

Berlin Heinrichplatz: The Novels of Ulrich Peltzer

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For at least a decade Germans have been waiting—waiting for literature, waiting for the great Berlin novel, waiting for the great novel of reunification. But despite numerous novels that have thematized reunification and Berlin—whether by Günter Grass or by Thomas Brussig—Germans are still waiting. It seems that no author can get it right, whether one is looking for entertaining narration on the one hand or a depiction at the height of modern literary techniques on the other. But perhaps this alternative is a false one: might it not be possible for a masterfully written novel, with precise and variegated language as well as sophisticated narrative structures, also to be entertaining? After all, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, not exactly a simple novel, is also a pleasure to read, comparable to Joyce's *Ulysses* or Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is true that such novels can not really be repeated, both because times are different and because imitations are inevitably subject to criticism. Hence something similar must always also be something different, something new and original; such a work would be a more precise picture of its era than the multitude of simple novels that tell about Berlin or reunification. Recently more and more literary critics in Germany have been finding in the works of Ulrich Peltzer an adequate answer to this challenge to narrative art; for this reason I want to take this opportunity to take a tour through Peltzer's three most recent novels in order to

outline their development.¹ In the background of my reflections will be the question: is it not possible that one of the eagerly awaited great Berlin novels has already arrived?

Writing the City or *Stefan Martinez*

In 1995, after an eight-year break in publication, Ulrich Pelzer published his second and to date longest novel, *Stefan Martinez*.² The very title of the novel thrusts an individual protagonist into the center of the reader's attention, implying that this might be a *Bildungsroman* of some sort. The eponymous protagonist does indeed appear in the novel's introduction: sitting at the breakfast table, looking at art books, interrupted by observations and reflections which illuminate his situation and make it clear that Stefan is sitting in the apartment of his girlfriend Evelin, that he is familiar with mathematics, and that he is attempting to borrow a reference work on cement. As readers learn later, Stefan is an architecture student who works as a statics calculator for an engineering company. His route to work takes him through the city, through Berlin, through the borough of Schöneberg. This journey extends over several pages full of detailed descriptions of what Stefan experiences through seeing, smelling, and hearing, and these pages are full of memory particles which thrust themselves abruptly into the narration. In order to give a sense of Pelzer's language and style, I cite a relatively long, coherent passage:

The rising and falling wail of a siren blew in from Hauptstraße, becoming louder, and then blue emergency lights flashed above the car roofs, thin blue strips mirrored in the tin, and two or three times in the dull windows of the newspaper shop, until they faded out, as if they'd been turned off, while the siren could still be heard for a while, moving in the direction of Kleistpark. Slowly traffic started flowing again. From the open door of the shop came smoke, a stale porridge fermented with the odor of liquor, followed by a many-voiced roar: good joke, Eugen, that guy's a real piece of work. He'll do anything. Snorting, Martinez exhaled and glanced over the headlines: The Miracle in Ebrus. Hertha Finished. The Immune System Diet. The morning rain had made the newspaper damp, washing from the large letters a gray film

that covered the grid of photographs under the headlines like a curtain. No more details to be made out. Ebrus or Burnus, some place where there's been another earthquake. Far beyond Capodocia. Oyun ve Eglence-Salonu: a neon sign was flickering, as if it couldn't make up its mind to go on or off. What does that mean? Salon for Oyun and Eglence? Maybe the words had something to do with a game (fun, entertainment), because several times already on his way to the subway, between the heavy curtains of the low building, he had seen men playing cards, tired Turkish faces under the light of a florescent tube hanging low over the table. They gamble their hearts out, Klapproth had told him, tough guys. You really have to watch out with them. (SM 16-17)

This passage assembles a number of the topoi of modern city narration: neon lights and headlines, streams of traffic and information, the presence of the foreign next to the local color of Berlin natives, an opening up to the world side-by-side with a shutting oneself off from the world, latent criminality, and tempo. In spite of the complex, lengthy syntax, tempo arises from changes in sense perception and the dense depiction of variety. In the narrative sequencing, motivated by the protagonist's journey, this tempo recreates the simultaneity of the big city.

