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'That sweet And so on': Peter Handke's Yugoslavia Work

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“That beautiful And so on”: Peter Handke’s Yugoslavia Work

In his 1991 plea for Slovenia to remain part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Peter Handke noted that he

was born in a village in Austria's Carinthia. At that time, in the Second World War, the majority, no, the whole of the people was Austrian-Slovenian and communicated in the appropriate dialect. In her youth, my mother saw herself as being from that people, influenced above all by her oldest brother who was studying fruit growing on the other side of the border in Yugoslavian-Slovenian Maribor . . . but my father was a German soldier, and German became my language. . . .¹

During the wars in Yugoslavia, I translated Peter Handke’s *Eine winterliche Reise* (1996) into what became *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia* (Viking, 1997). In 1998, I drove and hiked along the Drina River in central Yugoslavia with Handke, his Serbo-Croatian translator Žarko Radaković, his Salzburg friend Zlatko Boković, and Thomas Deichmann, editor of *Novo* magazine, looking for signs of recovery after the war in Bosnia, struggling to comprehend those signs, to translate them into a language with which I could make sense of what I saw. Writing about “Peter Handke’s Yugoslavia Work” feels like a related attempt at understanding, at making sense of a world not my own. But while a translation and a journey have clear, determined beginnings (the first sentence of *Eine winterliche Reise* and the moment when Peter and Zlatko arrived in Zlatko’s little red Peugeot at the bus station in Sabac), where to begin this essay?

Handke’s works have long referenced and/or reflected the Balkans and its reality. *The Hornets / Die Hornissen* (1966), Handke’s first novel, was written by a very young man on the

¹ Departure of the Dreamer from the Ninth Land, "Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land. Eine Wirklichkeit, die vergangen ist: Erinnerung an Slowenien." *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27-28 July, 1991, feuilleton section, 1; also Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

Yugoslav island of Krk. Twenty years later, a young Austrian wanders through Slovenia in search of his lost brother in the novel *Repetition (Die Wiederholung)*, 1986). In the following decade, Handke's short prose pieces compiled in *Once Again For Thucydides / Noch einmal für Thukydides* (written from 1987-1990) include several set in what was then already becoming *the former Yugoslavia*. One of these stories, originally published as "Once Again For Yugoslavia" / "Noch einmal für Jugoslawien" can perhaps best serve to introduce an essay about Peter Handke's insistent and consistent argument for a Yugoslav state shared by diverse peoples, a state free of the destructive influence of U.S. and French and German and Vatican powerbrokers, free of war between Serbian and Croatian and Bosnian Muslim nationalists, a state fostered by complex and searching and self-questioning rhetoric, an impossible and beautiful state (of mind?)

Head Coverings in Skopje

A possible minor epic: of the various head coverings of the passersby in large cities, as, for example, in Skopje in Macedonia/Yugoslavia on December 10, 1987. There were even, right in the metropolis, those "Passe-Montagne" or mountain-climbing caps, covering the nose below and the forehead above and leaving only the eyes uncovered, and among them the bicycle-cart drivers with black little Moslem caps glued to their skulls, while next to them at the edge of the street an old man said good-by to his daughter or niece from Titograd/Montenegro or Vipava/Slovenia, multiple steep gables in his hood, an Islamic window and capital ornament (his daughter or niece cried). It was snowing in southernmost Yugoslavia and thawing at the same time. And then a man passed by with a white, crocheted forage cap shot through with oriental patterns under the dripping snow, followed by a blond girl with a thick bright stocking cap (topped by a tassel), followed immediately by a bespectacled man with a beret, a dark blue stem on top, followed by the beret of a long-legged soldier and by a pair of peaked police caps with concave surfaces. A man walked past then with a fur cap, earlaps turned up, in the midst of swarms of women wearing black cloths over their heads. After that a man with a checked fez, slung over his ear, in magpie black and white, Parzival's half-brother, piebald Feirefiz. His companion wore a leather-and-fur cap, and after them came a child with a black-and-white ear band. The child was followed by a man with a salt-and-pepper hat, a black-market magnate suavely making his way along the Macedonian bazaar street

in the slushy snow. The troop of soldiers then, with the Tito-star on the prows of their caps. After them a man with a brown-wool Tyrolean hat, front brim turned down, the back brim turned straight up, a silver badge on the side. A little girl hopping by with a bright deerskin hood, lined. A man with a whitish-gray shepherd's hat wound by a red band. A fat woman with a linen-white cook's scarf, fringed in the back. A young man with a multi-layered leather cap, each layer a different color. A man pushed a cart and had a plastic cap over his ears, his chin wrapped in a Palestinian scarf. One man walked along then with a rose-patterned cap, and gradually even the bareheaded passersby seemed to be equipped with head coverings -- hair itself a covering. Child, carried, with a night cap, intersected by woman with a slanted, broadly sweeping movie hat: there was no keeping up with the variety. A beauty in glasses walked past with a pale violet Borsalino hat and sauntered around the corner, followed by a very small woman with a towering cable-knit hat she had knitted herself, followed by an infant with a sombrero on its still open fontanel, carried by a girl with an oversized beret *made in Hong Kong*. A boy with a shawl around his neck and ears. An older boy with skier's earmuffs, logo TRICOT. And so on. That beautiful And so on. That beautiful And so on.²

“That beautiful And so on,” as it continues in *Abschied des Träumers vom neunten Land. Eine Wirklichkeit die vergangen ist: Erinnerung an Slovenien* (Departure of the Dreamer from the Ninth Land. A Reality that has Passed: Memory of Slovenia, 1991), in *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa, und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* (A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia, 1996), in *Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise* (A Summer Addendum to a Wintry Journey, 1996), in *Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder das Spiel zum Film vom Krieg* (Voyage by Dugout or the Play of the Film of the War, 1999), and in *Unter Tränen fragend* (Questioning While Weeping, 2000), “that beautiful And so on” continued and revisited in Zarko Radaković's and my responses to Handke's conjunction-rich prose (our

² For this and another of my translations from Handke's *Thucydides*, see the web site of *Conjunctions*, www.conjunctions.com/webconj.htm, 8/01/98.

Repetitions and Translation), “that beautiful And so on” will guide the course of this essay.

Departure of the Dreamer from the Ninth Land

14 May, 1989. I sit on a balcony of the Gostilna Rožič, a pension in Bohinj, Slovenia, and watch the white-tailed swallows wheel around me. We are surrounded by mountains, but thick clouds and intermittent rain veil them completely this morning.

In Repetition, Filip Kobal rides a train through a tunnel between Villach, Austria and Jeseniča, Yugoslavia, out of the political and cultural terrors of Europe into the fabled “Ninth Land” of Slovenia. We couldn’t exactly duplicate Kobal’s fictional trip in our rented Opel Kadett, but we counted it close enough to drive through a parallel tunnel.

