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Peter Handke's Theatrical Works

Scott Abbott, *Utah Valley University*



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PETER HANDKE

(6 December 1942-)

Scott Abbott

[*Dictionary of Literary Biography, Twentieth-Century German Dramatists*, 1992]

PLAY PRODUCTIONS:

Publikumsbeschimpfung, Frankfurt/M., Theater am Turm, 8 June

1966, director: Claus Peymann;

Weissagung and Selbstbezeichnung, Oberhausen, Städtische Bühnen,

22 October 1966, director: Günther Büch;

Hilferufe, Stockholm (by actors from the Städtische Bühnen,

Oberhausen), 12 September 1967; subsequently in Oberhausen

on 14 October 1967, director: Günther Büch;

Kaspar, Frankfurt/M., Theater am Turm, director: Claus Peymann, and

Oberhausen, Städtische Bühnen, director: Günther Büch, 11 May 1968;

Das Mündel will Vormund sein, Frankfurt/M., Theater am Turm, 31

January 1969, director: Claus Peymann;

Quodlibet, Basel, Basler Theater, 24 January 1970, director: Hans Hollmann;

Der Ritt über den Bodensee, Berlin, Schaubühne am Halleschen

Ufer, 23 January 1971, directors: Claus Peymann, Wolfgang Wiens;

Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus, Zürich, Theater am Neumarkt, 17

April 1974, director: Horst Zankl;

Über die Dörfer, Salzburg, Salzburger Festspiele, 8 August 1982,

director: Wim Wenders;

Das Spiel vom Fragen oder die Reise zum sonoren Land, Vienna,

Burgtheater, January 1990, director: Claus Peymann;

Die Stunde da wir nichts voneinander wußten, Vienna, Theater an der Wien,

9 May 1992, director: Claus Peymann;

BOOKS:

Die Hornissen: Roman (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966);

Publikumsbeschimpfung und andere Sprechstücke (Frankfurt am Main:

Suhrkamp, 1966)-- comprises Publikumsbeschimpfung,

Weissagung, Selbstbezeichnung; partially translated by

Michael Roloff as Offending the Audience; and Self-

Accusation (London: Methuen. 1971);

Begrüßung des Aufsichtsrats: Prosatexte (Salzburg: Residenz,

1967);

Der Hausierer: Roman (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967);

Hilferufe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967);

Kaspar (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967);

Hörspiel (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1968);

Hörspiel Nr. 2 (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969);

Prosa gedichte theaterstücke Hörspiel Aufsätze (Frankfurt am

Main: Suhrkamp, 1969);

Deutsche Gedichte (Frankfurt am Main: euphorion, 1969);

Die Innenwelt der Außenwelt der Innenwelt (Frankfurt am Main:

Suhrkamp, 1969); partially translated by Roloff as The

Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld (New York:

Seabury Press, 1974);

Quodlibet (in Spectaculum XIII, Frankfurt am Main, 1970);

Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter: Erzählung (Frankfurt am

Main: Suhrkamp, 1970); translated by Roloff as The Goalie's

Anxiety at the Penalty Kick (New York: Farrar, Straus &

Giroux, 1972; London: Eyre Methuen, 1977);

Hörspiel Nr. 2, 3, 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970);

Wind und Meer: Vier Hörspiele (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

1970);

Der Ritt über den Bodensee (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971);

translated by Roloff as The Ride across Lake Constance

(London: Eyre Methuen, 1973);

Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

1971);

Stücke 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) -- comprises

Publikumsbeschimpfung, Weissagung, Selbstbezeichnung,

Hilferufe, Kaspar; translated by Roloff as Kaspar and Other

Plays (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970) -- comprises
Offending the Audience, Prophecy, Self-Accusation, Calling
 for Help, Kaspar;

Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied (Frankfurt am Main:

Suhrkamp, 1972); translated by Ralph Manheim as Short
 Letter, Long Farewell (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
 1974; London: Eyre Methuen, 1977);

Wunschloses Unglück: Erzählung (Salzburg: Residenz, 1972);

translated by Manheim as A Sorrow beyond Dreams (New York:
 Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975; London: Souvenir Press,
 1976);

Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms (Frankfurt am Main:

Suhrkamp, 1972);

Stücke 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973) -- comprises Das

Mündel will Vormund sein, Quodlibet, Der Ritt über den
 Bodensee; translated by Roloff and Karl Weber as The Ride
 across Lake Constance and Other Plays (New York: Farrar,
 Straus & Giroux, 1976) -- comprises Prophecy, Calling for
 Help, My Foot My Tutor, Quodlibet, The Ride across Lake
 Constance, They Are Dying Out;

Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

1973); translated by Roloff and Weber as They Are Dying Out
 (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975);

Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974); translated by Roloff as Nonsense and Happiness (New York: Urizen, 1976; London: Pluto Press, 1976);

Falsche Bewegung. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975.

Der Rand der Wörter: Erzählungen, Gedichte, Stücke, edited by Heinz F. Schafroth (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975);

Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975); translated by Manheim as A Moment of True Feeling (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977);

Die linkshändige Frau: Erzählung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976); translated by Manheim as The Left-Handed Woman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978; London: Eyre Methuen, 1980);

Das Ende des Flanierens (Vienna: Davidpresse, 1976; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980);

Das Gewicht der Welt: Ein Journal (November 1975-März 1977) (Salzburg: Residenz, 1977); translated by Manheim as The Weight of the World (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984; London: Secker & Warburg, 1984);

Langsame Heimkehr: Erzählung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979); translated by Manheim as "The Long Way Around," in Slow Homecoming (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985);

Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp,

- 1980); translated by Manheim as "The Lesson of Sainte Victoire," in Slow Homecoming;
- Kindergeschichte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); translated by Manheim as "Child's Story," in Slow Homecoming;
- Über die Dörfer: Dramatisches Gedicht (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981);
- Die Geschichte des Bleistifts (Salzburg: Residenz, 1982);
- Phantasien der Wiederholung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983);
- Der Chinese des Schmerzes (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983); translated by Manheim as Across (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986);
- Gedicht an die Dauer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986);
- Die Wiederholung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986); translated by Manheim as Repetition (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987);
- Nachmittag eines Schriftstellers: Erzählung (Salzburg: Residenz, 1987); translated by Manheim as The Afternoon of a Writer (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989);
- Die Abwesenheit: Ein Märchen (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987); translated by Manheim as Absence (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990);
- Der Himmel über Berlin, Ein Filmbuch von Wim Wenders und Peter Handke; (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987);

Das Spiel vom Fragen oder die Reise zum sonoren Land (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989);

Versuch über die Müdigkeit. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989.

Versuch über die Jukebox. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990.

Noch einmal für Thukydides. Salzburg: Residenz, 1990.

Versuch über den geglückten Tag. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.

Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land. Eine Wirklichkeit, die vergangen ist: Erinnerung an Slovenien. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992. Originally in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, 27-28 July, 1991, feuilleton section, 1.

Die Stunde da wir nichts voneinander wußten: Ein Schauspiel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992.