Berlin is explicitly transformed into language not in its totality but rather selectively. The novel's map of the city corresponds to Stefan's mental map, which is filled with white spaces and consciously mentions certain parts of the city only in order to bracket them out:

His map of the city fell apart into various . . . rectangles. . . . Many parts of Berlin remained empty, unwritten on by the lines of his movements, spaces without graphs or axes that he didn't even want to get acquainted with any more. One walk through them had sufficed for all time. Wedding was a nightmare, Spandau purgatory, Rudow hell, the end of the world. (SM 18)

Stefan Martinez understands and makes sense of urban space in the way that city dwellers usually do: he ignores particular areas—areas that might be viewed as suburban bedroom communities for the petit-bourgeoisie or as urban living spaces for workers and white-collar employees, and which, with their respective

subcenters and local shopping and administrative areas, tend to differentiate themselves from the dense urban centers of Berlin before reunification: the West Berlin "City" on Kurfürstendamm and in the surrounding Charlottenburg, and the nightlife and subcultural districts Schöneberg and Kreuzberg, which for Stefan Martinez represent the true Berlin. In other words the protagonist counts as part of the city districts which—although they, too, offer living space for workers and white collar employees—are not as characterized by homogeneity as the districts he excludes. The heterogeneity of the metropolitan space is thus transposed to the neighborhood level, where it can be both experienced and described. Heterogeneity, sociocultural conditions of mixing, thus becomes the distinguishing feature of urban life. Simultaneity is what makes the metropolis.

Simultaneity arises through the multiplicity of sensations which transgress a particular threshold of reception—for even in the countryside there is such a thing as simultaneity: bells ring, a dog barks, wind blows through the trees. But in general these events are distanced, located just on the edge of perception, whereas in the city sense perceptions impose themselves upon people, surround them, and force them to take a position with respect to them—even if that position is to ignore advertisements or to cross the street quickly. Simultaneity as the accumulation of sensations in close proximity to the body is, understood thus, identical with the individual's experience of the city; however because the city is always experienced in conjunction with others, it is also a conscious collective experience. Hence to depict simultaneity is also to depict the uniqueness of urban experience and perception. "At the same time" can be seen as the ultimate sign of the urban.

In addition to sections in which the protagonist travels through the city—not, by the way, as a *flâneur*, if being a *flâneur* means wanting to preserve that which is individual and unique; if Stefan Martinez is a *flâneur*, then he is a *flâneur* pumped full of amphetamines—in addition to these journeys, the reader finds a multiplicity of other narrative conjunctions in which simultaneity is put into action in various ways. For instance a whole series

of dialogs occurs in a polyglot mishmash consisting of English and Italian interspersed with bits of German and French. These dialogs are motivated by Stefan's Italian roommate, Umberto, who understands even less German than Stefan Italian, with the result that both men are forced to help themselves in other ways; the same effect is created by the memories that occasionally interrupt the flow of narration, memories of one of Stefan's lovers in Italy. This multilingualism—expanded even further by reminiscences of Latin phrases and quotations that mark Stefan as a member of the educated bourgeoisie—is yet another expression of the urban, of the city as a space in which foreigners do not necessarily come together, but into which they flow, whether as tourists or as migrants for political or economic reasons, recalling in the multiplicity of their languages the image of the Babylonian confusion of languages, a reminder of the oldest city culture. In short: the metropolis is and has always been characterized by the coexistence of different languages and cultures.

One of the less successful attempts to structure simultaneity in the narration is the parallel montage of two passages of text over fourteen pages (SM 97-110). In this section the top two thirds of the page are devoted to continuing narration, in particular to Stefan's erotic memories, while he is at work, of his Italian lover; the bottom third is devoted to an excursus on the neuropsychology of perception, an excursus which begins with scientific jargon, but which becomes increasingly sharp and vivid. Because the chronology of the text is broken by the gap between sexual intercourse and photon streams, and because the intimate nature of sexuality is confronted with complex abstractions, one could call this a kind of simultaneity, recognizable even at the level of different typefaces. However this simultaneity is not the (seemingly) indifferent simultaneity of urbanity; rather, this passage establishes a rather random structural opposition which demands resolution. In other words, the opposition is not simply descriptive, does not simply demonstrate the coexistence of multiple forms, but rather creates questions, especially since this section is an anomaly in the context of the novel itself. Are the abstract elements intended simply as a contrast to the erotic

sequence, or are they, rather, meant to illuminate it, or even to expose it? Or does this section simply demonstrate the (unbridgeable?) gap between cognition and emotion, in which case, because of the intensity of erotic experience, intellectualism would come off rather badly?³ No matter how one answers these questions, and despite the formal correspondence between the simultaneity of the metropolis and the simultaneity of the textual levels, the text itself becomes so heavy-handed that simultaneity itself falls out of balance and becomes a contradiction.