Somehow we missed the tunnel and found ourselves driving along a lake shore. We turned back, then back again, sure of where we were because of correspondences between countryside and map, then suddenly, inexplicably, repeatedly lost. The tunnel was carefully marked on the map, as was the Autobahn leading to it; and the name “Karawanken Tunnel” stood in tiny red letters next to the marks that meant “mountains.” We could see the actual mountains. We could see the lake. We could drive through the streets of neighboring St. Jakob. But the map’s promised 7.6-kilometer tunnel (“toll required”) was simply not there.

*Finally Žarko asked an Austrian policeman for directions to the Karawanken Tunnel. The officer smiled so broadly that his thin moustache quivered. No such place, he said, not until the Yugoslavs finish their half. The map had brought us, anticipating the 1991 completion of the tunnel, to a place that did not yet exist. Thus was our desire to enter Yugoslavia deferred. (From Abbott and Radaković, *Ponavljane/Repetitions: Travels in a Novel(ist)’s Landscape* (Belgrade: Vreme Knjige, 1994))*

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva writes that foreigners, who by definition have left the structures of origin behind, are in a position to create new forms of living. The risks of otherness allow for a sloughing off of inhibiting language and culture, of limiting familial and

societal restrictions. The resulting openness makes possible adventures in politics, philosophy, sex, art, religion, and so on. The new structures, however, threaten to disturb the social order and engender fear in citizens native to a country or region.³ In reaction, natives force the foreigners to conform to new standards or to endure violence directed at the potential destroyers of values.

If becoming a foreigner is so problematic, and if staying home is petrifying, what are possible alternatives? Or, to put the question in a way that hints at an answer: How can one survey the world differently *and* remain at home?

In response to the Slovenian declaration of independence (the first of Yugoslavia's republics to do so), anticipating the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia, Peter Handke published an essay in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* the last weekend of July, 1991 in which he argues against Slovenian independence with ideas about the Slovene people (*Volk*) that outraged many Slovenians.⁴

Handke had earlier raised the question of belonging to a *Volk* in his tetralogy *Langsame Heimkehr* (*Slow Return Home* 1979). The narrator of the third volume, *Kindergeschichte* (*Child Story* 1981), choosing to raise a daughter in Paris, away from the German-speaking *Volk* that a few years earlier had made the word *Volk* as problematic as the word *Führer*, enrolls his daughter in a Jewish school. The Jews, he writes, are the only *Volk* to which he has ever wanted to belong. They qualify, the narrator explains, because they have remained a *Volk* without a national center.⁵ A similar dual quality – of being a *Volk* yet having no nation – has made Slovenia, Handke writes in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, a place like none other in the world. There is no country “where I as a foreigner felt so at home as in the country of Slovenia.” To feel at home as a foreigner. And why did Slovenia qualify?

Handke's first answer is an odd one in a political discussion. In Slovenia, he writes, things like a bridge or an orchard used to seem more real than elsewhere. What these Slovenian

³(New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 29-30.

⁴Republished as *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) and in *Langsam im Schatten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 182-197.

⁵ See my “‘The Material Idea of a *Volk*’: Peter Handke's Dialectical Search for a National Identity,” (Amsterdam: *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, 1995) 479-494.

things had in common, he argues, is a “certain hearty insignificance” (“eine gewisse herzhaftige Unscheinbarkeit . . . eine Allerwelthaftigkeit”). And what created this “hearty insignificance” that made things more present than usual? Handke argues that it was the appearance of standing outside history. Because Slovenia was part of the larger nation of Yugoslavia, as Slovenia it was absent from history. But because it was Slovenia, because Croatia was Croatia, and the same for Montenegro and Serbia and the other states making up Yugoslavia, the country as a whole had a balanced unity productively different from the destructive nationalism Handke saw in his own nation of Austria. In response to earlier discussions by Václav Havel, Milan Kundera, and others about a “central Europe” in which the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Italy, and similar countries would join in some sort of “natural” loose grouping that would split Yugoslavia into southern Balkan and northern European nations, Handke worries in this essay that that would drag Slovenia into history and put the quiet, unseemly things and people of the country into a political context that dissolves productive presence into absence and jolts productive absence into destructive presence.

To put it in another way, language enables us to recognize things we might not otherwise see. It can open or expand our horizons. A second language continues that opening. But as a language names and defines it also sets limits and closes off possibilities, becoming what Nietzsche called the “prison house of language.” Nationalism of the kind Handke decries here is fostered by language that tends toward an exclusive, limiting worldview in which the things and people in that nation grow more alike and less different and the things outside national boundaries grow more different and less alike. In the process, the other is sacrificed for the same. Even material things like church towers become nationalized, and the Catholic towers of Slovenia no longer share a landscape with southern minarets.

Handke understands the political reality of the Serbian domination of this historically disparate set of countries, and still he argues against dissolving the federation. With all its problems, the multiethnic state has produced people who know how to live as foreigners in their own country. Handke could give many examples – the blind Slovenian photographer Evgan Bavcar, or the Croatian painter Julija Knifer whose “meanders” wander over gallery and museum walls in Paris and Cologne; but a Serb, someone from the dominant group, is his best example. And that, he contends as this essay continues, is “my dear comrade and translator Žarko Radaković.” Intellectuals like Radaković, Handke writes, are indistinguishable from intellectuals

in international cities like Paris or New York, cities whose diversity allows foreigners to feel at home and natives to be foreigners. If I mention a hike I took, Handke writes, Radaković “will immediately serve up his new greater and lesser Serbian theory 'On Hiking along Rivers' and will soon prepare an international anthology – contributions from George Steiner, Jean Baudrillard, Reinhold Messner.” Greater *and* lesser Serbia – the ironic phrase models “that beautiful And so on,” that ability to move back and forth in an ongoing dialectic, a dialectic most possible, most probable, Handke argues in this essay about the looming disintegration of Yugoslavia, in a multiethnic state.

According to Kristeva, we will never be able to live at peace with the strangers around us if we are unable to recognize and tolerate the otherness in ourselves. In Kristeva's world it is Freud who awakens us to ourselves as strangers. For Handke it used to be Slovenia as a Yugoslavian state that encouraged foreigners to live as natives and natives as foreigners. After Slovenia's independence, that political space disappears.

Handke told André Müller that the only thing he had actually achieved in his life that has made him proud is “to have avoided a worldview.”⁶ And speaking with Žarko Radaković, he described his writing as an attempt “to make the world appear in its richness and in its peace. . . . Nothing else.”⁷ This attempt to describe (and thus create) a rich and peaceful world, to find adequate, alternative, and peaceable ways to represent a country distorted by the rhetoric of statesmen and journalists, is a constant in the texts that follow *Departure of the Dreamer*.⁸

II

⁶ Müller, André. "Wer einmal versagt im Schreiben, hat für immer versagt." *Die Zeit* 3 Mar. 1989: 77-79.

⁷ Radaković, Žarko. "Razgovor sa Peterom Handkeom." *Književna Kritika* Jan.-Feb. 1986: 19-36.

⁸Fabjan Hafner has written insightfully about Slovenia in Peter Handke's work: "Expeditionen ins Neunte Land: Slowenien und die Slowenen im Werk Peter Handkes." In *Peter Handke: Die Langsamkeit der Welt*, ed. Gerhard Fuchs and Gerhard Melzer (Graz: Droschl, 1993) 215-227.

