforth “any opposition, any criticism, any expression of dissatisfaction” in order to concentrate on reporting market prices and temperature readings. On 7 April the *Hessische Landeszeitung* ran anonymously an article in which Eisner traced the history of laws aimed at stifling criticism of the government and preserving status quo.²⁹

The political editor took time for belletristic and personal pursuits. As “E.” he wrote a minute description of the landscape and inhabitants of the Schwalm, a region of Hesse bisected by its namesake river.³⁰ Its residents differed markedly in physical appearance, manner, dress, and custom from their Hessian neighbors, prompting the author to venture that they were of Magyar rather than Germanic descent. The 29 September issue of the *Hessische Landeszeitung* printed Reinhard Fern’s musings on the attribution of Shakespeare’s works to his contemporary Bacon.³¹ A month later the Eisners announced by engraved card “the joyful birth of a healthy girl” on 23 October.³² As Ilse Hedwig and her brother Reinhard grew,

their father savored the pedagogue's pleasure in parenting and insisted that the children be allowed to enjoy their natural freedom. He recorded tenderly how his young son wept over a dead crow and attempted to revive it by pressing crumbs of cake to its beak.³³

The collegiality of Bader's staff, so different from what Eisner had experienced in Frankfurt, contributed to his sense of well-being in Marburg. Johann Becker, typesetter for the *Hessische Landeszeitung*, had written for the paper some peasant tales in the local dialect. Favorably impressed, Eisner urged Becker to submit his work to one of the national literary journals, but the humble typesetter declined. Acting in concert with Frau Becker, Eisner obtained the manuscript of Becker's "Next in Line" and entered it in a contest announced in the 28 June 1896 issue of *Die Hilfe* (Help), Friedrich Naumann's Berlin weekly. A prize of 120 marks was to be awarded for a story realistically depicting "the life of the little people in the city or country." Some fifty years later Becker's son remembered vividly Eisner's joy as he burst into the household to announce that the story had taken first prize.³⁴

The prevalent mood at the paper, despite a flurry of libel suits, was one of indomitable mirth, for Eisner brought to his editorial duties the same wit that animated the Sperans articles. When a semiliterate vegetable handler named Paul Zörb confided to Eisner a desire to see his name printed in the paper, the editor offered to accommodate him everyday. By agreement Zörb allowed his name to be listed on the masthead as the responsible party, while Eisner promised that the paper would pay any damages awarded by the court and smart money for time spent in jail. Whenever Zörb drew his brief confinements, the *Hessische Landeszeitung* hired three carriages—two for the Seven Ravens, a popular band, the garlanded third for Zörb alone—to convey the feted vegetable dealer from the editorial offices through the streets of Marburg to jail. When his time was up, the same show was made to fetch him back. The townsfolk revelled in the spectacle.³⁵

In July 1896 Dr. Richard Wrede, a journalist trained in law, succeeded Karl Schneidt as editor of *Die Kritik* (The Critique), a weekly devoted to "public life." Wrede had contracted Eisner to provide a regular commentary to lead off each issue. Because of the author's remove from the metropolis, his thoughts took the general title *Provinzialbriefe* (Provincial Letters). For the new forum Eisner adopted a new pseudonym, Tat-Twam, from the Sanskrit *tat twam asi*: you are thus.³⁶ Like the Sperans pieces, the *Briefe* addressed in the main "political events of the day." For almost two years Tat-Twam goaded the worthies until his identity became known and he was made to suffer the consequences. He

addressed his first letter to Wrede, speculating on why the editor had chosen a “poor provincial” to instruct the Berliner on affairs in Berlin.³⁷ “Perhaps you are even inclined to the view that one can distinguish the superficial and essential more easily from a distance.” In any case there was much to be said for “the influence the lowing of oxen and the cackling of geese exerts on the self-purification of one’s reason.” In the body of this first letter Tat-Twam surveyed the chicanery of the Reichstag in skirting the issue of women’s rights, preferring instead to extend protection to overhunted rabbit populations.³⁸