Because, over long passages, the narration is tied to the protagonist, his perceptions are the primary source for the narrative production of simultaneity. In various ways the progression of plot elements is interrupted throughout the narrative: again and again particles or complexes of memory, coming from various levels of time, rise to the surface, complicating the chronology of the narrative and demanding a *post facto* reconstruction of various plot strands. Occasionally the text itself offers readers assistance, as in the accounts of four paragraphs which evidently single out events of extreme significance for Stefan Martinez. Among these are: how his father and mother first met, Stefan's school years, a drug deal initiated by Nils (the Italian connection), and how Stefan meets Evelin. Such attempts at order, however, are merely sprinkled in along with a great many other perceptions, smells, glances, and sounds, each of which demands attention and entertains, suffusing the text with joyous detail and artificially simulating real perception. After all, one's quotidian approach to things brackets out a great deal of what one perceives in order to make room for higher-order goals or motivations. And generally that which is perceived is not also put into language. In Stefan Martinez's consciousness, however, it is, a fact which separates him from others, since details form themselves so precisely in his perception. The last sentence of the novel describes Stefan: "Things go through him. Which he sees" (SM 572).

Is this, then, not a *Bildungsroman* at all, as suggested previously, is Stefan Martinez's consciousness not there to be educated and formed but rather to restructure itself continuously in

an “I” in an emphatic sense? The answer in the text: “I doubt I hope I am. A succession of beginnings” (SM 210). Logically enough the narration—which, at any rate, constantly interrupts itself with ellipses and anacolutha, rushing to another beginning or another end—begins anew several times in each of the main plot sequences. The second chapter is narrated by Stefan’s mother after a kind of prologue has taken the reader back to World War I and Stefan’s grandfather, who settles in a small town in the Rhineland, where Stefan’s mother experiences World War II and its bombings, and ultimately meets and falls in love with the Spanish “guest worker” Miguel Martinez. This passage, which has its own coherence, does without the narrative innovations of the previous chapter.

The third chapter, which takes place in Berlin, then returns to such innovations, once again reporting on Stefan’s daily life, enhanced by sometimes lengthy reminiscences of his youth and experiences in school. Here, as in the first chapter, the narrative perspective occasionally departs from Stefan himself, shifting to his friends Hartwig, Till and Ludwig, who, in various combinations, with or without Stefan, pass through Berlin’s night life, in the course of which they consume drugs to excess. The progression through various pubs and bars seems curiously empty, enjoyable in only a limited way; it appears to be primarily a way of killing time or a way of warding off loneliness, or at any rate a loneliness perceived as bourgeois. However at one point Stefan Martinez had higher ideals, and this is made clear in reminiscences of his youth, in which readers learn of Stefan’s political activism as a young man socialized under the aegis of the politicization of 1968. After initial experiences with school strikes, Stefan becomes involved with a so-called “K-Gruppe,” and his reasons for such involvement go back to a simple wish⁴:

There has to be an end sometime. An end to oppression. An end to letting oneself be oppressed. To being intimidated. The interests of those people are not the interests of the working people, of trainees and schoolchildren. Because it’s about a new society, where no one will be afraid anymore. Where true equality reigns, with neither exploitation nor alienation. (SM 385)

Because of the party discipline demanded of him, internal group disputes, and the fracturing of the left into a multiplicity of factions fighting against each other, Stefan turns away from politics in disappointment and moves to Berlin, among other things to escape the *Bundeswehr* (SM 470).⁵

Back then . . . Kantstrasse (for instance), particularly between the administrative court and Savignyplatz . . . embodied a dream; when one came into the city from the West, it allowed one to drive zigzag on it at night, honking—a dream that no other city in the Federal Republic promised to keep; like the ecstasy of a memory, as if everything were possible if one could be greeted in this way, all the panoply of excesses seeking to gain form in the thoughts of a man who was still very young. Don't think you'll be getting something from me that you won't be big enough to cope with later on; but begin. With my best wishes: make an effort to conquer me. Enchanted by the Boulevard Montparnasse, which once Andreas and Stefan had not tired of walking down hour after hour, drinking liquor on the terrace of the Coupole, in dives [Kaschemen], in hushed places, one (i.e. he) recognized something in Berlin that spoke of the future, that wasn't to be found elsewhere in Germany: to be greeted with arms bravely opened wide and nevertheless to have to prove oneself. Every word uttered simply in some cities before the gray of dawn acquired a weight here, weighed more than an oath or a promise, and if one should be in a position to keep faith, sometime, then that weight would not just open up the world; it would make the world a part of one's own self, would fuse the self with the world without any in-between. Among many one would be someone, speaking, laughing, hoping, truly at home. (SM 524-25)

Berlin appears as a singularity, there is no place like it in the Federal Republic, at most reminiscences of other metropolises such as Paris are permissible; and Berlin is connected in a remarkable way to the self-development of the protagonist. At first Berlin appears as a horizon of possibilities. Then something demanding is perceived in the city: it is something which has to be conquered, but it also appears to offer adequate compensation for such a conquest. For Stefan Martinez this compensation consists of his fusion with the world, which becomes a part of his own self. In this seemingly paradoxical constellation, as one among many, Stefan has found himself.