A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia

Translating Peter Handke's A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia into English, I called Žarko to ask about the phrase: "Do we need a new Gavrilo Princip?" What kind of principle is this? I asked. Is it a term from business management? Gavrilo Princip, Žarko explained with a chuckle, was the young assassin of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Later, with Žarko in his country, I struggled with a broader question: How to tell a new story about the old land of the southern Slavs (Yugo = south). After all, what do I know? A foreigner, in the country for a few days. A self-styled translator with no command of this language. I remember the translator in Ivo Andrić's The Bridge Over the Drina: "Then too there was that Šefko, who in his translation was obviously putting the worst possible construction on the old man's exalted phrases and who loved to stick his nose into everything and carry tales even when there was nothing in them, and was ever ready to give or to confirm an evil report." (From Radaković and Abbott, "Translation," unpublished manuscript)

The foreword to the American, Spanish, French, and Italian translations of Peter Handke's *Journey to the Rivers*⁹ provides a glimpse into the colorful history of the essay's reception:

Dear foreign reader: this text, appearing on two weekends at the onset of 1996 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, caused some commotion in the European press. Immediately after publication of the first part, I was designated a terrorist in the *Corriere della Sera*, and *Libération* revealed that I was, first of all, amused that there were so few victims in the Slovenian war of 1991, and that I was exhibiting, second, "doubtful taste" in discussing the various ways of presenting this or that victim of the Yugoslavian wars in the western media. In *Le Monde* I was then called a "pro-Serbian advocate," and in the *Journal du Dimanche* there was talk of "pro-Serbian agitation." And so it continued until *El País* even read into my text a sanction of the Srebrenica massacre. – Dear French, Spanish, Italian, American reader: Now the text is translated, and I trust that you will read it as it is; I need not defend or take back a single word. I wrote about my journey through the

⁹*Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996). *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*. Tr. Scott Abbott (New York: Viking, 1997) vii-viii.

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. Dear reader: that, and that alone, I offer here for your perusal.

Peter Handke, April 1996

At issue are the effects of rhetoric: Peter Handke's own, that of the journalists he attacks, that of his critics. Handke claims his work is a self-reflexive, "slow, inquiring narration" in the service of peace and accuses specific journalists and newspapers of demagogy. His critics argue that his self-deluded inattention to the war promotes nationalism. In what follows I will trace a pattern in Handke's *Journey to the Rivers* that makes it, on my reading, a model of dialectical rhetoric, of narrative, non-systematic philosophy, of "that beautiful And so on" in the service of peace.¹⁰

The essay, whose double title – *A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia (Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien)* – indicates that this will be a travel narrative *and* a political essay, is divided into four parts with the simple titles: "Before the Trip," "Part One of the Trip," "Part Two of the Trip," and "Epilogue." "Before the Trip" and "Epilogue" contain most of the controversial accusations about the European press and its "coverage" of the wars in Yugoslavia, while the middle two sections contain most of the actual travel narrative.

In "Before the Trip," written, like the rest of the essay, after the trip, Handke describes his preparations. He contacted the two Serbs who would accompany him. He saw, just before leaving, Emir Kusturica's new film *Underground*, and found it an engaging combination of dreaming and actual history. He was surprised, then, to see the film reviewed by Alain Finkielkraut in *Le Monde* as pro-Serbian and terroristic. From what he sees as Finkielkraut's misreading (which, by the way, foreshadows how Handke's essay will be "read"), he turns to press reports of the wars in Yugoslavia. He cites European and especially German/Austrian complicity in the disintegration of Yugoslavia – a favoring of, acceptance of, and support of the breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia that, in his estimation, led to the war, or better said,

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive reading of this text in terms of a dialectic, see my "Modeling a Dialectic: Peter Handke's *A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia*." In *After Postmodernism: Austrian Literature and Film in Transition*, ed. Willy Riemer (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 2000) 340-352.

made it likely. The political actions, Handke argues, have their basis in a bias against Serbia that European culture has promulgated for decades (he mentions, for example, the post-empire Austrian rhyme “Serbien muss sterbien” -- Serbia must die) and that newspapers like *Le Monde* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* have played up. After questioning the “facts” as reported, he ends the opening section by asking: “Who will someday write this history differently, and even if only the nuances -- which could do much to liberate the peoples from their mutual inflexible images?” (50)

The essay’s second section begins with the trip to Belgrade. Žarko Radaković and Zlatko Bocokić meet Handke there. They walk through the city, visit a market in Zemun, drive to see Bocokić’s parents, drive to a monastery with the writer Milorad Pavić and meet that night with the writer Dragan Velikić.

The travel narrative continues in the third section with a description of gasoline vending as the three men leave Belgrade to drive to the town of Bajina Bašta on the Drina River to visit Radaković’s ex-partner and daughter. There they hear about the war, they are snowed in, they cross a bridge briefly to the other side, they listen to heroic tales sung by a guslar, and they finally leave Serbia by way of Novi Sad. Before the section ends, Handke remembers a trip to Slovenia just a month earlier which confirmed his fears that the new state had lost the multi-cultural openness it once had as part of Yugoslavia.

In the epilog, Handke recounts a morning in Bajina Bašta when he walked alone to the bus station and then to the Drina River. While standing on the shore he asked questions about what really happened at Srebrenica and returned to his attack on the media in general and on the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* specifically. The epilog ends with a suicide note left by an ex-partisan who shot himself in despair as his country began its civil war.

Although this summary is generally accurate, it is simply inadequate. Like the readings by Handke’s critics, it leaves out the multiple and conflicting voices the essay manages to incorporate. For a more careful reader, Handke’s essay asserts in the context of self-doubt, recognizes its own contingency in the face of justice, finds justice in contingency and multiplicity, and models honesty in complexity of style while attacking the dishonesty of simplistic journalism.

