Introduction to Scenes from *NAPOLEON OR THE HUNDRED DAYS*.

The best scenes in *Napoleon or the Hundred Days* depict the confused state of French life before the Emperor's final return, and no scene does this so brilliantly as the one with which the play begins. A cross fire of acrid remarks defines the frustrated hopes, aspirations, and ambitions that played their part in precipitating the French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath. Grabbe's principal spokesmen are two displaced ex-soldiers named Vitry and Chassecoeur, who make it perfectly clear that they live on memories of the recent past—though their reminiscences encompass much more than glory: an unforgettable point made by Chassecoeur is that all pictures of war that neglect the actuality of the suffering moment are fake. The first scene has many such striking observations, and they must be taken into account in any discussion of Grabbe's attitude toward war, an attitude that struck Hebbel as so adolescent that he called Grabbe "The Noncommissioned Officer." Vitry and Chassecoeur are not alone in their sense of dislocation: it is shared by the Old Milliner, who has lost three sons in the bloodbath that began in 1789; by the Old Officer, who for military service across the globe has been rewarded with dismissal; by the lawyer Duchesne, whom the dynamics of history leave completely bewildered—how can twenty-five years of radical progress be nullified by a few lines of newspaper print? Even aristocrats like the Marquis von Hauterive find the time out of joint: a true nobility of blood has been corrupted by an influx of commonness. All of this is given a firm cynical lining by the exclamations of various bystanders whom Grabbe employs in a fashion we now would not hesitate to call Brechtian.

When Grabbe finally brings Napoleon on stage, it is to show an exile who regrets having interposed himself between the momentum of the French Revolution and a future prepared for by the unremitting thrusts of the guillotine. Apparently he was not great enough to usher in the golden age. But it takes no more than an account of the demoralized situation in France to bring out the chauvinist and Führer in Napoleon: "As if nations could be weighed and counted! The world is most fortunate when the greatest nation rules all, powerful enough to maintain everywhere itself as well as its laws—and who is greater than my Frenchmen? . . . Europe, that childish old man, is in need of a rod of correction . . . and who could brandish it better than I?" In the second scene here given, Napoleon finally arrives in Paris, where the mob holds sway murderously while Louis XVIII totters. Directing the killing is an executioner named Jouve, who would as readily decapitate an emperor as a king, but who calls on Parisians to light up their windows in Napoleon's
honor when the latter goes by in all his military potency. On what this scene implies about Grabbe’s thinking on the relationship of history and revolution, there is a divergence of opinion similar to that associated with a Brecht play like *The Days of the Commune*: Grabbe, like Brecht, is credited by some with knowing that, in the final analysis, revolutions can be betrayed but not stopped—does not Jouve say that the caps of the Jacobins will outlast all else? To which one might reply that this same Jouve tells the crowd to cut off the Master Tailor’s ten fingers simply for the fun of it—and directly after the gruesome deed Grabbe announces through Vitry that the Revolution was made by the same types who are now sorry the tailor had only ten fingers. For that matter, what was Grabbe’s point in composing this scene except to demonstrate once more that behind the symbolic facades we erect between ourselves and reality there is little to respect. Napoleon comes home to a land where the Jouves will always be an essential part of the landscape. That contempt for the mass of men which Grabbe made no effort to hide in his letters is very much on display here: the crowd can as easily be manipulated by the opportunistic Master Tailor—who feels the Emperor’s return will be good for his trade—as it can be mesmerized into an instrument of murder by demagogues like Jouve who encourage men to express their basic nature.