I have already discussed the worldliness of the city as a place of exchange for information, cultures, languages, streams of traffic, as well as people and their fates. The city is capable of keeping its promises to the extent that one opens oneself to it, allowing it to become a part of one's self, a self which hence has a stake in others and in the world, while simultaneously being individualized, but in a non-elitist way. Hence *Stefan Martinez* does in the end turn out to be a kind of *Bildungsroman*, albeit not one in which a bourgeois subjectivity is formed. The subjectivity of *Stefan Martinez*, instead, is mimetic with respect to the city; it processes information, beginning and ending again and again, making new beginnings and then stopping. The creation of this subjectivity thus clearly takes place programmatically under the aegis of postmodernity. From the very beginning Peltzer suspends the agonistic constellation between protagonist and city identified by Volker Klotz as central to the classic big city novel of modernity, Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (Klotz 372-419). In that novel Döblin depicts a struggle between Franz Biberkopf's subjectivity and the metropolis, which the protagonist experiences as a petrified mass. In Peltzer's novel, by contrast, the city is an integral part of the movable subject. Simultaneity, diffusion, the occasional narrative desertion of the protagonist are affirmed and esteemed, and all of this is made clear in the contrast between Stefan's life in Berlin and the stories from provincial Germany, as well as the prehistory of the Martinez family: the stories of Stefan's grandfather and mother. The dynamism of the metropolis is the permanent educational institution, which Stefan Martinez transforms into his home, and which is the object of praise in Ulrich Peltzer's novel. However this is anything but a pure affirmation of the status quo; by structurally imprinting both simultaneity *and* the possibility of new becoming into his depiction, Peltzer makes a gesture to theorists of Berlin like Benjamin and Bloch, who, at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, described Berlin as a space of non-contemporaneity, a space in which capitalism showed most clearly the traces of the path that would lead to its own overcoming (see Jäger, "Kriegerdenkmal"). The desire to be one of many and to conjoin with the world presup-

poses precisely the social changes that Stefan Martinez had contemplated in his youth, for otherwise the agreement and harmony between self and world would be an illusion.

The City as World and Home or *Alle oder keiner*

The reconciliation of opposites, the hope for a kind of collective subject, is a central concern in Peltzer's works, a concern expressed in the very title of Peltzer's subsequent novel, *Alle oder keiner* [Everyone or No One]. Four years had passed since the publication of Peltzer's previous novel, and if it had already been remarkable that a novel from the middle of the 1990s depicted the pre-unification Berlin of the 1980s—a portrait of the sort that has only recently become fashionable (see especially Regener and, for a wider context, Teipel)—so too the next novel was concerned not so much with German reunification as with scenes from the life of the novel's protagonist Bernhard from the middle of the 1970s up to the 1990s, scenes that form the narrative present. The novel begins with a political demonstration in Spain's Basque country, a demonstration to which Bernhard is taken by his friend Florencio, whom he had met in the 1970s at an anti-psychiatry conference in Bologna. At the demonstration Bernhard begins to think about things, is surprised by what is happening in his head: the combination of stimuli and emotions, via chemical messengers and electrical impulses, with words and syllables. This complex conglomeration demands a lengthy citation, since it helps to illuminate Peltzer's poetics:

[B]ecause it can't be separated, as if a letter were stuck to every molecule, one to one practically, but subject to changes and never completely stable over the course of time; the connective energy decreases more and more, until finally a conventional pattern dissolves and a new one is formed, unexpectedly often, a jab at one's heart that one can't explain, one can only say: now it has happened, I felt it clearly, transforming what was once the valid present into a narration, into a story along whose incisions we stumble, a story that we invoke or curse, as if we were obsessed with keeping it awake or ripping it from the jaws of death, as if it would be one's own death, if one were to become silent, the end of all signals, monitors without information, a continuous, monotonous tone without depth. What remains are sentences. They

are true or false, one can comprehend them or not. One exists within them with heart and soul, as the saying goes, bringing oneself to the world throughout one's life. The unreachable limit, the outside—only in moments of ecstasy do we succeed in breaking through it, as a temporary possession that corresponds exactly to the words . . . as if woven line by line into the chapters of a novel which is one's own life, which calls it forth again, continues and coagulates it. . . . (AK 12-13)