Peter Handke has long been interested in the possibilities of dialectical thinking. In his interview with Herbert Gamper, for example, he returned several times to the subject of

Nietzsche and the dialectic: “I see [Nietzsche] not as a negator, but as a dramatic custodian of something that was always there, and yet naturally also as a very fruitful destroyer of that which did not deserve to be conserved. This dialectical relationship, these two things, make Nietzsche who he is”; “One can see in [Nietzsche] a model human existence: one who does not in any sense want to establish systems, who does not want to interpret the world according to a system. The fragmentary, halting style of writing and the few wonderfully painful poems . . . allow the reading of his works to be a joyful slow studying.”¹¹ These statements about the purposefully paradoxical philosopher who argued for contingency *and* a will-to-power make explicit Handke’s sense for dialectic as an interplay between despair and hope, conservation and destruction, and as furthered by an anti-systematic, fragmentary, positive creation of meaning through language: “The law of art: glorification, but dialectical glorification (it is not the Golden Age, but rather the Dialectical Age)”; “Didactic, argumentative philosophy will always be foreign to me, as opposed to narrative philosophy.”¹²

A recent attempt by an American philosopher to read Nietzsche as thinking *after*, even if still *in* the language of metaphysics, provides a helpful context for reading Handke as dialectician in *A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia*. In *The Question of Ethics: Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger*, Charles Scott looks at what he calls Nietzsche’s self-overcoming, an open process occasioned by questions about the values that structure his own discourse as well as the discourses of traditional morals: “In the discussion of the play of will to power and eternal return in Nietzsche’s writing -- a play of metaphysical assertion, antimetaphysical assertion, and nonmetaphysical recoil in the process -- we discern not only the conflictual directions that are methodically maintained, but also a middle-voiced recoiling function.”¹³ The middle voice, thinkable neither in the active nor the passive voices, is where, on Scott’s reading of Nietzsche, self-overcoming in metaphysics takes place: “It is the voice of differing, moving of itself, without the thought of transcendence” (32). Scott’s argument is

¹¹*Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen* (Zürich: Amman, 1987) 171, 172. See Michael Vollmer’s study of Nietzsche and Handke, *Das gerechte Spiel: Sprache und Individualität bei Friedrich Nietzsche und Peter Handke* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995).

¹²*Die Geschichte des Bleistifts* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985) 344, 294.

¹³(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 32.

complicated and fascinating and deserves further explication; but I sketch the gesture of his thought here as an example of what I think Handke means when he speaks of dialectical thinking. It is thought within polarities (like the metaphysical / antimetaphysical assertions Scott mentions) that nevertheless recoils at its own dualistic structure. It is a momentary break in the structure that allows difference and motion and play to reveal metaphysical thought's repression of the always present play of conflictual forces. It is self-overcoming thought, as Scott writes, that calls into question the presumptive authority of its organizing ideas to make room not for its own truth but for other truths (30).

Handke's essays on Yugoslavia are part of a series that includes the essays on tiredness, on the jukebox, and on the successful day.¹⁴ With these essays, Handke practices a literary form with a long history, a form whose peculiarities have been well described by Theodor Adorno in "The Essay as Form."¹⁵ In the context of his ongoing attack on the dogmatic identity thinking of post-Enlightenment scientific thought, Adorno suggests the following ideas I see as pertinent to the form of Handke's work: "[The essay, as a form] rebels against the doctrine, deeply rooted since Plato, that what is transient and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy . . ." (10); "The customary objection that the essay is fragmentary and contingent itself postulates that totality is given, and with it the identity of subject and object, and acts as though one were in possession of the whole. . . . [The essay's] weakness bears witness to the very nonidentity it had to express" (11); "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" (13); "The daring, anticipatory, and not fully redeemed aspect of every essayistic detail attracts other such details as its negation; the untruth in which the essay knowingly entangles itself is the element in which its truth resides" (19).

These fragments of Adorno's essay read like descriptions of the formal experiments of Handke's essays. We don't, however, have to rely exclusively on Adorno or Scott for theory, for

¹⁴ *Versuch über die Müdigkeit, Versuch über die Jukebox, Versuch über den geglückten Tag* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989, 1990, 1991).

¹⁵ *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 3-23.

Handke's essays are themselves self-reflexive essays on the essay. In the "Essay on the Successful Day," for example, the narrator's confident but botched description of Van Morrison's "Coney Island" immediately follows an impatient request by the narrator's interlocutor for a direct, certain description of an achieved day (in contrast to the indirect and halting nature of the essay up to that point):

But with all your digressions, complications, and tergiversations, your way of breaking off every time you gain a bit of momentum, what becomes of your Line of Beauty and Grace, which, as you've hinted, stands for a successful day and, as you went on to assure us, would introduce your essay on the subject. When will you abandon your irresolute peripheral zigzags, your timorous attempt to define a concept that seems to be growing emptier than ever, and at last, with the help of coherent sentences, make the light, sharp incision that will carry us through the present muddle in medias res, in the hope that this obscure 'successful day' of yours may take on clarity and universal form."¹⁶

In response, the narrator suggests a double form that includes the form the interlocutor has rejected: "Isn't it typical of people like us that this sort of song keeps breaking off, lapsing into stuttering, babbling, and silence, starting up again, going off on a sidetrack – yet in the end, as throughout, aiming at unity and wholeness? (127) It is exactly this double form, this ongoing dialectic that aims at wholeness through fragments, that Handke's detractors, along with most of his defenders, have missed.

While *A Journey to the Rivers* ends with a suicide note, the first part of the final paragraph is crucial. During the trip through Serbia, Handke writes, he noted only two things in his notebook: "'Jebi ga!', *Fuck it*, common curse" – and the section of the suicide's farewell letter. These are the poles between which the entire essay moves: obscene aggression and fatal resignation. There are moments of both along the way, especially in the first and last sections of the essay; but for the most part, especially in the travel narrative, Handke describes what he calls, citing Hermann Lenz and Edmund Husserl, "third things," things colored by the bi-polar aggressions and despairs of war, but also somehow independent from them, third things not

¹⁶*The Jukebox and Other Essays on Storytelling*, tr. Ralph Manheim and Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) 126.

unrelated to the “middle-voiced recoiling functions” Scott sees in Nietzsche’s thought.¹⁷

Because he fears he will be misread, Handke raises red flags for readers used to undialectical dualisms, for readers with appetites for shocking images rather than for quiet and peripheral “third things”: “And whoever is now thinking: ‘Aha, pro-Serbian!’ or ‘Aha, Yugophile,’ . . . need read no further” (2-3); “And whoever understands that not as retching, but as indifference, likewise need read no further” (17). Handke requires similar discipline of himself in his writing. Early in the essay, for example, a critical voice breaks in to ask: “What, are you trying to help minimize the Serbian crimes in Bosnia, in the Krajina, in Slavonia, by means of a media-critique that sidesteps the basic facts?” Handke, the narrator Handke, answers: “Steady. Patience. Justice. The problem – only mine? – is more complicated, complicated by several levels or stages of reality: and I am aiming, in my desire to clarify it, at something thoroughly real through which something like a meaningful whole can be surmised in all the mixed-up kinds of reality” (12). Near the essay’s end, S., Handke’s wife asks: “‘You aren’t going to question the massacre at Srebrenica too, are you?’” to which he answers: “‘No . . . But I want to ask how such a massacre is to be explained, carried out, it seems, under the eyes of a world-wide public.’” “Note well:” he writes, “this is absolutely not a case of ‘I accuse.’ I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning, to raising doubts” (73-76).