An article that registers Eisner’s divergence from Cohen’s evolutionary camp, “Out!” was the second piece for *Die Kritik*.³⁹ Its title derived from an incident at the adjournment of the Reichstag for summer recess. When one of the forty-eight Social Democratic deputies remained seated during the customary salute to the kaiser, supporters of the monarchy shouted their abuse in the monosyllable “raus,” a command used to banish beggars from the gate or dogs from the kitchen. Beyond being within his rights as a citizen, Eisner argued, Deputy Schmidt had demonstrated good taste in not making a sarcastic obeisance to an institution that Social Democracy vowed to abolish. To hail perfunctorily the man who constantly denigrated the party as “the enemy within” could be judged the most egregious *lèse majesté*, smacking of mockery. Eisner wondered as to the future protocol, for given the ineluctable growth of the party, it was only a matter of time before Social Democrats would control the Reichstag. Of immense significance is his statement: “It is not our concern whether in the meantime repressive measures interrupt this development. Our constitution, flawed in its most fundamental principle, has no cushion to soften and render harmless the clash of forces. Their final resolution is brutal conflict. Before that conflict, though, a state of affairs is conceivable in which the president of the Reichstag closes the sessions with a salute to revolutionary Social Democracy, liberator of peoples.” In Germany, he observed, the adversarial forces marshaled themselves less into the opposing camps generally associated with class conflict—“capitalism and collectivism, bourgeois society and social state, property and communism, liberal individualism and socialism”—than beneath banners of monarchy and democracy. The state prosecutors whose job it was to redress offense to the crown doubtless scrutinized the second of the *Provinzialbriefe* and clamored to know its author’s identity.

It could well be argued that the day on which Eisner definitively cast his lot with the party was 8 August 1896. On that date *Die Kritik* printed his thoughts on the meeting of the Socialist International in London.⁴⁰ At a peace rally in Hyde Park one of the SPD representatives, Paul Singer,

said that whereas the bourgeois states had formed the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria, and Italy and the Dual Alliance of France and Russia, the workers of the world formed a single united front, a league of one, to defeat the bourgeois state. Singer's declaration, Eisner wrote, had the ring of prophecy, for eventually "by the law of economic development we will effect humanity's mightiest ethical achievement with the host of recruits turned out by class conflict, the League of Culture." The triumph would come in the twentieth century after thorough, systematic preparation. Social Democracy, Eisner explained, was grounded in three premises: the ethics of community, the economics of collectivism, and the tactics of class conflict. Of the three, the party had come to grips with only the last, winning for itself an estimable measure of political power. In its prerevolutionary stage the party would have to use every tool at hand to educate the worker for his historical moment. But inevitably, Eisner warned, "the future will not be born of rational argument but in wild battles with victory and destruction." Only then could a collective community of equality emerge that would redefine human relations. He urged the intellectually and ethically whole who wanted to have a hand in shaping the future to make a commitment. "We must flee to Social Democracy even if we do not share its economic and tactical premises. It is the only refuge of all idealists. . . . And even if they themselves had no further merit, these Social Democrats, than that they are organizing the masses, training them in clear thinking and thus creating from dark chaos, with its unpredictable explosions, an ordered world coursing in a regular orbit . . . , this would suffice to sympathize with them. . . . One will never have the need to combat them, at most to reform them." He counseled the party to repudiate anarchism, a romantic holdover at odds with scientific socialism, and took for signs of maturity its work to further women's emancipation and public education and its recognition of the benefits of parliamentary participation to win gains in these areas.

Yet no sooner had Eisner commended the party on its efforts to improve education than he was embarrassed by its representatives in London and felt compelled, earlier than he had expected, to reform its policy.⁴¹ On the fifth day of the International congress the Germans voted against a resolution, modeled on their own Erfurt Program of 1891, calling for universal, free, public education from kindergarten to university for every capable student, when Labourite Keir Hardie, himself an autodidact, proposed that "capable" be struck from the wording. Appropriating the term denoting the liberal economic philosophy of *laissez-faire*, Hardie denounced the restriction as intellectual "Manchesterism." No one who desired education, he argued, should be excluded on the basis of ability.

To do so would be elitist and contrary to the essence of socialism. The Germans considered Hardie's reasoning a misguided "exaggeration of the principle of equality." Eisner agreed, though, with the British delegation: "Even if one eliminates the capitalistic restraints and arrives at the so-called natural selection of capacity, then a new and hardly preferable source of injustice and repression is created in the process. The concept of ability does not end in an intelligence test. In the colossal multiplicity of talents it is by no means the most admirable qualities that win out in the intellectual competition tied to scholastic organizations. . . . The free play of forces must never be the principle for social organizations and institutions; it is justifiable solely as individual motivation." Despite the opposition of the German delegation, the resolution was adopted by a vote of fourteen to six.