As in *Stefan Martinez*, Peltzer is interested in the connection between neurophysiology and linguistic consciousness. Here too language usually fails to transcend a specific border; in exceptional circumstances this border is crossed, allowing unmediated access to things. However whereas in the previous novel subjectivity in process had been allied with the city, here subjectivity constructs itself again and again from the beginning through writing and the telling of stories. On the one hand subjectivity searches for information about its own existence; but on the other hand, precisely in its search, subjectivity creates its own existence as an almost inescapably linguistic essence, simultaneously foreign and familiar in its mediated nature. If one understands existence, being-in-the-world, as essentially characterized by having to come to grips with the world and the things in it—or, in Peltzer's words, to gain access to things—, then the problem of access to the world, of linguistic perception becomes more difficult. In particular, one must seek to depict things while at the same time marking the deficiencies of such linguistic, written depictions. To strive for impossible success in the face of certain failure: this is Peltzer's literary credo. However it is not just a question of the things which one must seek to apprehend, things which Peltzer describes with great precision and variety. As with the figure of Stefan Martinez previously, so too Bernhard constructs himself via the objects and impressions that form his world. What is also of importance is the self-constitution of the subject through writing and putting things into language: things that mark the space, form the context, and constitute the present of the subject. Without these things, the individual would be thrown back upon him- or herself. The belief in the existence of things protects against solipsism, and skepticism about language's capabilities protects against

naive realism, since there is no fixed point at hand. Instead, any fixed point is a goal, a horizon which retreats as one moves toward it. Hence the subject itself also retreats and begins again, marked by traces that it leaves behind. Where it knows itself to be in union with the things of the world, as in the ecstasies of love and drugs, its is without language. If this dilemma becomes the fundamental principle of writing and perception, then the question of the city, of Berlin, which had previously acted as a mediator and seemed to make reconciliation possible, becomes more complicated.

Before we explore the significance of Berlin, however, we must catch up with Bernhard himself, the novel's protagonist, who is sitting in the apartment of his new lover Christine and trying in his mind to tell her his story; in her absence he is remembering and gradually supplying the fragments with the help of which readers can understand the narrative present. In one of these passages Bernhard remembers how he and his former lover Evelin gradually got settled, got money, acquired tasteful decorations for their living space, and made plans for the future:

No fighting, not about this and not about that. Things and their cost already seem to have distanced themselves from me by light years, I look at them as if through the wrong end of a telescope. I still recognize what they're good for and where they belong, but nothing else; the connection is broken. I can't describe this very well, as if it were a formulaic equation that suddenly fell apart. (AK 22)

The costs mentioned here refer not just to the exchange value of things but, more importantly, to the intellectual difficulty of grasping them, a difficulty which has a political aspect, since it is not just a question of one's subjective approach to the world but also a question of not allowing things to be limited to their exchange value alone. The ability to recognize the use value of things, to grant things a kind of surplus, has been lost:

[W]rong, not the weather, not economic seasons, like a continuous natural cycle that spins and spins and crushes anything that gets on its wrong side, whoever dares to block its path or tries to stop it, crazy people, slackers, comedians, surveilled and watched

over by the state; rather, an inexorable flood of goods that rushes forth as suddenly as it loses itself and disappears into the sand: what's left is a desert of things dreamed into emptiness, and then it begins again, at the touch of a button. . . . (AK 17)

What this means in poetic language is that previous certainties and understandings about economic cycles and about the state as an agent of capital have apparently been lost. One can expect that Bernhard will look for and find a supplement; and indeed, after the end of leftist explanations of the world other things become important: the battle to establish a connection to things is moved to other plains. Bernhard, the first-person narrator, explains the significance that music has acquired for him as an innovation that conveys a message "that, not very precisely perhaps, contained what seemed to me to be lacking, for me; from now on everything would have to be different" (AK 38). The music mentioned here is, in the first instance, electronic music, not in any danger of making it onto the hit parades but rather connected to a subculture with subversive impulses. Developed in the 1970s and early 1980s, this music is aimed against the mainstream and against the easy self-satisfaction of songwriters and the technical virtuosity of rock. Bands from the milieu of what used to be called industrial music are mentioned, such as Throbbing Gristle, This Heat, and Suicide. Bernhard goes to a concert of the latter band at the legendary Kreuzberg auditorium named after the previous city zip code SO 36—a name slightly disguised in the novel as "Esso."

[T]he very latest having to do with music, with machines and voices, electronically amplified sounds that surrounded one every day, often just noise, rumbling, squeaking feedback . . . then again groups came on playing their music so loud and fast that it seemed as if neither they nor their audience had a second to lose on analysis . . . all of this stood on its own, representing no one else, no more authority dictating how one was to speak or move, how something was to be depicted, beyond the assertions of petrified, dead concepts and a paralyzing surveillance of thought via an above that was right and a below that was wrong, or vice versa, via antiquated symbols and negations, texts as heavy as cement that one was supposed to learn by heart from beginning to end instead of taking what one was able to use practically,

turning the pages, jumping, changing the station . . . and so everyone cobbled his own program together, released from the custody of the one truth. . . . (AK 48)

Music stands here for a completely different approach to the world. It marks not just a sociocultural break between leftist alternative culture and the anarchic radicalism of punk but also the transition from Marxist critique and analysis to postmodern *bricolage*—understood, with Foucault, as a conceptual tool chest open to one's own construction projects—which, at least initially, carried the promise of transforming affirmation into subversion. Of course this hope was not fulfilled, but the failure is not important in this context, since what is at stake is Bernhard's sense of having escaped from a period of heavy stagnation into political freedom, not capitalist freedom but rather political freedom even in the battle against capitalism; he feels liberated from the guardians of pure dogmas, the keepers of orthodoxy, liberated into spontaneity, into political activity, an activity which is not too proud to engage in what Foucault calls micropolitics.