Translations by Handke

Walker Percy, Der Kinogehér (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980);

Florjan Lipus, Der Zögling Tjaz (Salzburg: Residenz, 1981);

Emmanuel Bove, Meine Freunde (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981);

Emmanuel Bove, Armand (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982);

Francis Ponge, Das Notizbuch vom Kiefernwald (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982);

Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, Der Spiegeltag (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982);

Gustav Januš, Gedichte (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983);

Emmanuel Bove, Bécon-les-Bruyères (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984);

René Char, Rückkehr stromauf (München: Hanser, 1984);

Marguerite Duras, Die Krankheit Tod. La Maladie de la Mort (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1985);

Walker Percey, Der Idiot des Südens (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985);

Patrick Modiano, Eine Jugend (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985);

Aischylos, Prometheus gefesselt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986); premier at the Salzburger Festspielen 1986;

Francis Ponge, Kleine Suite des Vivarais (Salzburg: Residenz, 1988);

Julien Green, Der andere Schlaf (München: Hanser, 1988);

William Shakespeare. Das Wintermärchen. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991. Premier at the Berliner Schaubühne, 1990.

Gustav Januš. Mitten im Satz: Gedichte. Salzburg: Residenz, 1991.

FILMS

3 amerikanische LP's, screenplay by Peter Handke, directed by Wim Wenders, 1969;

Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter, screenplay by Peter Handke and Wim Wenders, directed by Wim Wenders, 1972;

Falsche Bewegung, screenplay by Peter Handke, directed by Wim

Wenders, 1975;

Die linkshändige Frau, screenplay and directed by Peter Handke,

1977;

Der Himmel über Berlin, screenplay by Wim Wenders and Peter

Handke, directed by Wim Wenders, 1987;

Television Films

Chronik der laufenden Ereignisse, screenplay and directed by

Peter Handke, WDR, 10 May 1971;

Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied, screenplay and directed by

Herbert Vesely, ZDF, 27 November 1978;

Das Mal des Todes, by Marguerite Duras, translation, screenplay,

and directed by Peter Handke, ORF, 20 February 1986;

Theatergoers are certain to be shocked by a performance of a Peter Handke play. They may find themselves doing the acting while cursed from the stage, or they may be subjected to hours of sweet, soporific philosophizing. They may "see" a play that is only words, or they may experience a play without a single word. They may hear mumbled and mixed up lines meant to elicit subconscious responses, or Handke may give them crystalline oratory. The play may end with a capitalist smashing his head against a rock, or with a goddess proclaiming a gentle new age. The play may claim to present no images, or it may

be absolutely allegorical. But if the forms cannot be anticipated, the themes remain fairly constant. Handke's plays concern themselves with theater itself, whether by attacking or repeating theatrical conventions. They all consider language, as it enables and inhibits. And they all, in various ways, circle around the basic philosophical question: If our languages, our selves, and our communities are contingent (as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Derrida have suggested), then where lies meaning? Handke's plays are disturbing and difficult, not crafted to please huge audiences. Nonetheless, from the beginning they have attracted directors of the quality of Claus Peymann and Wim Wenders and have played repeatedly in the world's leading theaters.

Just west of the southern-Austrian village of Griffen where Handke was born on December 6, 1942, stands an old monastery church. Maria Siutz Handke, Peter's mother, lies buried in its cemetery, as does his step-father Bruno Handke. Both father and step-father were German soldiers, and Handke grew up speaking German. His mother, like most people in the village, was part Slovenian. Even today the church's services and publications are bilingual and the paintings of the stations of the cross have Slovenian captions: "1. Statio Jesus je k'smerti obsojen." Several of Handke's works, especially his novel Repetition, are set in Slovenia, and he has translated several works from Slovenian into German.

Handke stood out as a pupil in the village school and won a scholarship to the Catholic boarding school in Tanzenberg. Although he did very well in languages and found a friend and mentor in Reinhard Musar, a fine teacher of German, Handke has often described this part of his life as a nightmare. He transferred to a gymnasium in Klagenfurt for the final two years. From 1961 to 1965 Handke was a law student at the University of Graz and worked with avant-garde writers affiliated with the Forum Stadtpark. He passed

his first examination in law, but when Suhrkamp Verlag accepted his novel Die Hornissen (1966; *The Hornets*) for publication he discontinued his law studies.

While in Graz Handke had married the actress Libgart Schwarz. Their daughter Amina was born in 1969 and Handke raised her after he and Schwarz separated in 1972. Handke's Kindergeschichte (1981; translated as Child Story, 1985) is a fine description of a single father's attempts to raise his daughter in Paris.

In 1966 Handke's attack on the Gruppe 47's "new realism" and his insistence that literature is made of language and not of the things language describes made headlines. So did his first play, Publikumsbeschimpfung (1966; translated as Offending the Audience, 1971), which premiered in Frankfurt, directed, as often in later years, by Claus Peymann.

Publikumsbeschimpfung begins with rules for the actors. They are told, among other things, to listen to the litanies of the Catholic Church, listen to "Tell me" by the Rolling Stones, watch the Beatles' films, and observe people-aping monkeys and spitting llamas in the zoo. Next come three pages of directions for setting up the pre-play atmosphere expected by the audience: sounds from behind the curtains of scenery being set up, ushers even more formal and ceremonial than usual, protracted dimming of lights, audience members to be refused entrance if not dressed appropriately. When the curtains open and reveal an empty stage and uncostumed actors and when the house lights go up once again, the audience begins to realize that they themselves have been acting in the play. The four actors tell the audience that they will not see the play their theater experiences have led them to expect, but rather a play without visual images or action: "Wir sprechen nur (We will only speak). Nothing will be represented. The stage represents nothing. Its emptiness represents no other emptiness. It is simply empty. The audience is the theme, the event.

The actors need no tricks, they say, they need not be theatrical.

The speakers repeat themselves, they contradict themselves, they speak of repetition and contradiction. They point out the ordered society of theater goes and contrast that with the stage where there is no order. They draw attention to the breathing, sweating, swallowing, and blinking of the audience, making them acutely aware of themselves. They describe the events preceding the play: the anticipation, the dressing, the travel, the finding of seats. They discuss the representation of reality in traditional theater: "Es wurde nicht um des Spiels, sondern um der Wirklichkeit willen gespielt" (The play was not played for the play's sake but for the sake of reality). But reality cannot be played, only irreality. When the play points beyond itself it becomes impure. Nothing can be represented.