In the face of this self-critique, what does it mean when critics claim that Handke is denying the massacre at Srebrenica?¹⁸ It means, I think, that they are reading unfairly, taking statements out of their dialectic context. Alternately, perhaps, they mistrust his complicated sense for justice, they suppose his questions and denials are simply camouflage for an unbridled

¹⁷Cf. the following from Handke’s play *Das Spiel vom Fragen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 143-144:

Spielverderber: Wird aus dem morgendlich heiteren Spiel vom Fragen, wie es mir vorschwebte . . . am Ende doch wider meinen Willen ein Drama? Gibt es denn keinen dritten Weg? Ist mir nicht öfter schon eine Flucht nur gelungen, weil ich sie erst versuchte in dem Bewußtsein, es sei ohnehin hoffnungslos? Aber ist der Dritte Weg in den Märchen nicht jener des Todes? . . . Wird es von uns, anders als einst von dem heroischen Zug der Cheyenne zurück in ihr Heimatland, einmal heißen, wir hätten mit unserer Reise zum Sonoren Land eine der sinnlosesten Wanderungen der Geschichte unternommen? . . . Welch Glaube -- an das Sinnlose, die sinnlosen Unternehmungen.

¹⁸See, for example, Tilman Zülch’s foreword to *Die Angst des Dichters vor der Wirklichkeit*, which ends by identifying Handke with the “long tradition of denial of genocide in the Europe of the twentieth century” (22).

polemic, they feel that while claiming the opposite, Handke's images are as inflexible as their own, that his history is as rigid as theirs.

It is possible, of course, that they are right. But when compared with the one-sided rhetoric of his critics, Handke's text feels to me like a model of dialectic reasoning. Of the many examples I could give, one will have to suffice. Note the almost excruciating care Handke takes here to demonstrate his command of multiple sides of the issue, as well as his moral commitment to a justice that embraces both:

Later, from the spring of 1992 on, when the first photographs, soon photo sequences or serial photos, were shown from the Bosnian war, there was a part of myself (repeatedly standing for "my whole"), which felt that the armed Bosnian Serbs, whether the army or individual killers, especially those on the hills and mountains around Sarajevo, were "enemies of humanity," to slightly vary Hans Magnus Enzensberger's phrase in reference to the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. . . .

And in spite of that, almost coincidentally with the impotent impulses to violence of someone visually involved from afar, another part of me (that in fact never stood for my whole), did not want to trust this war and this war reporting. Didn't want to? No, couldn't. Because, namely, the roles of attacker and attacked, of the pure victims and the naked scoundrels, were all-too-rapidly determined and set down for the so-called world public. (17-18)

Of the two parts of himself, only the one shocked at Serb aggressions stands for all of him. There is no question, then, of absolving the Serbs of responsibility for their violence. And still, justice, in this situation, is broader than that initial and final response. It requires that other questions be asked as well.

What could be more reasonable? And what could be more conducive to peace? Why can't journalists covering the wars in Yugoslavia, Handke asks, read and tell a more complicated story? "And with this kind of maturity, I thought, the son of a German, pull out of this history that repeats every century, out of this disastrous chain, pull out into another story" (80). Let others write the factual story of these wars, Handke writes: "Nothing against those – more than uncovering – *discovering* reporters on the scene (or better yet: involved in the scene and with the people there), praise for these other researchers in the field!" (74); "To record the evil facts, that's good" (82). He, however, the son of a German and thus heir to a propensity for Wagnerian

totality, wants to write another story, an additional story.

The “and” that connects the paragraphs on the two parts of himself cited above and the proliferation of initial “ands” in sentences and paragraphs as the essay comes to a close, work formally to create the continuing motion of a dialectic. While this is not a new device for Handke (he employs it with similar intent in *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht*,¹⁹ and *Repetition* ends with the admonition to the storyteller: “. . . take a deep breath, and start all over again with your all-appeasing ‘And then . . .’”²⁰), it is a crucial move in this essay that risks the untruths of obscene defiance and suicidal despair, that asserts that the “transient and ephemeral” are worthy of description during a war, that relies on density of texture in place of infallible argument for its truths. “The untruth[s] in which the essay knowingly entangles itself,” turning on the axis of the

¹⁹(Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994). As the long fairy tale set in No-Man’s-Bay nears its end, the “ands” intensify, repeating not only at paragraph inceptions but increasingly throughout paragraphs. For example, as the narrator describes his experience in a wooded hollow he thinks that the word for the hollow, “*feux*, hearth,” in an ancient chronicle, “is still applicable, and further: ‘The chronicle does not correspond to the world,’ and further, as on almost every day once: ‘I have failed, all is lost!’, and further: ‘Today I will find something thought to be permanently lost! There are such days,’ and further: ‘My table here is too small for an epic,’ and further: ‘No, too large!’ And what then? . . .” (1009-1010). “And what then?” becomes a refrain as the book nears its end. Both the question and its introductory conjunction connect the new sentence or paragraph to what has been before. They also make sure that it doesn't stay at that, that something new comes, that the narrative proceeds. And the “and,” even as it introduces the second, oppositional half of a polarity, becomes, in its repetition, the third. Not a final third. Not the last word. But the new attempt, new world, transformation (*Neuansetzen, neue Welt, Verwandlung*) the book thematizes. The “and” insures that the new is not radically new and simultaneously denies a radical return to an origin. Instead, it questions the unitary origin through the multiplicity of another possibility and reinforces unity through an initial example. “And” is the arbiter both of the same and of the other.

Final note: In ancient Greek most sentences begin with connective particles. One of the most common, *kai*, usually translated as “and,” flavors as well as connects with meanings of “and,” “even,” “also.” One of the characters of *My Year in the No-Man’s-Bay*, a priest, is said to desire a new translation of the New Testament, “as literal as possible, from the Greek” (637), and with its preponderance of sentences begun by conjunctions, Handke’s book approaches this Greek ideal. Several pages before the book’s end there is an instructive section of narrative in which a narrative is reduced to its barest form, to the conjunctions. “Out of the two divided stories should arise a third. And how will it go? For example: As I was still slow. Or. . . . Or. . . . Or. . . . And. . . . But. . . . And . . .” (Tr. by Krishna Winston, 1062-1063).

²⁰Tr. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988) 246.

coordinating conjunction, are more truthful finally than the non-dialectical assertions with which politicians and journalists and pundits assail Serbs and the writer who asks the questions justice requires.²¹

I'll end my account of *A Journey to the Rivers or Justice for Serbia* with the essay's final questions and assertions. Is this the writing of a benighted advocate of *Blut und Boden*, or of an essayist whose courageous play of ideas lays him open to error and to truth as well?

But isn't it, finally, irresponsible, I thought there at the Drina and continue to think it here, to offer the small sufferings in Serbia, the bit of freezing there, the bit of loneliness, the trivialities like snow flakes, caps, cream cheese, while over the border a great suffering prevails, that of Sarajevo, of Tuzla, of Srebrenica, of Bihać, compared to which the Serbian boo-boos are nothing? 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.

So, now it's time for the poetic? Yes, if it is understood as exactly the opposite of the nebulous. Or say, rather than "the poetic": that which binds, that encompasses -- the impulse to a common remembering, as the possibility for reconciliation of individuals, for the second, the common childhood. (81-82)

The common in the context of the uncommon. The binding, encompassing dialectical poetic in the context of undermining nationalisms and war. "That beautiful And so on."