The significance in the previously cited passage of the brief subordinate clause which states that these are sounds that belong to the quotidian environment should not be underestimated. Music thus creates a connection to the city, superimposes itself upon the city, becomes a kind of drug in the sense that it produces states of consciousness that, in *Stefan Martinez*, had been found in erotics or other ecstasies. The experience of corporeal immediacy is preserved even in the intricate chronology of the novel, which is characterized by various time layers that reappear constantly until they reveal themselves, in the course of the narration, as memories and can then be dated and find their place in a history which must be reconstructed. Even in the 1990s music remains the royal road to immediacy, as the description of a concert by the Berlin technopunk band Atari Teenage Riot, which also takes place in SO 36, makes clear.

As if it were slowly regaining consciousness, the audience begins to react, as I can see from my position above, the crowd starts moving at various points, tempted to penetrate the massive force of the carpet of sound rolling over them, crash waves of elec-

tronically agitated particles, with individual shouts and roars; I sense that a suction is coming into being, into which I dive, which pulls me along with it, my body thrusts itself back and forth as if of its own accord . . . sampled words and parts of sentences rise above the voices of the men, base sounds vibrate in my chest as if my heart were losing its beat. . . . (AK 229-30)

The only other context in which bodily sensations of this sort occur is at political actions and demonstrations in the Basque country and in Bologna, at protest rallies against the orthodox Communists and against public swearing-in ceremonies for army draftees in post-unification Berlin. Although the traditional leftist explanations of political misery have become questionable, what is inadequate or even horrific in politics continues to be stressed—political crimes are depicted with intensity, from the military junta in Chile through the poison gas catastrophe in Seveso to brutal police actions and the murder of Bernhard's friend Florencio for political reasons. This insistence on the horrors of political violence contrasts sharply with the *dolce vita* of Bernhard's established, perhaps even jaded peers, who are concerned primarily with a particular *savoir vivre*, exquisite cuisine, and tasteful interior decoration; the contrast marks a kind of cluelessness or alienation (AK 204).⁶ An insoluble trace remains between the passages which precisely describe furniture and cuisine on the one hand and the no less precise descriptions of political inequities on the other hand. Strange textual passages occupy these interstices, separated from the rest of the text spatially and through italics; such passages pop up throughout the novel, occasionally referring to other similar passages, occasionally standing alone. Here is one example: "[A] premonition that one gets in sleep daydream sewn into a coarse linen sack and thrown into the ocean repeating itself night after night tiny glimmering hope during the day" (AK 207). These textual insertions operate at the limits of meaning, seeming to describe traumatic scenarios which develop in semiconsciousness between dreaming and being awake. To some extent real fears and traumas are thematized, but sometimes these are just sentence fragments, possibly preserved at the moment of waking up, without giving any information about what went before, as in "*light tongue heavy tongue what*

can you say" (AK 239). The connection between these passages and the conflict between the good life and political inadequacies is this: these passages execute and explicate the irritation caused by the contrast, visibly inscribing the unfairness of social relations into the novel itself.

It would be easy here to cite Adorno's dictum that there can be no truthful life in the midst of falsehood, but Peltzer demonstrates, instead, that it is precisely the non-contemporaneity of false and true that is the problem: the individual, who has only one life, seeks of necessity to settle into this life as well as he or she possibly can. The demand associated with the good life forms the title of the novel: everyone or no one. In reality all people ought to be able to participate in the good life, to receive their part of the happiness that is available, of the surplus produced by society. But such a program cannot be realized in the blink of an eye, even if one begins with small things, at the local level, and this is the harsh lesson the protagonist must face. Hence in spite of all his comfort, Bernhard feels himself disturbingly empty—"distanced from things" is his way of putting it. This sense of dissatisfaction ultimately leads him to withdraw from the self-satisfied and self-congratulatory jadedness of his peers, a withdrawal signaled initially by a change of girlfriends: Bernhard gives up his previous relationship in favor of a new love affair with the ambitious writer Christine. Here, as always with Peltzer, the private and the political form an inseparable link. This link is formulated in recent theories that are themselves referred to in the novel:

