The Austrian attention to scenarios of victimhood can be put in a (now somewhat clichéd) national modern lineage devoted to the bleak side of human nature. Michael Haneke certainly places himself in this tradition, particularly with his literary adaptations of somber twentieth-century works—ranging from Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Three Paths to the Lake* (*Drei Wege zum See*, 1976), Joseph Roth’s *Rebellion* (*Die Rebellion*, 1993) to Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (*Das Schloß*, 1997), and Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher* (*La Pianiste*, 2001). These films have garnered him a series of epithets ranging from “prophetic” to “eschatological” in feuilleton and academic writing, and the tentatively optimistic end to *Code Unknown* in the last chapter diverges from the dark worldview underpinning his oeuvre to date. Christoph Ransmayr, another award-winning countryman, also presents us with dire scenarios in his novels and short prose. The well-known German literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki has even called Ransmayr a canon-worthy “apocalyptist,” albeit one who “praises existence.”¹ Like Haneke, Ransmayr is concerned with victimhood as a master discourse. In his novels in particular, society is an arena of competition, mutual exclusion, and tension between undifferentiated victims and indifferent perpetrators. Like the director, the author has managed to sublate the specifically Austrian component of this concern into more abstract articulations—and for this he has been celebrated on the international circuit.² In the way in which Haneke occasionally looks to a transcendent sphere for answers to societal frictions (in his excursions into a Pascal-inflected mysticism), Ransmayr projects earthly chaos into a cosmic realm, only to find it reflected back. The writer finds the heavens depopulated, and mankind becomes a victim of physical and chemical forces of decay. In his writings, we find a decidedly this-worldly eschatology, which moves from the minutiae of human life embedded in history to the larger natural forces governing that very existence.

F. Naqvi, *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood* © Fatima Naqvi 2007
Such thinking devoted to ‘last things’ has profound implications for the rhetoric of victimhood and the politics of victimization I have been discussing. In this chapter, I will ask whether a shift toward an apocalyptic Weltanschauung, privileging the destructive forces of nature, amounts to a disavowal of history and historical responsibility. Does the completely asymmetrical difference that is posited between man and nature—which cannot be explained with reference either to vertical or horizontal differences (chapter 1)—make a mockery of human agency? Are human beings, aware of a cosmic indifference to their existence, victims per se and thus unable to position themselves historically?

I

In 2001, Ransmayr wrote an introductory essay to a volume entitled *Anselm Kiefer: The Seven Heavenly Palaces 1973–2001 (Anselm Kiefer: die sieben HimmelsPaläste, 1973–2001).* What the art historian Markus Brüderlin saw as a “congenial” correspondence between the author’s literary predilections and the artist’s apocalyptic scenarios turns out to be more than a meeting of like minds (9). “The Unborn or Anselm Kiefer and the Tracts of the Heavens” (“Der Ungeborene oder Die Himmelsareale des Anselm Kiefer”), the piece that resulted from Ransmayr’s visit to Kiefer’s studio in Southern France, continues Ransmayr’s literary preoccupation with human victimization and powerlessness by way of a summary of Kiefer’s development since the late 1960s. Numerous thematic allusions to and stylistic repetitions from the author’s novels punctuate “The Unborn.” Both men, Ransmayr’s essay insinuates, interpret our life in *mediis rebus,* they do so in view of life’s restricted duration and an imminent, violent end.\(^4\) Heedful of mankind’s transience and fragility, they seek a sense of cosmic belonging, where the vicissitudes of historical reality meld with those of a natural apocalypse. They establish concordances with larger mystical goals, even while problematizing both the concordances and the goals themselves.

During the visit to Kiefer’s studio in Barjac near the Cévennes Mountains, Ransmayr progresses through the painter’s multi-acre compound like one of his errant protagonists moving through inhospitable fictional environs. Ransmayr’s literary terrains are always hostile, scarred by human intervention as well as geophysical forces. Invariably, these starkly physical worlds are drawing to their ends, and the hapless protagonists go down with them. In *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness (Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis, 1984)*, for example, the Triest-born Josef Mazzini reconstructs the travels of the Austro-Hungarian expedition to the North Pole in the 1870s and the ambivalent motivations for this quest. Mazzini becomes fascinated with this voyage. When he retraces the crew’s trials a hundred years later, however, he disappears in Spitzbergen, Norway. In