Before the audience is allowed to leave the theater in their accustomed way, they will be cursed, because cursing, the actors say, avoids mediation as it makes a spark jump from actors to audience. First, however, there are clichéd assessments of the audience's unsuspected role in the play: "Ihr wart die Entdeckung des Abends. . . . Ihr hattet den Löwenanteil am Erfolg. . . . Euch muß man gesehen haben, ihr Rotzlecker" (You were the find of the evening. . . . You had a lion's share of the success. . . . You were a sight to have seen, you snot-lickers). Gradually the positive critical clichés give way to the clichéd curses, a contradictory set of epithets: "ihr Saujuden . . . ihr Nazischweine . . . ihr jüdischen Großkapitalisten . . . ihr Proleten . . . Ihr Ewigkeitsfans. Ihr Gottesleugner. . . . Ihr schleichende Pest. Ihr unsterblichen Seelen" (you Jewish swine . . . you Nazi swine . . . you Jewish big-capitalists . . . you proletarians . . . you fans of eternity. You deniers of God. . . . You creeping plague. You immortal souls). The contradictions show one person's curses to be another's praise; and the curses finally return to highly stylized praise as the piece ends:

"Ihr Damen und Herren ihr, ihr Persönlichkeiten des öffentlichen und kulturellen Lebens ihr, ihr Anwesenden ihr, ihr Brüder und Schwestern ihr, ihr Genossen ihr, ihr werten Zuhörer ihr, ihr Mitmenschen ihr" (You ladies and gentlemen you, you celebrities of public and cultural life you, you who are present you, you brothers and sisters you, you comrades you, you worthy listeners you, you fellow humans you). The obvious relativity of the clichéd curses and praise raises basic question, for from whose perspective are these negative and positive values? And in fact, the play calls values in general into question: the values of traditional theater, of traditional audiences, of supposed meaning beyond the surface, beyond play, beyond the language of the (only) speaking actors.

Five months after the June 1966 production of Handke's Publikumsbeschimpfung, Jacques Derrida presented his paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins University, arguing that "The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset." He further described "the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse -- provided we can agree on this word -- that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."

To use a word-play possible in both German and English, Handke's "play" arouses

anxiety by implicating the audience in the play, by stripping the play of its fundamental ground, of reassuring certitude, by refusing to point beyond the system of differences that is the play to a transcendental signified or to a supposed reality. Handke's "Sprechstück" (Speech-Play) is a "Sprachspiel" (language game) in which a supposedly "natural form of expression" -- cursing -- and a theater that does not mean but is, attempt to circumvent the problem of representative expression.

Publikumsbeschimpfung was an enormous critical success and still exerts influence on contemporary theater; but several of the play's assertions are troubling. Can Handke really leave the realm of signification behind? Can the stage ever simply be empty, and not empty in contrast to the usual stage with props? Can his "Sprechstück" ever be a simple, natural, unmediated telling? Is there really a difference between "image" and "concept" as the play suggests, or is every "concept" always an "image"?

Several other Sprechstücke quickly followed Publikumsbeschimpfung. Weissagung (1966; translated as Prophecy, 1976) begins with a quotation by Osip Mandelstam: Wo beginnen?/Alles kracht in den Fugen und schwankt./Die Luft erzittert vor Vergleichen./Kein Wort ist besser als das andre,/die Erde dröhnt von Metaphern . . ./ (Where to begin?/Everything is out of joint and totters./The air quivers with comparisons./No word is better than the other,/the earth resounds with metaphors . . .). The entire play, spoken by four speakers, is a long series of prophetic figures referring back to themselves instead of, as usual, purporting to point beyond themselves. These are signifiers that are simultaneously the signified: "Die Fleigen werden sterben wie die Fliegen. . . Das Schwein am Spieß wird schreien wie am Spieß" (The flies will die like flies. . . The pig on the spit will scream as if on a spit). As a play, Weissagung absolutely refuses to move

beyond the "truth" that Nietzsche described as "a mobile army of metaphors"; and as a result it is disconcerting to audiences expecting dramatic action.

Selbstbeziehung (1966; translated as Self Accusation, 1969) is Handke's third "Sprechstück," written for two speakers (female and male). The play is a self description, an autobiography, and, according to the title, a self accusation. "Ich bin auf die Welt gekommen" (I came into the world), the play begins, and with great abstraction the actors describe their first movements as infants, their first sounds and sights, and then, as they acquire a vocabulary, their socialization: "Ich bin der Gegenstand von Sätzen geworden. . . . Ich bin eine Aneinanderreihung von Buchstaben geworden" (I became the object of sentences. . . . I became a sequence of letters of the alphabet). The speakers describe their subsequent turn from nature to rules and their resulting fitness for society (Gesellschaftsfähigkeit). But as the rules lay hold of the speaker, they make a kind of productive sin possible. There follow long lists of proudly confessed transgressions: "Ich habe mich geäußert durch Spucken. . . . Ich habe die Waggontür vor dem Halten des Zuges geöffnet. . . . Ich habe in einer Sprache gesprochen, in der zu sprechen volksfeindlich war" (I expressed myself through spitting. . . . I opened the door before the train came to a stop. . . . I spoke in a language defined as inimical to the people). Because of the stultifying effects of society and its languages and rules, this listing of transgression involves a certain heroism, despite the supposed self accusation.

But then this person whose being is absolutely determined by the languages he learns, determined just as much in her reaction against the rules as if she were keeping them, begins a new list on the theme: "Ich habe die Regeln der Sprache nicht beachtet. Ich habe Sprachverstöße begangen. Ich habe die Worte ohne Gedanken gebraucht" (I failed to

observe the rules of the language. I committed linguistic blunders. I used words thoughtlessly). The audience expects to cheer at the breaking of grammatical rules, just as it has celebrated the other breaks from society; but instead it finds that these rules legislate against using language without thought, and that the transgressions all involve the speaking of deadening clichés: "Ich habe die Gegenstände tot genannt. . . . Ich habe die Traurigkeit dunkel genannt. . . . Ich habe die Leidenschaft heiß genannt" (I called objects dead. . . . I called melancholy black. . . . I called passion hot).

Thus the speakers accept the strictures of society and confess their sins, revolt against society through the bravado of confession, abjure the language of society as hostile to life, and somewhat indirectly praise more "true," non-clichéd language. The message here, that language both inhibits and enables, is one of Handke's most central themes. Is then the language of this play true? the play asks of itself. Not in a metaphysical sense; but it has attempted to break into the cycle of society's dominating clichés. And if it has affirmed little, it has at least affirmed its own linguistic, artistic activity, an activity that its speakers say has changed them: "Ich bin ins Theater gegangen. Ich habe dieses Stück gehört. Ich habe dieses Stück gesprochen. Ich habe dieses Stück geschrieben" (I went to the theater. I heard this piece. I spoke this piece. I wrote this piece).

In Hilferufe (1967; translated as Calling for Help, 1970), another Sprechstück, the unidentified speakers speak sentences, fragments, and words associated somehow with danger or need or question or answer -- in short, descriptions related to the word "hilfe" (help): "ein zum tod verurteilter ist enflohen . . . nach dem kochen ist der pilz nicht mehr so giftig . . . unleserliche gesuche werden zurückgewiesen" (a man sentenced to death has escaped . . . after boiling, the mushroom is no longer so poisonous . . . illegible requests will

be rejected). Each phrase or word is followed by the response "NEIN." Finally the question "hilfe?" is spoken and the response is "JA!"

Handke describes, in notes, what to expect in this cerebral word-play: "die aufgabe der sprecher ist es, den weg über viele sätze und wörter zu dem gesuchten wort HILFE zu zeigen. sie spielen das bedürfnis nach hilfe . . . akustisch den zuhörern vor" (the task of the speaker is to demonstrate the route over many sentences and words to the sought after word HELP. they play the need for help . . . acoustically, for the audience). As long as the actors are searching for "help," Handke writes, the word has the meaning of the need to find the word. Once the actual word is finally spoken, however, it has lost that meaning.