[T]hat was one of the theories that people were interested in, looking for the moment in which everything is turned around and for the reasons why people put up with it; our question was why do people behave in the way that they do, often directed against themselves, to their own detriment . . . desperately longing to be swallowed by the mass of the others, literally into insanity, the heavenly rays in the ass of presiding judge Schreber. They weren't just his own private affair, a metaphor for his craziness; they were a social hallucination. . . . The inner world of the outer world, for us two sites of production connected to each other, the one no less real than the other, to be understood only in their interconnection, to be cured only in their interconnection, through activity. . . . (AK 214-15)

The political conflict reaches into the realm of the private, disturbing private happiness and pointing to an interconnection with the realm of the social; the novel's insistence on this connection is accompanied by a reference to *Anti-Oedipus*, the analysis of capitalism and schizophrenia by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This postmodern theory is apparently capable of at least partially preserving social protest, and of giving protest a weightlessness, an airiness not far removed from the musical concerts and the bodily experiences associated with them in the novel. At any rate Bernhard develops a relaxed relationship to theory and to politics, and this relaxation contrasts starkly with the rules and demands that had, for instance, interfered in the life of Stefan Martinez. This relaxation prevails even in the narrative structure of the text, which is no longer at pains to pile experiment on experiment, adopting a multiplicity of language styles and introducing and following a multiplicity of characters. Instead, the style of *Alle oder keiner* is condensed, and with the exceptions mentioned, which are clearly intentional, Peltzer consistently adheres in this novel to one stylistic and tonal level. While this level is characterized by great linguistic complexity, depicting non-contemporaneous events simultaneously, as the lengthier citations above demonstrate, the novel's stylistic coherence also shows that Peltzer has found and become comfortable with his voice, and that he is able to coordinate various plot strands and time levels with the masterful skill characteristic of an author at home with his own authority.

This sense of being at home also shines through in the novel's depictions of Berlin. Whereas in Stefan Martinez the city had been described as a challenge, as a framework to be conquered, or as an entity with which the protagonist had to come to terms, the protagonist of *Alle oder keiner* is already at one with the city. Berlin is his life space, his home, his second skin, and Bernhard moves through the city with a high level of self-confidence. Moreover, the space of the city has become smaller. Whereas Peltzer's previous novel had tried to give a panoramic view of the metropolis, the city's space has been condensed in *Alle oder keiner*. While Bernhard, who has a temporary job as a psychologist in a research

project at the Freie Universität, occasionally narrates his experiences in Dahlem, the suburban district in which most of the university's buildings are located, he concentrates his narration primarily on a small segment of Kreuzberg, the area around Heinrichplatz, between Spreewaldplatz, Oranienplatz, Mariannenplatz, and the Kottbusser Bridge. In other words this is the center of Kreuzberg, a space made famous by the carnivalesque, Bakhtinian disturbances that occur within it every year on May 1.⁷ In a very long sentence Bernhard tells of a typical stroll through this area, the kind of stroll that he has frequently taken after concerts:

[O]ften it was already dusk, a yellowish strip above the warehouses and office buildings on the banks of the Spree, if one walked, or if one walks, from the Schlesisches Tor to Berlin-Mitte, toward the television tower, one could clearly hear one's footsteps on the sparsely-traveled street, which connected barricaded or destroyed bridges, just the trunks of pillars in the water which flowed along lazily, until one couldn't go any further because, from the riverside, the Wall suddenly sprang forward, blocking one's way, like the project of a minimalist artist, in the manner of a running fence right through the city, slabs of cement thickly rounded at the top, set down by cranes and later gotten rid of just as quickly and thoroughly in order to clear the way again for traffic into the northern districts and to the east. Everywhere businesses were opening here, where previously shop windows covered with dust had prevented one from looking in, there were computer stores, falafel shops, and restaurants with coolly marbled walls, a lot of apartment buildings had also been renovated by now, their exteriors freshly painted, so that the whole neighborhood seemed brighter, not as cheerless as it once had been, from the headquarters of the Springer company to Bethaniendamm, to the welfare office in a wing of the former Lutheran sisters' hospital, a pseudo-Romanesque building-complex with a little tower and slender columns—I think one can see this from Heinrichplatz if one stands in the intersection, but I don't know for sure, I'd have to go back there to make sure my assumption is correct, I don't have the time for that, and anyway it's completely unimportant. (AK 49-50)