²¹Cf. this statement from *Die Weltwoche*, 5 November 1992, an interview with Wolfgang Ritschl: "Es ist immer schön, sich preiszugeben. Man freut sich immer an einem Schreiber, der nicht vollkommen gepanzert und selbstgerecht vor die Welt tritt, sondern sich auch preisgibt. Auch in meinem Jugoslawien-Essay gebe ich mich mit meinem Romantizismus zu Jugoslawien preis. Ich gebe mich preis, um Wahrheiten zu sagen, um angreifbar zu sein. Durch die Angreifbarkeit kommen die Wahrheiten erst zu den anderen hin. Ich mache mich lächerlich und sage doch ein paar Wahrheiten. Das ist doch viel besser, als wenn einer nur Wahrheiten sagt."

III

A Summer's Addendum to a Wintry Journey

29 May 1998, Višegrad, Republika Srpska

Was denkt in dir? Peter asks.

What? I ask, unable to hear him over the noise of Milka and her band.

What is thinking in you?

Sorrow, I answer.

For two months in 1992 there was intense fighting here. Marauding Muslims. Marauding Serbs. And now the town is devoid of Muslims. Since we crossed the border into the Republika Srpska, I have been imagining Muslims and Serbs lying in bed those 60 nights. Worrying, as they lay there, about possible futures. About a sudden end to possible futures.

Tonight we sit at a long linen-covered table in the dining room of a large resort hotel tucked back into the forested hills above the town. Guests of the Mayor of Višegrad.

Of the 20,000 inhabitants of Višegrad, he says, 2500 are refugees. Yes, there is high unemployment. The town's factories have shut down. There are, of course, no tourists. The hotel is a cavernous home to men convalescing from the war.

A young man limps into the dining room with two women, one his girlfriend perhaps, or sister, the other old enough to be his mother. They take a table. They talk some. They drink a bottle of wine. They don't speak. The young man twirls his box of cigarettes between the table and his finger.

Milka, backed by an accordion, a keyboard, and drums (was there a drummer?), is a sultry lounge singer with a Serbian repertoire, traditional sad love songs sung in a middle-eastern quaver.

The town, the mayor explains, was 2/3 Muslim before the war. In 1992 the Muslims chased the Serbs out of the city. The Serbs retook the city through the grace of the Muslim Murad Šabanović, who captured the hydroelectric dam above the city and threatened to blow it up. The Muslim population fled the threat of flooding. The Yugoslav army arrived and dislodged the crazy terrorist. And the Serbs moved back in.

A small man with a dark beard pushes past a concerned waiter to crutch

his way toward our table. He breaks into the conversation and with a sweaty palm shakes each of our hands. He pulls two photographs out of a coat pocket.

The waiter signals to Milka. She skips toward our table, cordless microphone in hand, armed with a vigorous Serbian song.

The small man holds out two worn photos. The first is a glossy celebrity shot of Radovan Karadžić. The second is a snapshot of a soldier. My brother, he says, killed in the war. My brother, killed in the war. My brother.

At pointblank range, Milka belts out “O Višegrad!” The convalescing soldier puts away his photos and retreats slowly on his crutches. Milka hits three quick high notes, kicks up a shapely heel, and dances away. (From Radaković and Abbott, “Translation,” unpublished manuscript)

In the *A Summer's Addendum*, the third of this series of essays about Yugoslavia's disintegration, or better said, in response to that tragic process, Handke revisits many of the people and places of his *Journey to the Rivers*, retelling, refiguring, revising his initial account: “that I began to reconsider my published sentences was rather a consequence of a comment by Olga.” He travels finally into the Republika Srpska, to Višegrad and Srebrenica, and ends his account 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?” (91)

As examples, then, from a story without such enemies, a story rather of images that are the antithesis of such stereotypes, *Bilder* for an age that has lost, or given up, or sold, or propagandized its images (see, of course, Handke's recent novel *Der Bildverlust*), I shall analyze a cluster of observations in *A Summer's Addendum* from one of the most notorious sites of the civil war.

In the silver-mining city of Srebrenica, that mountain-valley site of atrocity and revenge, Handke, traveling with Bocokić, Radaković and a librarian from Bajina Bašta, finds stark scenes he, as narrator, populates with wishful and then self-negating hallucinations. Earlier, in Višegrad, the narrator's fantasy had been of a woman wearing a scarf and a man in a fez who were welcomed into the crowd at a real soccer match, characters whose head-coverings are reminiscent of the passersby in Skopje (59). Now, while describing a ruined mosque below a mostly intact orthodox church (“. . . and far below it the remains of the mosque, part of a cupola, still recognizable even though, like all the other parts of the building, it had collapsed, the last

fragment of form in the otherwise totally formless debris all around”), the narrator thinks it is time for the late-afternoon call to prayer and then hears, from the wreckage, along with the sound of the mountain stream that once flowed here, just such a call. The thought, of course, that fantasized sound, cannot stand in the face of present reality: “No, and twice no, neither the call nor the stream – had it once flowed here? – still existed. . . . Nothing but the ravine-filling cracking of plastic tarpaulins” (68-69).

Later he will suggest a world map with Srebrenica as its center, but for now this narrator so often accused of ignoring the realities of a vicious war begins a new series of “ands,” beautiful only by virtue of the fact that they continue a narrative that could end, suddenly, in despair: “And thrust my hand deep into the stinging nettles near the church, into the just blossoming and thus most sharply stinging ones, and then again” (69). And then, quickly, a real, if spare, image of hope, conjoined to the self-destructive anger by another “and”: “And on one steep slope, up in the clear-cut, a couple of people hoeing in such narrow, often single-rowed beds, that even all together they didn’t add up to anything close to a garden . . .” (69).

Thinking back on Srebrenica three paragraphs before the story ends, the narrator takes a page from Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest* where she notes that “In thinking about American Indian history, it has become essential to follow the policy of cautious street crossers: Remember to look both ways.”²² What if, the narrator asks, we think of the Serbs and Muslims in Srebrenica as Indians and settlers, “but don’t the evil Indians in the westerns also appear up on the rocky cliffs, attacking and massacring the peaceful American wagon trains – and aren’t the Indians fighting for their freedom? And ‘very last question’: Will someone, sometime, soon, who?, also discover the Serbs of Bosnia as such Indians?” The Serbs/Indians did indeed massacre peaceful settlers (residents and refugees) in Srebrenica, *and* they also had been provoked. Can’t we look both ways? Peter Handke asks once again. Can’t our sentences be complicated by the conjunction “and”?

IV

Questioning while Weeping

30 May 1998, Višegrad

²² (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) 18.

We drive to a construction site on a hill overlooking the Drina and its Turkish bridge. Three stories high, typical orange-brick construction. A hundred people, perhaps, work at the site. A line of women and men unload a truck, passing orange tiles from hand to hand in a long chain. On the high roof men are interlocking the tiles in undulating rows. On the highest ridge are nailed a small evergreen tree, a ragged red, blue, and white Serbian flag, and an improvised rack from which hang three bottles of brandy and three new plastic-wrapped shirts.