Earlier in the spring Eisner had strolled with Cohen through Marburg and listened as the professor told of his recent visit to Berlin. There a friend, a Social Democratic Reichstag deputy, had taken him to a performance at the German Theater of Hauptmann's *Weber*, a play he detested. Why, Cohen asked, did people consider Hauptmann's drama great art? He expected an argument; Eisner admired Hauptmann and, indeed, had corresponded with him. To Cohen's astonishment, Eisner was pensive and then answered: "If you expected great art embodying the socialist worldview, then you had to be disappointed by Gerhart Hauptmann." Naturalism had served its purpose by dashing convention and freeing letters from the stultifying propriety and prudishness of the bourgeois salon, and Hauptmann was unsurpassed in his ability to translate contemporary attitudes into credible characters whose speech seamlessly matched their station, but there was no one at present with the depth and vision to convey to mankind in sublime measure and style the universality of their ideal, no one to shape "the mighty, affirming art that forges the new cosmos from the twilight of the gods."

In his capacity as political editor, Eisner followed closely the Social Democratic Party congress in early fall at Gotha in the neighboring state of Saxony. A topic of protracted debate was the party's bearing toward modern literature, an issue raised by criticism charging Edgar Steiger, editor of *Die Neue Welt* (New World), the party's cultural and literary weekly, with indecency for printing unexpurgated naturalist texts. His chief critics were Reichstag deputy and occasional poet Karl Frohme and the *Hamburger Echo*, a major party daily. A number of influential delegates questioned from an ideological perspective the inclusion of naturalist works in Social Democratic journals. Hermann Molkenbuhr remarked that with their graphic depictions of the misery of the poor their effect

was depressing rather than liberating, inspiring thoughts of suicide, and Wilhelm Liebknecht, the aging editor of *Vorwärts*, pointed out that Hauptmann made no pretense of being socialist. Steiger argued effectively that whatever the naturalists' faults might be, theirs was the only writing of current relevance to the workers' movement. Party chairman Bebel and congress president Paul Singer effected a compromise whereby *Neue Welt* would continue to print the work of the avant-garde, but language that could be considered offensive to women readers would be carefully edited. The irony was weaker then in that virtually no bourgeois journal would print what Steiger had run.

The conversation with Cohen and the proceedings at Gotha were impetus to a seminal essay in which Eisner revised and consolidated his thinking on art and society and enunciated a political aesthetic. It was published in late October 1896 in *Das Magazin für Litteratur*.⁴² The Gotha debate was more significant than most of its participants realized, he wrote, because "it concerns not just the education of Social Democracy, hence the proletariat, the masses, as to art; it concerns equally the shaping of art to the masses." The day-long debate encapsulated a decade of controversy in bourgeois circles over naturalism, and the issue was resolved quickly in a "victory for reason" over philistinism. But the question remained as to whether the naturalists, whose relentlessly realistic and graphic depictions of human misery now had official party sanction, furthered the ultimate goals of the movement. "An icy shudder ripples through the delicate bones of our literary mavens at the mere thought that one, even in jest, could dare require writing by party line." But an ascendant class striving nobly for the realization of its life-affirming ideal could not be content with the "tired resignation and arid pessimism" at the heart of naturalism.

Germany's most modern literature was for the masses no more than a bridge to an ultimately committed, class-conscious art heralding the "golden age of humanity," the Social Democratic vision. "Where a great culture movement crystallizes in a party—and the modern form of every culture movement is the party—there too art must be party art. Here the party is no refundable ticket but rather the essence of every progressive intellect. The poet who stands within the culture movement cannot be anything other than a party man. . . . The party of the future must also engender the poet of the future." The classical poet of the future would be he who could dramatize Marx. In the absence of that titan, Eisner determined to shape his own creative writing to the end he envisioned.⁴³ On 3 November *Vorwärts* took note of Sperans's comments and printed excerpts from the "worthy essay."

