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# The Rhetoric of War and Peace: Peter Handke's 'Questioning While Weeping'

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The Rhetoric of War and Peace  
Scott Abbott

Peter Handke. *Unter Tränen fragend*. Frankfurt am Main. Suhrkamp. 2000. 158 pages. DM 36. ISBN 351841136-5.

*[The essay] rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy. . . . This kind of learning remains vulnerable to error, as does the essay as form; it has to pay for its affinity with open intellectual experience with a lack of security that the norm of established thought fears like death.* Theodor Adorno

Peter Handke's *Unter Tränen fragend* (Questioning while Weeping: Notes after the fact on two trips through Yugoslavia during the war, March and April 1999) is the latest of the Austrian author's books provoked by the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The series began in 1991 with *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land* (Departure of the Dreamer from the Ninth Country), an essay lamenting Slovenia's declaration of independence from the land of the "southern Slavs." As succession led to civil war and public opinion turned against the Serbs, Handke traveled in what had become Serbia to write *Eine*

*winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien (A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia, 1996) and Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise (A Summer's Addendum to a Wintry Journey, 1996). Handke's play, Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg (Voyage by Dugout or The Play of the Film of the War, 1999), set a fictional ten years after the war in Yugoslavia, explored the war in a different genre; and now, after the war in Kosovo and NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia, the travel essays that make up Questioning while Weeping have appeared. This is not to say that Yugoslavia has been Peter Handke's only obsession during the past decade. There have also been two novels, another play, a children's book, and a translation of a book of poetry. The Yugoslavia texts, however, for the most part first published in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, have entered into European public consciousness to an unprecedented degree, even for this often public and sometimes controversial author.*

*"It was principally because of the war," Handke writes in Justice for Serbia, "that I wanted to go to Serbia, into the country of the*

so-called aggressors. . . . I felt the need to travel into the Serbia that became, with every article, every commentary, every analysis, less recognizable and more worthy of study, more worthy, simply, of being seen.” Readings from *Justice for Serbia* to packed houses throughout Europe kept Peter Handke, if not the substance of his sentences and paragraphs, at the center of a political storm. Audience members repeatedly accused him of denying massacres at Srebrenica and elsewhere, and of traveling to a bucolic Serbia while war raged in Bosnia, questions raised in the text itself:

Yes, with each sentence I too have asked myself whether such a writing isn't obscene, ought even to be tabooed, forbidden – which made the writing journey adventurous in a different way, dangerous, often very depressing (believe me), and I learned what “between Scylla and Charybdis” means. Didn't the one who described the small deprivations (gaps between teeth) help to water down, to suppress, to conceal the great ones?

Finally, to be sure, I thought each time: but that's not the point. My work is of a different sort. To record the evil facts,

that's good. But something else is needed for a peace,  
something not less important than the facts.

In response to polemical attacks in many of the major European and American newspapers and magazines, Handke reminded readers in the introduction to the American, Spanish, French, and Italian translations of his essay, that he had written about his "journey through the country of Serbia exactly as I have always written my books, my literature: a slow, inquiring narration; every paragraph dealing with and narrating a problem, of representation, of form, of grammar – of aesthetic veracity; that has always been the case in what I have written, from the beginning to the final period."

In a political struggle about the rhetoric of war and peace, form and an inquiring narration are easily ignored. That is unfortunate, because narration is the major question of each of these texts. Why can't journalists covering the wars in Yugoslavia, Handke asks, tell a more complicated story? Why are their narrations so black-and-white, so certain, so absolute, so bellicose? Near the end of *Justice for Serbia*, the narrator admonishes himself, "the son of German," to

“pull out of this history that repeats every century, out of this disastrous chain, pull out into another story.”

In *A Summer's Addendum to a Wintry Journey*, Handke revisits many of the people and places of his initial journey, retelling, refiguring, revising his initial account: “that I began to reconsider my published sentences was rather a consequence of a comment by Olga.” There follows a trip into the Republika Srpska, to Višegrad and Srebrenica, that ends with questions: “And this is supposed to be a contemporary story? Who will read it these days – a story without villains who are enemies of humanity, without a stereotypical enemy?”

*Voyage by Dugout or The Play of the Film of the War* (its hotly and widely debated premiere in Vienna's Burgtheater on June 9, 1999, Claus Peymann director) features a casting call by two filmmakers, an American (essentially John Ford) and a Spaniard (Louis Buñel, in effect), who want to make a film of the war in Yugoslavia approximately a decade after it occurred. The directors discuss

narrative strategy, listen to the war stories of a local historian, an ex-journalist, three “internationals,” and others, and finally decide not to make the film. The final conversation between the filmmakers turns to the need for good translators to mitigate war: “During mutual insanity and hatred,” the John Ford character argues, “one side often laughs deep within itself. But the laughter never breaks the surface. Let’s have translators, for both sides – maybe exactly the same laughter exists inside the other.” The Buñel character agrees that “such a translator would be the antithesis of the Inquisition,” and then comments on the kind of (hi)story being constructed by the international “community”: “And this latter-day apocryphal horde, our patron, needs a single guilty person for this story and has itself taken the role of the hero.” History, the telling of history, flawed and sensationalist accounts of this Yugoslavian history – one of the characters unfurls Mark Danner’s series of articles in the *New York Review of Books* (seen in the play as simplistic and bombastic) – is the center around which Handke’s violent and sweet and troubling fantasy of a play circles.