The last and longest of the Sprechstücke is Kaspar (1967; translated 1969). "Das Stück . . . zeigt, wie jemand durch Sprechen zum Sprechen gebracht werden kann. Das Stück könnte auch 'Sprechfolterung' heißen" (The play . . . shows how someone can be made to speak through speaking. The play could also be called speech torture).

Kaspar, whose name and basic situation -- of an adult learning language for the first time -- comes from the nineteenth-century foundling Kaspar Hauser, learns in the course of the play to put things in order: "Seit ich sprechen kann, kann ich alles in Ordnung bringen" (Ever since I can speak I can put everything in order). That this order is arbitrary makes no difference, for "ein Satz hilft dir über den Gegenstand hinwegzukommen, wenn du nicht wirklich über ihn hinwegkommen kannst" (a sentence helps you get over an object when you can't really get over it").

The discovery that reality can be manipulated by language leads Kaspar to understand metaphor and the arbitrariness of language: "Es ist nicht wahr, daß die Verhältnisse so sind, wie sie dargestellt werden; wahr ist vielmehr, daß die Verhältnisse

anders sind als sie dargestellt werden" (It is not true that the conditions are as they are represented; on the contrary, it is true that the conditions are different from their representation). Kaspar thus moves from a naive sense of a self expressed through language to a sense for a self that is nothing but language.

Creating order through speech is an ambiguous accomplishment, Kaspar learns. Immediately following the intermission, that creation becomes oppressive when "die gesellschaftlich Kranken" (the socially sick) are forced, through violence, to fit into the social order. Those who have been brought to order now look for sentences valid for all, straight-jacket sentences that ensure "peace on earth."

Once Kaspar has learned the lessons of language he can reflect on the enabling and limiting process of acquiring language, and he does so with a voice now like those of the ominous prompters whose clichéd voices have guided his (mis)education: "jeder Gegenstand machte mir bange/. . ./ich war ohne Bewußtsein/gleich einem Besoffenen/. . ./ich selber verstellte/mir die Sicht/kein Licht ging mir auf/. . ./bevor ich anfing/auf die Welt zu kommen/. . ./ich mußte darunter leiden/daß ich nichts/unterscheiden/konnte:/ . . ./Ich kam zur/Welt nicht nach der Uhr/sondern weil/die Schmerzen/beim Fallen/mir halfen/einen Keil/zwischen mich und die Gegenstände/zu schieben/. . ./Ich lernte alles was leer war/mit Wörtern zu füllen/und lernte wer wer war/und alles was schrie/mit Sätzen zu stillen/. . ./nie/wieder/schaudere ich/vor einem leeren Schrank/. . . (every object filled me with fear/. . ./I was without consciousness/like some drunk/. . ./I blocked my view/myself/no light/lit up for me/. . ./before I began/to come onto the world/. . ./I had to suffer,/could not distinguish/among anything/. . ./I came into the world/not by the clock/but because/the pain/while falling/helped me drive/a wedge/between me/and the

objects/. . ./I learned to fill/all empty spaces with words/and learned who was who/and to pacify everything that/screamed/with sentences/. . ./never/again/will I tremble/before an empty closet). That tremble/shudder may have been Kaspar's last link to life, for now his existence is ordered by ever more degrading sentences. Kaspar becomes increasingly aware of his plight, until he summarizes it so: "Schon mit meinem ersten Satz bin ich in die Falle gegangen" (Already with my first sentence I was trapped).

Finally, since language has turned out to be an arbitrary system of differences, Kaspar begins to speak in a meaningless chain of signifiers, one statement or word leading senselessly to the next. Handke describes Kaspar's last three phases as follows:

"14. Phase -- Kann Kaspar mit unbefangenen Sätzen, die er auf seine alten befangenen Sätze anwendet, die verkehrte Welt dieser Sätze umkehren?"

"15. Phase -- Kann Kaspar sich wenigstens mit einer verkehrten Welt von Sätzen gegen verkehrte Sätze von der Welt behaupten? Oder: Kann Kaspar, indem er verkehrte Sätze verkehrt, wenigstens den falschen Schein der Richtigkeit meiden?"

"16. Phase -- Wer ist Kaspar jetzt? Kaspar, wer ist jetzt Kaspar? Was ist jetzt, Kaspar? Was ist jetzt Kaspar, Kaspar?"

(14th phase -- Can Kaspar, with uninhibited sentences which he applies to his old inhibited sentences, reverse the inverted world of these sentences? 15th phase -- Can Kaspar defend himself at least with an inverted world of sentences against inverted sentences about the world? Or: Can Kaspar, by inverting inverted sentences, at least avoid the false appearance of rightness? 16th phase -- Who is Kaspar now? Kaspar, who is now Kaspar? What is now, Kaspar? What is now Kaspar, Kaspar?).

The question about whether Kaspar, by inverting inverted sentences, can at least

avoid the false appearance of correctness, is a crucial one to all of Handke's work, from first to last. As well as anyone, Handke recognizes the positive value of living in a contingent postmodern world, a world shaped by Nietzsche, Freud, Saussure, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. The order attacked in Kaspar is one form of the potentially oppressive transcendental signified. Kaspar discovers that order, that meaning, to be both arbitrary and supported by violence. But the play also suggests that something has been lost -- a direct relationship with things, for example -- and in admitting that loss, the play questions the contingency it has been asserting. Kaspar simultaneously argues against the totalizing of language and posits, however tentatively, something positive beyond the resulting contingency. This tendency will become a major thrust of Handke's later work.

After the Sprechstücke, Handke wrote quite a different play, Das Mündel will Vormund sein (1969; translated as My Foot My Tutor, 1970). The title is from a translation of Shakespeare's The Tempest, "What, I say, my foot my tutor?" and refers to the relationship of dominance and submission the play depicts. In contrast to the Sprechstücke, which aimed to present only language, not a single word is spoken (although in a larger semiotic sense, there is much language here as well). The first and last scenes are in front of a farmhouse, the middle scenes inside the house. Two characters, the ward and the guardian, interact with one another in competitions dominated for the most part by the guardian. For example, attempting to be higher than one another they jump up, climb onto a chair, climb onto a table, climb onto a chair on the table, and the guardian finally wins the competition, as usual, by hanging from a cord in the air. In another scene the guardian throws bottles and other kitchen items and the ward tries to catch them. He fails repeatedly, and they crash to the floor. Suddenly he catches one and the stage immediately becomes

dark, signaling the abrupt, if ephemeral, change in relationship. Finally the guardian shows the ward how to use a beet-cutting machine (covered in the first scene by a raincoat) to cut off the tops of beets (and perhaps, metaphorically, something else). As it gets dark on the stage the ward tries repeatedly to sever the top of a beet. When utter darkness finally rules, nothing is heard falling; but loud breathing is heard that gradually fills the hall. Then silence. The play ends as the ward repeatedly reaches into a sack and lets the sand he draws from it fall into water.