Eisner was deeply impressed with the openness and ingenuousness of the proceedings at Gotha. The way the Social Democrats conducted their business he likened to the new architecture that left superstructure visible. Although debate was at times heated and division sharp, the delegates behaved like members of a greater family, addressing each other with the familiar *du*. Their head was Paul Singer, who presided like one of the “Jewish patriarchs, almost extinct now, who with iron will, loving heart, and wise discretion brought together all members in their guardianship each Sabbath, however hostile some individuals cared to be.” Perhaps recalling Bruno Wille’s break with the party, Eisner identified as a breed of recalcitrant the students in their “political puberty,” convinced of their own superior intellect and reason, who, when their point of view was rejected by their sturdy comrades, broke ranks and bolted, unwilling to undertake the tedious task of winning their opponents over time: “One simply has to have the democratic belief in the reason of the masses, and it solidifies only in later years when one has learned to abstract and knows how to separate appearance from reality.” The young, bourgeois intellectuals’ impatience was stoked, Eisner surmised, by the assurance of a privileged position in the existing state.

Of particular interest to Eisner, journalist and editor, was the party’s changing view of the role of its own press. The venerable Wilhelm Liebknecht, editor in chief of *Vorwärts* and, at seventy, one of the last socialist leaders of Marx’s generation, was criticized during debate as incompetent—a charge with which Eisner ruefully concurred. “The same party that in theory champions large-scale production founded nothing but puny, small-scale operations,” local papers so poor in quality that their intended readers preferred the superior products of the enemy camp. Recently, though, the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (Leipzig People’s Newspaper) and the *Sächsische Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Saxon Workers’ Newspaper) had shown how good a party paper could be and strengthened the demand for a national daily befitting Europe’s premier socialist party. Eisner reckoned that the delegates at Gotha had set for themselves a herculean labor in overhauling their press, but the effort would benefit both the party in particular and German journalism in general.⁴⁴

Having proclaimed his admiration for Social Democracy, Eisner now took aim at a rival movement, Friedrich Naumann’s National Social Union (Verein der Nationalsozialen), which had grown out of Stöcker’s Christian Social Labor Party.⁴⁵ At their recently concluded meeting in Erfurt, where “the Freiburg professor Max Weber cheerfully preached the gospel of a radical individualism,” the National Social adherents stopped short of forming themselves into a party, opting instead for the

title “union,” and showing thereby, Eisner gibed, their “slight tendency toward coffee club.” Its chief constituents were theologians ashamed of a church with no social conscience, social reformers put off by the rigid constraints of Marxist thought, bourgeois malcontents too sensitive for party discipline, the “lost sons” of National Liberal chief Rudolf von Bennigsen, refugees from a host of failed causes—an assembly of Hamlets incapable of forming their critical resolve.

However highly one regarded Friedrich Naumann personally, however greatly one supported a domestic policy centered on bettering the workers’ lot, one nonetheless had to reject the National Social movement as neither fish nor fowl: the two descriptors were mutually exclusive. To seek to improve living conditions in Germany and elevate the national standard of living by advocating colonial expansion with its attendant militarism was akin to refurbishing one’s rooms and then setting the house on fire. “In reality, no radical, domestic social reform is possible without concerted international efforts in the political and economic realm.” Moreover, Eisner prophesied, imperial adventurism would lead inevitably to conflict in Europe and fatal competition with Asia and America. “If these National Socials are really serious about social salvation, why do they seek to intrude on the preserve of the party that through tireless work has finally become a power with which the ruling powers must reckon?” By supporting Social Democracy, Eisner concluded, Naumann and his followers could accomplish far more than they ever would on their own.

The contagion of colonialism had spread even into the Social Democratic Party, infecting particularly the trade-union ranks. Party theorist and functionary Eduard Bernstein, who argued for a revision of Marx’s hypotheses on the development and decline of capitalist society, emerged as a leading spokesman for “social imperialism.” The controversy, which over the course of a decade would split the party, had its roots in the economic boom of the mid- and late-1890s. After the depression that followed Bismarck’s dismissal, the second half of the decade was a period of prosperity in which the German worker’s standard of living began to rival that of his English comrade. Interest groups such as the Colonial League and the Pan-German League sought to convince the worker of his stake in *Weltpolitik*: if Germany could overtake Britain in the race for colonies, German industry would profit from the acquisition of raw materials and new markets, and the German worker would share the rewards.⁴⁶ As the trade unions’ membership doubled between 1896 and 1900, exceeding 600,000, so too did their influence in the party.⁴⁷

From the outset Kurt Eisner opposed imperialism. In a series of articles he lashed out at both the theory and practice of colonial aggrandizement.