These are refugees from Sarajevo, the Mayor says. They have formed an organization and with a government grant of land, tools, and materials are building 158 apartments here. He introduces us to the president of the refugee group, a thin man, maybe 70 years old, bright-eyed and erect, who speaks an eager English as he shows us around.

Mr. Handke, he says, you are a writer. And I too am a writer. I write children's books. We are colleagues. You are big and I am small. But we are colleagues.

Peter introduces Žarko and me as his translators. The president has eyes only for Peter.

We meet the young architect. She and her husband, she says, have moved into an abandoned Muslim house. Through third parties they are trying to exchange their house in Sarajevo for the one in Višegrad.

TV cameras arrive and Peter joins the chain to pass a few roof tiles for Serbian television. Then it's time for lunch. We share cold cuts and tomatoes and plum brandy at a long table.

This is the Austrian writer Peter Handke, the President announces. He has come to visit our building. We will now hear words of wisdom from this great man. Mr. Handke, would you please honor us with words to remember on this proud occasion?

Peter stands and raises his cup of brandy. He looks at the President. He looks at the refugees along both sides of the table. He turns back to the President. He speaks words to remember: Jebi ga. Fuck it. The surprised refugees raise a boisterous cheer. Peter grins and raises his cup again. (From Radaković and Abbott, "Translation," unpublished manuscript)

The fourth of Peter Handke's essays on the language of this war, *Questioning while*

Weeping (the first half published in the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 5/6 June 1999) 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.²³

Like the earlier books, *Questioning while Weeping* attempts to present images (“images still exist? The loss of images is not yet absolute?” 151) from a Yugoslavia besieged “not only with cluster bombs and rockets but above all with ‘context’ and ‘idea’” (157-158). The first trip, while bombs are falling, is a quick one from Hungary to Belgrade and back, while the second one, also during the NATO bombardment, takes the author, Zlatko Bocić, and Thomas Deichmann through Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia into Serbia, where they visit bombed factories and bridges and buildings, accompanied 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?” (154) In a book about what Handke calls “verbal and iconic pornography” (155), about the loss of language (“‘The first victim of war is truth’? No, it is language” 23), the oncologist’s calling into question *and* weeping, critique *and* sorrow, are gestures indicating her ability to experience conflicting impulses. But the real question for me, given the history of the reception of Peter Handke’s Yugoslavia work, given the author’s public persona, remains the question of a difficult dialectic upheld against a relentless political/cultural entropy. 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 one way or another, in each of his Yugoslavia texts. In *Questions while Weeping*, a voice posts warnings after especially passionate passages: “Warning: Antirational Mysticism!” (30); “Warning: One-Sidedness!” (39); “Warning: Anti-American!” (44); “Warning: Paranoia!” (48); “Warning: Bellicosity and Anti-Civilization Affect!” (60) The text thus parodies its critics and

²³ Parts of this and the following section were published in *World Literature Today*, 75:1, Winter 2001, 78-81.

gently questions its own images.

Further, to avoid 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* a Serbian Partisan, aged and poor, whose World-War-II comrades suffered under Croatian Catholic oppression. The narration moves from image to image to image by employing the familiar “and”—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’” (108). 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 . . .” (125). Now, however, the machines of war break the peaceful pattern.

Once invoked, the “and” initiates a cascade of sentences as the narrative struggles to find images adequate to the damage done by the NATO bombers to the destroyed automobile assembly plant in Kragujevac: “And again, in Kragujevac. . . . And remarkably. . . . And in the center. . . . And ‘the 124 badly injured workers’ . . .” (117-119).

Carefully, self-reflexively, the narrator expresses concern about himself as a constructed image, as a political tool for the Serbs:

. . . 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! . . . (116-117)

Then, as he sees the damage to the factory, especially to its tools, the narrator returns to thoughts he had in the Slovenia essay (things were more real, “the things were ready-to-hand – *gingen einem zur Hand*” 13) about things and reality and being:

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. (*Questioning while Weeping* 117-118)

In similar terms, Heidegger writes in *Being and Time* about how the world reveals itself through a broken tool:

The modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness, and obstinacy all have the function of bringing to the fore the characteristic of presence-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. . . . But when an assignment has been disturbed – when something is unusable for some purpose – then the assignment becomes explicit. Even now, of course, it has not become explicit as an ontological structure; but it has become explicit ontically for the circumspection which comes up against the damaging of the tool. When an assignment to some particular “towards-this” has been thus circumspectively aroused, we catch sight of the “towards-this” itself, and along with it everything connected with the work – the whole ‘workshop’ – as that wherein concern always dwells. The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself.²⁴

As Handke fights for phenomenological accuracy in his prose, he finds a kind of Heideggerian revelation of “being (existing)” in broken tools. That NATO bombs have caused the destruction would be beyond Heidegger’s concern. The loss of collaboration and being is at the heart of Handke’s.

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. Once again, Peter Handke ventures here 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. *Questioning while Weeping* is the kind of self-reflective assertion Adorno called “determinate negativity,” and as such, in my opinion, the sentences of the essay can be trusted.

V

²⁴ Tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) 104-105.

The Play of the Film of the War

1:30 a.m., 1 June 1998

I'm sitting in my room in the Hotel Višegrad, looking out onto the Drina and the Turkish bridge, still lit by floodlamps. The bridge's eleven arches are reflected in the silky black river. A nightingale calls from across the river. I've never heard a nightingale; but it can be nothing else. Unmistakable. It calls again, and then again. It's indescribably romantic. I'm alone in my room.

From the terrace below there is an occasional burst of laughter from Peter, Zlatko, Thomas, and Žarko, who are still talking with the two women from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the younger one from Spain, the older from France. We argued for hours about the role of organizations like theirs in Yugoslavia.

How long have you been in Yugoslavia? Peter asked the French woman. For a year-and-a-half, she answered.

Do you speak Serbo-Croatian? Peter asked.

No, she answered. I've been too busy to learn. The first town I was in was under attack for nine months. I worked through an interpreter.

You are here to tell the people how to run their country and you don't understand their language! Peter exclaimed. You can't bother to learn their language?

Who are you? the woman asked. What are you doing here? What gives you the moral right to judge what I'm doing?

Go home, Peter said.

Fuck you, the woman said.

Go home.

Fuck you.

The night air had chilled, and the French woman was shivering. Peter took his coat from the back of his chair and draped it around her shoulders. There, he said, that will help.

Fuck you, she said, and pulled the coat around herself. (From Radaković and Abbott, "Translation," unpublished manuscript)

Voyage by Dugout or The Play of the Film of the War features a casting call by two filmmakers, an American (essentially John Ford) and a Spaniard (Luis Buñel, in effect), who

want to make a film of the war in Yugoslavia approximately a decade after it has 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: “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” (122). The Buñel character agrees that “such a translator would be the antithesis of the Inquisition” (122), 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” (123). 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* (84, dissected in the play as simplistic and bombastic) – is the center around which Handke’s violent and sweet and troubling fantasy of a play circles.