The text of the play is written in first person plural, as if narrator and readers are members of the audience. The narrator often gives possible audience responses -- as to the loud breathing near the end: "ein Röcheln? ein sehr angestregtes Luftholen? Oder nur ein großer Blasebalg? Oder ein riesiges Tier?" (a death rattle? A very intense inhaling? Or only a bellows? Or a huge animal?). We learn things from the text that cannot possibly be portrayed on the stage: "Tätowierungen auf den Armen sind nicht zu sehen" (tatoos can not be seen on his arms) or "Hühner sind nicht zu sehen" (There are no chickens to be seen). The statement about chickens seems to grow out of a stream of consciousness in which a couple of apple seeds have just fallen to the ground, seeds that chickens, had there been some, might have eaten.

Early in the play, with the stage dark, breathing like that at the end is heard, and a description is tendered of an Italian spy film in which loud breathing in the dark unnerves an intruder and leads to his death. The narrator of Handke's play suggests that "dieses Atmen im Finstern ist auch hier gemeint, freilich ohne die Folgen" (This breathing in the dark is meant here as well, although without the consequences). The audience, of course, cannot see this piece of intertextuality, nor are they likely to make the same, intensely personal

connection the narrator makes here, a connection that may, however, make a difference in interpreting the penultimate scene of the play. When the ward, the guardian, and the ominous beet-cutting machine disappear into darkness from which only the ward reappears, the breathing may, in light of the film reference, suggest the murder of the guardian. But for that meaning to be constructed the theater audience needs more information than it is given.

The premier of Das Mündel will Vormund sein, directed by Claus Peymann, followed Peymann's production of Handke's Selbstbezeichnung that same evening. The man and woman speaking the words of Selbstbezeichnung appeared naked, and then shocked further by repeating the abstractions of the play slowly and monotonously. Before the play even began to approach its end, members of the audience expressed their displeasure so vocally that the actors left the stage. After an intermission the second play progressed, and still excited audience members shouted directions to the ward as he picked up toenail clippings and other things for the guardian. Gradually they settled down to respond appreciatively.

Several critical responses to the play refer to earlier statements by Handke about his Sprechstücke that there was nothing to interpret, that an empty stage did not mean anything beyond itself, that it was simply an empty stage, and consequently argue that this new play without language also points to no meaning beyond itself. Handke, however, has never been one to remain with a successful form, and said, in fact, in an interview about this play that "das Stück spiegelt stumm Herrschaftsverhältnisse, zeigt, daß sich Herrschaft auch wortlos ausüben läßt" (the play mutely mirrors relationships of dominance, shows that dominance can also be practiced without words), a metaphor that every viewer in fact intuits.

Handke's next play was Quodlibet (1969; translated 1973). Quodlibet (as you wish,

as you like it, a multivoiced musical composition in which various melodies are played humorously and simultaneously) is described by Handke as a precursor to Der Ritt über den Bodensee. Not much of a script is given, just suggestions of what sorts of words and phrases actors might want to speak to elicit oblique responses from a Pavlovian audience.

Actors portray figures of the world theater: a general, a Bishop, the chancellor of a university, a politician with two CIA bodyguards, a woman in evening dress, a woman in pants with a poodle, and others. They murmur half-heard, misunderstood words, random sounds that give rise to Freudian associations, "Wörter und Sätze, die im Theater als Signale wirken: Ausdrücke der Politik; der Sexualität; der Analsphäre; der Gewalt" (Words and sentences which in the theater act like signals: political expressions, expressions relating to sex, the anal sphere, violence). Thus the play does not depict sex or violence, but instead elicits confusion that the audience resolves by mishearings dictated by their subconscious. Handke describes an intended result in a note on the production of the play: "Was erreicht werden sollte . . . ist: Furcht und Mitleid, Zärtlichkeit und Wut. Furcht vor der Unabänderlichkeit, die die Figuren darstellen, Mitleid für ihre träumerische Abgeschlossenheit, Zärtlichkeit für ihre Schönheit, Wut über ihr Selbstbewußtsein und ihre Ruhe" (What is supposed to be achieved here . . . is: fear and pity, tenderness and rage. Fear of the inalterability the figures represent, pity for their dreamy seclusion, tenderness for their beauty, rage at their self consciousness and their peace).

In Der Ritt über den Bodensee (1970; translated as The Ride Across Lake Constance, 1972) a man rides his horse over thin ice covering Lake Constance. Upon reaching the other side he is told how thin the ice is, and he dies of shock. This is the story behind the title, a story never told in the play but related to the epigraph: "'Träumt Ihr oder

redet Ihr?" (Are you dreaming or are you speaking?). Speaking in a trance, Handke says, we are able to communicate superficially. Made conscious of our language, however, we are shocked into miscommunication or silence. Communicating in a dream state not only enables speech, it also enables social order, power structures, hierarchical systems. With eight characters and a doll Der Ritt über den Bodensee portrays various types of social interaction -- love, work, buying, and selling -- and the language involved in those interactions. Jannings, a character who comes to dominate George after someone suggests that he might be the more powerful of the two (so he too is constituted by language) describes the development of language in terms reminiscent of Kaspar: "Man hat angefangen, miteinander zu verkehren, und es hat sich eingespielt. . . . Eine Ordnung ergab sich, und um weiter miteinander verkehren zu können, machte man diese Ordnung ausdrücklich: man formulierte sie. Und als man sie formuliert hatte, mußte man sich daran halten, weil man sie schließlich formuliert hatte! Das ist natürlich, nicht wahr?" (People began to socialize with one another and it became the rule. . . . An order resulted; and for people to continue to socialize with one another, this order was made explicit: it was formulated. And once it had been formulated, people had to stick to it because, after all, they had formulated it. That's natural, isn't it?). Determined by the language through which others see her (the language of menus -- something to be consumed), another character demonstrates the categories that determine her: "Spreche ich dir zuviel? Habe ich dir zu spitze Knie? Bin ich dir zu schwer? Ist dir meine Nase zu groß?" (Do I talk too much for you? Are my knees too bony? Am I too heavy for you? Is my nose too big?). Relations with things are also dominated by language: "Er schlief auf Disteln!" -- 'Ich kann mich nicht erinnern, so einen Satz jemals gehört zu haben: also kann er gar nicht auf Disteln geschlafen

haben!" ("He slept on thistles!" -- "I cannot remember having heard such a sentence: thus he cannot have slept on thistles!").

Handke said that in this play he wanted to examine both the languages of society and the languages of theater that attack that language. Traditional theater communicates in much the same way as regular communication (which makes it accessible to audiences), and it is similarly prone to trivialization and exploitation. Handke's theater, however, as it attempts to move beyond dominating cliché, can only do so if it begins to speak another language, a language largely unfamiliar to the audience. The play attempting to deconstruct a system in which signifiers are related to transcendental signifieds cannot itself pretend to meaning; and so, as a play Der Ritt über den Bodensee refuses to deliver a clear message. June Schleuter quotes two critics of the New York performance a year after the premier: Stanley Kaufmann -- "It is disturbing and, for many, must be enraging. . . . [The rage] comes simply from [Handke's] utter contravention of what an audience expects from a play.' In the New York Times, Clive Barnes remarked frankly: "To say I didn't understand Peter Handke's play The Ride Across Lake Constance . . . would be to underestimate shamefully the cavernous profundity of my ignorance."