In “The Bleeding Heart,” the eighth of the *Provinzialbriefe*, he assumes the persona and blustering, jingoist style of an imperial enthusiast railing against the overly cultivated sensitivity, the “ethical diabetes,” of those who decried the maltreatment of natives at the hands of German colonists and troops.⁴⁸ He characterizes the vanguard of imperialism as “the best men of German stock, who risked their lives for crown and country by dutifully impressing Africa’s Negro brutes for the good of the fatherland.” The detractors of Germany’s colonial mission, led by August Bebel, with their lies alleging brutality, corruption, and abuse of women were, of course, in the pay of the English. The jingoist journalist presents an indigenous folktale, purportedly collected by a colonial governor, to illustrate the African natives’ need for the civilizing influence of German culture. The tale’s principal character is Bwana Bill, a wealthy and powerful prince served by a host of ministers and purveyors whom he pays by taking from the general populace half of everything produced. Since Bill’s entourage hails him as a god of sorts and the law condemns his critics to death, the people languish in subjection. The analogy could be lost on no one.

A month later Eisner questioned the motives behind a propaganda campaign urging the nation to make war on Turkey over atrocities against Armenian Christians, thereby abetting the tsar’s cause when Russian persecution of Jews matched the Turkish atrocities.⁴⁹ Citing a pamphlet that demanded “Germany must lay its strong and mighty hand on Asia Minor” to save Christendom from the Turkish barbarians, Eisner reminded his readers that Islam’s august achievements in scholarship, the arts, and science had schooled Christian Europe of the Middle Ages. The atrocities committed in Russia and the German colonies voided any moral right to rebuke the Turks. “The humanitarian ideal is long since foreign to the Christian states. How can they civilize Turks in the name of Christianity?”

Eisner believed that as a result of the imperial rivalries developing between Germany and the democracies of Western Europe, the monarchy was moving toward closer relations with the Russian crown—a development he regarded as potentially catastrophic. He became convinced that the monarchy itself was the root of the nation’s evils and began to write more vituperatively against Wilhelm and the emperor’s total lack of accountability to his subjects. It proved a fateful course.

DICTATORIAL MEGALOMANIA: LÈSE MAJESTÉ AND PLÖTZENSEE PRISON (1896–1898)

IN 1894 LUDWIG QUIDDE, editor of the Imperial *Reichstagsakten* (Reichstag Record) in Munich and former head of the Royal Prussian Historical Institute in Rome, published in *Die Gesellschaft* an article titled “Caligula: A Study of Roman Dictatorial Megalomania.” It was reprinted the same year by Wilhelm Friedrich of Leipzig, Eisner’s publisher, as a twenty-page pamphlet. Although the article purported to portray the notorious Roman despot in his madness, the reader readily recognized it as a deftly veiled tract against the “personal regime” of Wilhelm II. Convicted of *Majestätsbeleidigung*, or lèse majesté, Quidde lost his position as editor and was jailed for three months in 1896.¹ Typically, however, the law was brought to bear on less prominent critics of princes. In the 1 February 1896 issue of *Die Kritik*, a review of news items of the past week compiled by Mephisto deplored that a twenty-year-old worker had been sentenced to two years’ imprisonment for shouting “Hurrah for anarchy!” while Wilhelm made an inspection tour of a warship under construction at the Hamburg shipyard of Blohm and Voß.²

The attorney Max Falkenfeld of Fürstenwalde wrote in the 13 September issue that the concept of lèse majesté was a product of the late Roman Empire, which had also endowed the word “Byzantine” with its modern, negative connotation.³ He looked back to when the great Friedrich II ordered that handbills against him posted at riders’ eye level be lowered that the populace might better read them. Friedrich’s Berlin was a capital of the Enlightenment; in the present, Falkenfeld lamented, a “mystical twilight rules the minds.” Every German citizen except the sovereign, he observed, could choose whether or not to seek legal redress for defamation. The sovereign alone had no say in the matter; the law and the state prosecutor relieved him of that right. Even more ironically, in cases of lèse majesté the accused was forbidden from arguing the merit