The latest of Peter Handke's explorations into the language of war, *Questioning while Weeping*, continues the Quixotic attempt to present simple images in complex sentences from a country Handke believes has been deformed, misrepresented, and caricatured by the world press and by Western press agents. The book does not mention that two weeks before the first of his two visits to a Yugoslavia under bombardment by NATO planes, Handke renounced his membership in the Catholic Church and returned the ten thousand Marks awarded him in 1973 for Germany's Büchner Prize in protest of ecclesiastical and government support for the war.

Like the earlier books, *Questioning while Weeping* attempts to present images ("images still exist? The loss of images is not yet absolute?") from a Yugoslavia besieged "not only with cluster bombs and rockets but above all with 'context' and 'idea.'" The first trip is a quick one from Hungary to Belgrade and back, while the second one takes the author through Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia into Serbia, where Handke is taken to bombed factories and bridges and buildings by a government spokesman.

The book's title is drawn from an incident near the end of the second trip. An oncologist from a nearby hospital, a woman who has often traveled in the United States, joins the three travelers at their table and asks, with tears in her eyes, why her country is being bombed: "Are we really that guilty?" In a book about what Handke calls "verbal and iconic pornography," about the loss of language ("The first victim of war is truth? No, it is language."), this double motion, calling into question and weeping, is crucial. How will the author of the controversial *Justice for Serbia*, the famous writer greeted by Serbian television cameras when he arrives at the bombed Kragujevac auto assembly plant, the honored guest hosted by Yugoslavia's minister of culture, preserve his beloved dialectic ("I am a dialectical writer") in what now-predictable critics will call a piece of propaganda?

To loosen up his argument, Handke's narrator employs the self-critical voice present in each of his Yugoslavia texts, a voice that here posts sometimes ironic warnings after especially passionate passages:

“Warning: Antirational Mysticism!”; “Warning: One-Sidedness!”;  
“Warning: Anti-American!”; “Warning: Paranoia!”; “Warning:  
Bellicosity and Anti-Civilization Affect!”

In place of static images, the narrator presents double or triple, progressing or moving images. He describes sympathetically, for example, both the Croatian Catholic Bishop of Banja Luka, at risk now in a largely Serbian town, *and* an aged, poor Serbian Partisan whose comrades suffered under Croatian/Nazi oppression. The narration moves from image to image to image by employing the “and” that has become Handke’s formal trademark over the last decade, an “and” that connects and continues and complicates, an “and” that appears in the title of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* owned by the old Partisan, and also in the Holy Trinity the author evokes during a mass: “Yes, it is true, the personage of God acts as ‘Father,’ as ‘Son,’ and as ‘Spirit.’”

Once invoked, the “and” initiates a cascade of sentences: “And again, in Kragujevac. . . . And remarkably. . . . And in the center. . . .

And 'the 124 badly injured workers'. . . ." Hearing NATO bombers overhead one night while staying in the mountains, the narrator laments the loss of such conjunction: "In another time, this moment would have been a deeply peaceful 'and' of trinity: the rush of mountain streams, and the nightingales, and high above the nightly jetliners with passengers underway from Frankfurt, perhaps. . . ."

Now, however, the machines of war break the peaceful pattern. With its various languages and religions and landscapes, prewar Yugoslavia represented the intricate multiplicity Peter Handke finds attractive and productive – Serbo-Croatian *and* Albanian *and* Macedonian *and* Slovenian, Serbian Orthodox *and* Roman Catholic *and* Muslim, or the multiple head-coverings in Skopje. As I read them, his Yugoslavia texts are an ongoing attempt to point out the simplistic rhetorical either/or's that promote war and to provide images that are "true" in part because of their multiple complexities conjoined by "and"'s, images that promote peace.

As a last example of the self-questioning presentation of images from Yugoslavia, this description of a visit to the destroyed auto-

assembly plant in Kragujevac, an indictment of the bombing from a surprising perspective:

. . . from the outside, facing the street, the miles-long, rather low and remarkably delicate facade appeared to be undamaged . . . unexpected flashbulbs, video cameras: suddenly we are, unsuspecting till that moment, a *delegacija*. But why not, *zašto da ne?* (one of the most common enduring Yugoslavian phrases, along with “nema problema”): don’t wince, even as a “delegation” observe as well as possible, remember, witness! . . . Strange too how the destruction of the *tools*, the workbenches, the hammers, the pliers, the vices, the measuring devices, the nails and screws (even the smallest items flattened and twisted) affected me more than that of the massive machines. It was as if, with these tools – wasn’t “tool” once an indication of becoming human? – the violent powers from above had destroyed labor, that is, all collaboration and being (existing) for the entire region for a long time to come.

NATO’s bombs have destroyed the tools of humanity, and by implication, the verbal bombs Handke has cited from *Le Monde* and

the *New York Review of Books* have flattened and twisted the language of peace, asserting with clenched fists rather than questioning while weeping. With his new book, Peter Handke again ventures into the narrative landscape of war and peace, acutely aware of his precarious position as possible propagandist, as producer of images that will tend to war or peace. It is the kind of self-reflective assertion Adorno called “determinate negativity,” and as such, in my opinion, these sentences can be trusted.

Caveat lector: the author of this review traveled with Peter Handke and his Yugoslav translator Žarko Radakovic along the Drina River in 1998 and is the translator of *Justice for Serbia* (Viking, 1997) and *Voyage by Dugout* (forthcoming in *Conjunctions*).

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