In 1970 Handke also published the novel that first brought him a wide readership, Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter (translated as The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick, 1972). The story of a paranoid ex-goalie who begins to read everything as a sign, commits a gratuitous murder, and runs from the police, sold well, was quickly translated into several European languages, and was made into a successful film in 1972 by Wim Wenders. Wenders and Handke had collaborated earlier and would again work together on films like Falsche Bewegung (1974, Wrong Move) and Der Himmel über Berlin (1987, released in

America as Wings of Desire).

During the late 1960's and early 1970's Handke achieved a certain notoriety in the media. Newspapers titillated their readers with reports of Handke's unorthodox readings at universities and of his relationship with French actress Jeanne Moreau. Although his texts relentlessly questioned the existing social order, political leftists ridiculed him for living in an ivory tower. Ivory tower dweller or not, Handke's work has been honored with several major literary prizes: the Hauptmann Prize in 1967, the Büchner Prize in 1973, the Kafka Prize in 1979, the Vilenica Prize in 1987, and the Grillparzer Prize in 1991, to name just a few.

Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus (1973; translated as They Are Dying Out, 1974) is a more traditional drama than Handke's earlier plays, for it has recognizable characters and a dramatic plot. Hermann Quitt is a powerful capitalist who, with fellow capitalists, exploits workers and consumers. At the same time he is a sensitive man who is losing the "rationality" required of a powerful person. The tension between Quitt's roles as capitalist and sensitive individual creates the drama. The capitalists describe their system, above all, as rational: "Unsere Produkte aber gibt es, und indem es die gibt, sind sie schon vernünftig -- sonst hätten wir als Vernunftswesen sie ja nicht aus vernünftigen Rohstoffen in vernünftigen Arbeitsgängen durch vernünftige Menschen erzeugen lassen" (Our products exist and their very existence makes them rational -- otherwise we, as rational beings, would not have had them produced in a rational manner from rational raw materials by rational people). Goaded by Kilb, an anti-capitalist who ridicules the capitalists and their rationality, Quitt abruptly quits the social order that gives him power, shocking even Kilb as he rips off a woman's blouse and spits in his guests' faces. And after Hans reads him Stifter's story "Der

Hagestolz" he is further inspired to revolutionary creation.

Quitt describes the nineteenth century of Stifter's story as a time when an earlier existing Weltgefühl (feeling for the world; universal feeling) was already gone, but when there was still a memory of that feeling and a longing for it. And because Stifter patiently and responsibly played the role of memory and longing, "stellten sich die Gefühle auch wirklich ein, vielleicht" (feelings were really produced, perhaps). Even given the "perhaps" that, typical of Handke's work, immediately relativizes a supposed center of meaning, Quitt finds his own situation execrable when compared to Stifter's: "wo man früher das Ganze erblicken wollte, sehe ich jetzt nichts als Einzelheiten" (where one once used to see the whole, I see nothing but particulars now). His business dealings have been attempts to hide the fact that he is playing a role that does not even exist, and now that he recognizes that, he says, he will create a new role. If the reality of business is nothing, then he will work with his "altmodisches Ich-Gefühl" (old-fashioned sense of self), with a "Vorstellung" (representation, imagination, idea, or even performance). The decision to double-cross his fellow capitalists will create a tragedy in the tradition of Shakespeare, and "die Vorstellung wird Wirklichkeit sein" (the idea will be reality).

After Quitt has caused chaos in the carefully ordered capitalist system, another of the capitalists, Lutz, expresses his dismay: "Ich will an nichts mehr glauben. Woran soll man sich noch halten, wenn der da unsre Preise zerstört, und damit unser vernünftiges System? Was für eine Zeit ist das? Was gilt eigentlich noch?" (I don't want to believe anything any more. What's there left to believe in when he destroys our prices, and with them our rational system? What kind of age is that? What's still valid?). Lutz feels betrayed at this loss of center, but Quitt, the perpetrator, has gained nothing himself, for he has simply moved out

of one role into another. Rebelling against the system has only brought him into another system, and he complains: "Ich will von mir ohne Kategorien sprechen. Ich will bitte nichts mehr bedeuten" (I want to speak about myself without categories. I don't want to mean anything any more, please). Leaving the rational system of capitalism has not made him the traditional liminal, irrational, insane philosopher hearing the voice of his daemon or the prophet hearing the voice of God, but rather an idiot hearing the "voices" of film titles, lines from popular songs, and advertising jingles: "Während die einen Monster entzaubert werden, rülpsen vor dem Fenster schon die nächsten" (While one set of monsters is being exorcised, the next ones are already burping outside the window). Rather than living in the glib new system of meaning he has entered into, Quitt longs to stutter, to be shortsighted, to tremble. Instead he smashes his head against a rock until he falls senseless to the floor.

Shortly after his mother's suicide, Handke wrote an extraordinary biography of her, Wunschloses Unglück (1972; translated as A Sorrow Beyond Dreams, 1975). From 1973 to 1979 Handke lived in Paris and wrote, among other works, Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung (1975; translated as A Moment of True Feeling, 1977), Die linkshändige Frau (1976; translated as The Left-Handed Woman, 1978), his journal Das Gewicht der Welt (1977; translated as The Weight of the World, 1984), and the first volume of his ambitious tetralogy Langsame Heimkehr (1979; translated as The Long Way Around, 1985). In part so that his daughter could attend a German-speaking gymnasium, Handke moved to Salzburg in 1979. His stay there included a personal and working relationship with actress Marie Colbin. They did a film version of Margerite Duras' Das Mal des Todes (The Mark of Death) in Handke's translation and under his direction with Colbin as the young woman in 1986.

While in Salzburg Handke finished his tetralogy with the prose texts Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire (1980; translated as The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire, 1985) and Kindergeschichte and the play Über die Dörfer (Through the Villages, 1981). Radically different from his earlier work, Über die Dörfer premiered at the Salzburger Festspiele in 1982, directed by Wim Wenders. The first scene of this play is a discussion between Gregor, a writer, and Nova, the spirit of a new age, the second scene a meeting at a distant construction site between Gregor and his brother Hans, a construction worker, the third a discussion between Gregor and his sister Sophie about her plan to open her own shop, and the fourth scene a confrontative meeting of all three siblings followed by a philosophical speech by Nova. On one level the question of the play is whether the house inherited by Gregor and inhabited by Hans should be mortgaged to finance a new business for Sophie. But more basically, the play is about truth.

Handke calls Über die Dörfer a Dramatisches Gedicht (Dramatic Poem), echoing Lessing's generic description of Nathan der Weise. Lessing said of his dramatic poem that it was not playable on the stage, that it would be enough if readers were to read it with interest. The same might be said of Handke's play, although it was produced in Salzburg.