June 9, 1999, the day of the play’s premiere, was also the day NATO representatives announced that their seventy-eight-day bombing of Yugoslavia would cease. Claus Peymann directed the play, his last production at the Burgtheater after thirteen high-profile years. In early March, in protest of ecclesiastical and government support for NATO intervention in the war, Handke had renounced his membership in the Catholic Church and had returned the ten thousand Marks awarded him in 1973 for Germany’s Büchner Prize. There had been rumors that Handke would withdraw his play in protest of the bombing and there were rumors that protestors would disturb the premiere. The play opened as scheduled, to a packed house, to a largely appreciative audience.

Most of Europe’s newspapers reviewed the play the next morning, including four in Berlin, three in Vienna, two each in Munich, Cologne, and Hamburg, and Paris’s *Le Monde*, which featured the review on its front page. The reviews, like recent criticism of Handke’s work, varied widely, but one German headline expressed a unanimous sentiment: “THERE WAS NO SCANDAL.”

Although Peter Handke can be blunt, as he was when he called an obtuse critic an asshole in a nationally televised discussion after one of his readings of *A Journey to the Rivers*, the virulence of the attacks on him for his writing about Yugoslavia is still puzzling. Not until the

war in Yugoslavia and Handke's written pleas for a more complex, more self-ironic, more peaceful rhetoric did he become, in the European press, a "Serbenfreund," a Serb lover, a pariah like the pariah people.

If one were to ask Handke if he is indeed a lover of Serbs, he would likely point out that the question is racist and then answer yes. The question that ought to be raised is whether Peter Handke is a nationalist – is he the kind of nationalist who would vilify Croats, Slovenians, Bosnians, or Kosovars, who would stir up hatred, welcome war, and condone genocide? Here, the record is clear. Peter Handke has spent a lifetime attacking the kinds of ideological absolutisms that produce nationalism, hate, and war.

It is a relief, Handke writes in *Phantasien der Wiederholung*, to be released from such domination: "We, after the world wars: the wonderful knowledge that we are not masters ('You are the caretaker of a meager garden,' Vergil)."²⁵ Handke finds it morally liberating to be rid of words like "masters"; but beyond that he wants to construct new metaphors, fruitful ways of thinking – and thus, I suppose, the Vergil quotation that defines us as humble gardeners. Repeatedly Handke has attempted to unmask truth as what Nietzsche called a "mobile army of metaphors," for awareness of truth as arbitrary construction undermines the rulers whose truth claims are enforced by violence: "The night of this century, during which I searched my face obsessively for the features of a despot or a conqueror, has ended for me."²⁶

Voyage by Dugout works on the same levels as the previous work, attacking "truth" as assumed by various accounts (including film, newspapers, histories, and the play itself) and creating the kinds of self-conscious myths or *Märchen* Handke feels we need to order our productively multivalent societies. The planned film will draw dialectically on John (Ford) O'Hara's penchant for legends and stories and little historical lies and on Luis (Buñuel) Machado's "bull-tickling craziness."

At the end of the play, after the appearance of the dugout, a mobile, dialectical site for a multifarious Volk ("The Balkans! Other countries have a castle or a temple as a holy site. Our sacred site is the dugout" 115-116), O'Hara and Machado decide not to make their film. O'Hara refuses on the grounds that a tragic film makes no sense. Machado says he won't make the film

²⁵ (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) 26.

²⁶ *The Long Way Around*, in *Slow Homecoming*. Trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Farrar,

Straus & Giroux, 1985) 115.

because his films have always been about society, and “society no longer exists . . . it’s a single commercial and moral horde . . . people have forgotten what it means to stand up for oneself while allowing the other a place to stand” (123).

Not allowing the other a place to stand is the mark of a violent nationalism. In Peter Handke’s play, however, even the most despicable characters, the aggressive mountain-bike riding Internationals, the shrill and certain European-Americans who have come to judge and punish Yugoslavia, are given succor by the Greek they have attacked so viciously – “To the Second International: Are you cold? You’re shivering! (He puts his coat around her shoulders.) Who is the child there in your locket?” (99) As he has since his earliest texts, Handke here stands up for the Serbs while allowing Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Kosovar Albanians, and even the obnoxious Internationals a place to stand.

A final incident, extraneous to the play, will further illustrate Peter Handke’s unrelentingly dialectical thinking, a two-edged gesture none of his critics to date have been able or willing to reproduce. When Günter Grass, with whom Handke has repeatedly crossed pens, spoke out publicly in favor of NATO intervention in Yugoslavia (the same intervention that led to Handke’s leaving the Catholic Church and returning his literary prize), Serbs in Belgrade announced that that they would collect Grass’s books and send them back to the German Nobel-Prize winner. Handke urged them to forego this action, to keep reading Grass’s self-critical, dialectical literary works while opposing his political statement. The action of a nationalist?

Postscript

6 June 1999, Vienna

In the city center, I stumble onto a Sunday-evening demonstration against NATO and for Yugoslavia. “NATO – fascistik, NATO – fascistik!” the crowd of maybe 2000 chants.

Back in my room, unable to sleep, I turn back to my translation of Peter’s new play. I wish Žarko were here to compare notes. How did he translate “Fertigsatzpisse”? Pissing your finished, your modular sentences? Sentential piss?

At 10:30 I watch a report on Peter done for Austrian TV (ÖRF2). Peter’s

crime, the reporter and his commentators agree, is that he is a “Serbenfreund,” a friend of the Serbs. Not good to be a friend of the enemy. Peter should have known better, it’s an old story: Jap lover, Kraut lover, Jew lover, Nigger lover, Serb lover.

I turn off the sentential piss and return to Peter’s play.

9 June 1999, before midnight, Žarko’s birthday, Vienna

I ought to go to bed, but I’m still reeling from the events of the day.

Several hours ago NATO and the Yugoslav Parliament came to some kind of agreement ending the bombing after 78 days.

And, I’m just back from the world premiere of Peter’s “The Play of the Film of the War,” directed by Claus Peymann. I’ve seldom been this moved, this challenged, by a work of art.

The really bad guys of the play, three “Internationals” who know all the answers, who dictate all the terms, who can think only in absolutes, appear on the stage as follows: “Three mountainbike riders, preceded by the sound of squealing brakes, burst through the swinging door, covered with mud clear up to their helmets. They race through the hall, between tables and chairs, perilously close to the people sitting there.” American and European moralists, functionaries with no hint of self-irony or humor, absolutists who run the world because of their economic power – these sorry excuses for human beings were depicted this evening as mountainbike riders.

“Žarko,” I said, “Don’t you ever tell Peter I ride a mountainbike.”

“No, my friend,” he whispered, “I’d never do that.”

The play drew on several incidents from our trip, including when Peter put his coat around the shoulders of the OSCE woman in Višegrad. After the play, flushed with enthusiasm and insight, I told Peter how well he had integrated a real event into an imaginative play. “Brilliant to put her and her friends on mountainbikes!”

“Doktor Scott,” he chided, “Doktor Scott. Always on duty.” (From Radaković and Abbott, “Translation,” unpublished manuscript)

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