After the anti-theater of his earlier work, Handke turns in this play to Greek theatrical forms. Of the four scenes, two take place before the curtain, and the other two, like many scenes in Greek drama, also take place in front of something -- a palace, a tent, or a grove in the case of the Greeks, a construction site and a cemetery wall in Handke's play. The slow, wordy pace of the play is also patterned on the Greeks: "Aischylos erscheint mir von allen Dramatikern als der vollkommenste: keine Intrige, nur die Wortgewalt; reines Drama" (Aeschylus seems to me, of all dramatists, the most perfect: no intrigue, only the

force of words; pure drama). Handke quotes Grillparzer's statement that Greek tragedies, in which "Erzählung" (story) outweighed "Handlung" (action, plot), had not yet completely separated themselves from the epic out of which they grew. Handke sees the epic as "again" necessary in drama: "für die Vergewisserung" (for reassurance) through epic repetition. He is striving, he writes, for "natürliche Dramaturgie, ohne die Dialog- und Handlungstricks des eingebürgerten Theaters" (natural dramaturgy, without the tricks of dialogue and plot of the traditional theater). All of this leads to a play of very long monologues spoken in elevated language, a device Handke describes not as monologues but as "Wechselreden" (alternating speeches).

The repetition of Greek forms, the slow, philosophical tempo made explicit in one of the epigraphs -- "Eine zärtliche Langsamkeit ist das Tempo dieser Reden" (Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce homo; A delicate slowness is the tempo of these speeches), the elevated language, and the appearance of Nova ("eine Göttin soll erscheinen und den Trost verkünden, so wie einst" -- a goddess is to appear and proclaim consolation, as of old), are not, as some have supposed, a simple mystical denial of the postmodern contingencies explicit in Handke's earlier work. Near the end of this play Hans angrily reexpresses these contingencies: "Es gibt weder Erkenntnis noch Gewißheit. Es gibt nichts Ganzes, und was ich denke, denke ich allein, und was mir allein einfällt, ist nicht Wahrheit, sondern Meinung, und es wirkt keine Weltvernunft, und das gemeinsame Menschheitsziel geht mehr denn je um als Gespenst. . . . Es gibt keine Einheit zwischen oben und unten" (There is neither knowledge nor certainty. There is nothing whole, and what I think I think alone, and what occurs to me alone is not truth, but opinion, and no world-reason is operating, and the common human goal is circulating more than ever as a specter. . . . There is no unity

between above and below). In response Nova gives her long speech of comfort, a speech that could be heard, as it begins with statements like "aus mir spricht der Geist des neuen Zeitalters" (out of me speaks the spirit of the new age) as metaphysical proclamation (the antithesis of Handke's earlier work). But the speech, in its entirety, is clearly something else.

First of all, Nova says that her words will be, like the play, a "Dramatisches Gedicht" -- a work of art then, and not religion or philosophy. She speaks of gods, for, as she says, "Es gibt dieses Wort, und es ist durch kein anderes ersetzbar" (This word exists, and it is replaceable through no other). Not that there are indeed gods, but that in the language game we have helped create, the word "gods" plays an irreplaceable role. There may be no path, but the image of a path must be created. "Zu tun als ob, ist eine Kraft" (To act as if, is a power). Nature, the self, light, children, peace, the dead, time, space, form, and color are all praised in seemingly metaphysical terms, but they are also, paradoxically, recognized as contingent. Meaning must be created in that contingency: "vergeßt die Sehnsucht nach den vergangenen heiligen Orten und Jahren. Mit euch ist die heilige weite Welt. Jetzt ist der heilige Tag. Wirkend arbeitend, seht ihr ihn und könnt ihn fühlen. Jetzt: das sind die Farben. Ihr seid jetzt, und ihr seid die Gültigen" (forget the longing for the bygone holy places and years. With you is the holy, wide world. Now is the holy day. Actively working you see it and can feel it. Now: those are the colors. You are now, and you are the valid ones). When a careful, upturned glance sees that the faces of the gods smile out of the things, Nova counsels, "Seht das Wunder und vergeßt es" (See the miracle and forget it). Such "miracles" are wonderful, and they must be forgotten. Humans must discover themselves as gods. In the face-to-face with the other is the only non-totalizing meaning. "Liebe Leute von hier" (Dear people from here -- as opposed to people caught up in

metaphysics), Nova says, "es gibt in unsrer Menschengeschichte nirgends einen stichhaltigen Trost. . . . Das übernatürliche ist nicht zu erwarten" (there is nowhere in our human history a lasting comfort. . . . The supernatural is not to be expected). Truth will not be found, but neither can we live without it. We must create it as a "Volk der Schöpfer" (people of creators).

Handke repeats his anti-metaphysical yet meaning-affirming stance in Die Geschichte des Bleistifts, his journal during the years he was writing the Langsame Heimkehr (Slow Return Home) tetralogy of which Über die Dörfer is the conclusion: "Das Gesetz der Kunst: Verherrlichung, aber dialektisch (es ist nicht das Goldene Zeitalter, sondern das Dialektische. . . . So ist das Farben- oder Lichtsehen mystisch und antimystisch zugleich, vereinigend und trennend zugleich.--'Das Herz blutet'; denn ich sehe mein Zuhause, und ich sehe: Ich werde von zuhause weggehen müssen" (The law of art: glorification, but dialectically (it is not the Golden Age, but the Dialectical. . . . Thus a vision of colors or light is simultaneously mystical and antimystical, unifying and dividing at the same time. -- 'The heart bleeds!'; for I see my home, and I see: I will have to leave home). In Über die Dörfer Gregor returns to his village and discovers the meaning of home, of the land, of the tree at the center, and he simultaneously decides to give that up, to keep moving. But he will move slowly and by way of the villages.

For Handke there are no gods, there is no lasting comfort except in the true, repeatable fiction of art: "Auch Chaplin tritt am Ende des 'Großen Diktators' als Nova, als Mensch des neuen Zeitalters, auf; und so sind wohl schon seit jeher viele als Nova aufgetreten; und was hat es genützt? Daß immer wieder noch einer als Nova auftreten konnte" (Chaplin too appears at the end of The Great Dictator as Nova, as a person of the

new age; and thus have many since then appeared as Nova; and what was the use? That repeatedly one more could appear as Nova).

Four years later, in 1986, the same year Handke's extraordinary novel Wiederholung (translated as Repetition, 1987) appeared, another Handke work premiered at the Salzburger Festspiele, this time Handke's translation of Aeschylus' Prometheus, gefesselt (Prometheus, Bound), directed by Klaus Michael Grüber. In 1987 Handke published the story Nachmittag eines Schriftstellers (translated as The Afternoon of a Writer, 1989) and the novel Die Abwesenheit (translated as Absence, 1990). That same year he left Salzburg to travel in Yugoslavia, Greece, Egypt, Spain, Japan, and elsewhere. He wrote a series of long essays: Versuch über die Müdigkeit (1989; Essay on Tiredness), Versuch über die Jukebox (1990; Essay on the Jukebox), and Versuch über den geglückten Tag (1991; Essay on the Achieved Day) and a book of descriptive texts Noch einmal für Thukydides (1990; Once Again for Thucydides). His translation of Shakespeare's Das Wintermärchen (The Winter's Tale) was staged in Berlin in 1990 by Luc Bondy. The major text written during this time was the play Das Spiel vom Fragen: Oder die Reise zum sonoren Land (1989; The Play/Game of Questioning: Or the Journey to the Sonorous Land).

Critical responses to the play were both loving and harsh. "Peter Handke weiß nicht, wie man Stücke schreibt, das heißt, er will es nicht wissen. So tritt uns das Schauspiel selber wie eine Frage entgegen. Wahrscheinlich erwartet es keine Antwort, bestimmt aber Zuneigung" (Benjamin Henrichs in Die Zeit, Nr. 5 -- 2 February 1990; Peter Handke does not know how plays are written, that is, he does not want to know. Thus the play itself approaches us like a question. Perhaps it expects no answer, certainly however sympathy).

"Die Uraufführung läßt keinen Zweifel mehr zu an der Haltlosigkeit der Texte, deren

erhabenes Tönen immer wieder abstürzt in die Platitude: Was sie als Poesie behaupten, ist süß-saurer Kitsch, hört sich an wie die pubertäre Lyrik von Jünglingen, die zuviel Hölderlin gelesen haben" (Peter Iden in the Frankfurter Rundschau, quoted in Die Zeit, 2 February 1990; (The premiere no longer allows any doubt as to the emptiness of those texts whose lofty sounds repeatedly plunge to platitudes: What pretends to be art is sweet/sour kitsch, and it sounds like the pubescent poetry of youths who have read too much Hölderlin).

In a discussion following a performance of the play Handke responded: "Ich hasse alle Leute, die wissen, wie ein Stück geschrieben zu sein hat" (I hate all people who know how a play should be written).

Performances of Das Spiel vom Fragen at the Vienna Burgtheater (under the direction of Claus Peymann) lasted for more than four demanding hours. There are eight characters in this play, seven of whom are travelling, as the subtitle suggests, "to the sonorous land," and the other a native in various guises who meets them at several points along the way. A world-praising Mauerschauer (Teichoscope) who turns out to be Ferdinand Raimund (the nineteenth-century Austrian author of magical fairy-tale dramas) is opposed by a cynical Spielverderber (spoil-sport) whom the audience finally recognizes as Anton Chekov. A young actress plays opposite a young actor, and an old man against an old woman. The seventh travelling character is a childlike, barefoot Parzival.

Travelling home, as in Handke's Langsame Heimkehr, is an almost ubiquitous theme in Handke's work; and it dominates this play/journey as well. The pilgrimage is to a sonorous land from which, at the play's beginning, a deep, sonorous signal sounds. This tone may be grand in a Wagnerian sense, and it may come from a place identified near the end of the play as Emmaus (the place the resurrected Christ revealed himself to two of his

disciples), but the play, as one would expect from Handke, is a play of questioning and not of metaphysical answers. The place called Emmaus is in fact a ferry, and thus simply serves to convey the travellers along their way, as opposed to being their final destination.

Additionally, Emmaus is immediately relativized as plural and not necessarily glorious when the old woman says that "der Billigwohnblock daheim am Ortsrand, wo einem beim Vorbeigehen die Aasfliegen in den Mund schwirren" (the cheap apartment block back home at the edge of the locality, where carrion flies swarm into a passerby's mouth) is also called Emmaus.

Handke is a studied non-convert, converted neither to the metaphysical nor to absolute skepticism. His Mauerschauer repeatedly declaims what approaches the metaphysical: a "Gebet des Daseins, bestehend einfach im Dasein, hier, jetzt" (prayer of being, existing simply in being, here, now), or "Entdecke ich die Schönheit, macht sie mich für den Augenblick wahr" (when I discover beauty, it makes me, for the moment, true), or "wir haben buchstäblich geglüht vom Ganz-Frage-Sein, und im Himmel oben hat, als Zeichen des uns vorschwebenden Fragens, eine Wolke gestanden" (we literally glowed with Being-Wholly-Question, and in the heavens above, as a sign of the questioning hovering before us, stood a cloud). But in each case the Mauerschauer pulls back from the transcendence he has approached by referring to fantasy, imagination, a role he plays, or to what he describes as the material here and now. He is constantly aware that he is creating as opposed to finding truth. Further relativizing his truths are the statements of the Spielverderber, whose allegorical role is to deconstruct the truth of the Mauerschauer's play/game. His cynical response to the cloud/sign from heaven is typical: "Warum dann nicht gleich eine Stimme von oben, oder der reitende Bote des Fragekönigs? -- Seltsamer

Freund: Auch die Zeit deiner Zaubermärchen ist vorbei. Oder?" (Why not then a voice from above, or the riding messenger of the Question King? -- Peculiar friend: The time of your magical fairy tales is also past. Isn't it?). But in the back and forth between the two the cynicism of the Spielverderber is also relativized; and in fact, the two opponents even switch sides during one conversation.

This is a play that refers to the mystical three drops of blood in the snow of the Parzival legend and to the crucified Christ as possible centers of meaning, but only in the context of leisurely, ongoing travel, travel that always calls the centers into question: "Mauerschauer und Spielverderber, gemeinsam: Laß uns ein Zeitlang noch ohne Ziel gehen! -- Beide tanzen ab" (Mauerschauer and Spielverderber, in unison: Let us walk for a time with no goal! -- Both dance off).

Handke's play is clearly not satisfied with pure deconstruction, but its new constructions are most pointedly not proclamations of pantheism or a new Catholicism either: "Wie viele Abschiede überall, wie viel Abschiedsschmerz! Nur die Nonnen in dem beleuchteten Abteil schwatzen vor sich hin ohne Kummer, fahren von niemandem weg, glauben sich schon vereint mit ihrem Herrn im Himmel. Garnicht gut so, garnicht gottschön!" (How many departures everywhere, how much pain of those departures! Only the nuns in the lit-up compartment chatter on without concerns, travel away from no one, believe themselves already united with their Lord in Heaven. Not at all good so, not at all godbeautiful).

Handke returned to Paris in 1990. There he became a father for a second time. In May of 1992 his new play, Die Stunde da wir nichts voneinander wußten (The Time When We Knew Nothing of One Another) had its premier in Vienna, again directed by Claus

Peymann. Like Das Mündel will Vormund sein, this is a play without words. The printed text is a set of stage directions that describe a public square and the people who pass through it. The light changes in the square. The weather changes. And hundreds of people played by several dozen actors move across the square. A sense of randomness and alienation competes with a sense for the fullness and diversity of human existence. Near the play's end the separate characters find kinds of communion with one another and a very old man begins to "speak" in gestures to the group circled around him. It is a moving moment of shared meaning, and, as we expect with Handke, it does not last. The square becomes once again a place where various figures come and go.

As Handke has felt his way beyond the negative morality of his early work (and of much of postmodern thought) he has begun to reiterate words and theater forms that have been systematically stripped of meaning (as much by himself as by others): god, beauty, nature, self, Heimat, permanence, truth, love, Volk, child, light, presence, wholeness, being. By creating the contexts of questioning, absence, tiredness, repetition, goalless walking, departure, and play Handke clears enough room to allow him to speak the words that tend otherwise to totalities. Transcendence is a vain supposition of thoughtless nuns in Handke's cosmos; but within the European language game, a game shaped in part by the plays he writes, Handke has suggested that we can at least (and at most) ask questions about words profitably deconstructed in the last quarter century.

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