It is inconceivable that Stefan Martinez could have expressed himself in this way, could have avoided giving information and then asserted that such information was irrelevant anyway. Evi-

dently the city, once understood as a challenge, is now no longer worthy of a second glance—in spite of all its transformations after the reunification with the GDR. If one asks why this is the case, then the answer is the one I have already suggested: that Berlin has become the narrator's home. But this word alone is insufficient, because home means not just the limited territory that one appropriates in contradistinction to the foreign; rather, what distinguishes Berlin, and what had already distinguished it in *Stefan Martinez*, is the city's ability to incorporate the world within it, an internationalism that is unique within the Federal Republic. This internationalism, in turn, means that making Berlin one's home is equivalent to making the world one's home. The novel demonstrates this brilliantly, allowing scenes in Kreuzberg to share space with scenes in the Basque country, in Italy, and in Romania. This is probably the most realistic way of depicting a great European city in the era of globalization, since cities like Paris and London, Berlin and Barcelona are now increasingly characterized not so much by their local inhabitants as by migrants: people traveling in search of work, tourists, temporary students, working people who may well love the city and see it as the end point and goal of their peregrinations, but who, for other reasons, must remain mobile, must be nomads, under the aegis of flexibility and the dynamization of the economic world. To live in Berlin, then, no longer means constantly being in one place but rather: to go somewhere to work on a construction job, to go to another place on one's vacation, and to visit friends in yet another place. The globalization of the city corresponds to this movement, since Berlin has the same department stores, since the same movies are shown, since the same music is played in nightclubs, the same cars move through the streets, the same products are sold in stores in Berlin as in other comparable cities. There is relatively little left to mark the specificity and uniqueness of a city, but this is not the point, since Peltzer is not looking for local folklore or anything like it. Rather, as in *Stefan Martinez*, the metropolis is differentiated from the provincial in its ready acceptance of trends toward mobility, in its affirmation of difference, in its yes to dynamization; and what is unique in Peltzer's

novel is the insistence on the eponymous everyone or no one, an insistence which retains a critical horizon against which those who profit from globalization are shown the price of their freedom, a price which is unacceptable as long as there are people who lose from globalization.

The New World, or *Bryant Park*

The conflict between winners and losers continues in Peltzer's next text, the much-discussed novella *Bryant Park*. The critical attention accorded to the book can be attributed to a publication contemporaneous with the Frankfurt Book Fair in October of 2001, shortly after the events of September 11, which, amazingly enough, found their way into the text. I will show how September 11 makes its appearance, but first I want to sketch briefly the structure of the narration.

As in his Berlin novels, Peltzer chooses here a segment of the metropolis in order to narrate a manageable segment of the city, specifically the area of Manhattan surrounding the eponymous Bryant Park. Not far from the park lives the narrative's protagonist, named Stefan, who is carrying out genealogical research in the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue, trying to follow the track of an immigrant family; but this search is hardly important, since what really matters are the descriptions of city life, of everyday objects and the people who meet Stefan or with whom he is familiar. This primary narrative level, which takes up the most space, is interrupted by a secondary level, which, in reverse chronological order, tells the story of a drug deal planned in a Berlin movie theater, a deal which ultimately leads to Naples and failure.⁸ This secondary level resembles the story of a similar drug deal in *Stefan Martinez*, especially since some of the characters have the same names. At a tertiary level of the narrative, taking up the smallest amount of space—composed, in fact, almost entirely of fragmentary particles—is a story of an old man's sickness and death, told from the perspective of the old man's son. These three narrative levels are not set apart from each other spatially but rather run through each other, separated only by the italicization of levels two and three. An example:

[A]lthough Edoardo—said Nils in answer to one of my questions—was, according to general opinion, an all right guy, Brigitte was supposed to have been with him frequently down there and had had nothing but nice things to report, good experiences (don't always think about a story, otherwise everything gets caught up in speculation, one is trapped by one's own airplane thoughts, closing in in loops, notorious pros and cons red and white points flashing fast one after another in the night-blue sky, moving without a sound from west to east, toward Kennedy Airport considerations, juridical doubts, as if one stood accused before the bench of some court how celebratory that looks once we formulated a complaint together on the telephone: Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, addressed to the pension office, which remorselessly listed personal time debits in their letters and summations, not letting one get space to draw breath, to explain conditions in their complex chronological units. The past and the prospects for the future, physical check-ups floating over the heads of the observers like a mysterious electronic apparition one can't lose oneself in pathetic hair-splitting, speech acts on the computer that cost so much, my God, father, I'm truly not interested in what you've got running wrong on your hard drive). Without a word Nils suddenly turned the speed regulator to zero. (BP 81-82)

This is a particularly complex but nevertheless typical example. The three narrative levels are not always written together so closely, what are called fade-ins and fade-outs in the language of film criticism do not always come so quickly, but nevertheless the text's style is made clear here, especially since all three levels of the narration are present in this passage. If one asks what such a complex interlocking of narrative components signifies, one answer might be that this interlocking should be read as the description of a consciousness recalling several stories in different situations, in which case it would be a single memory that is speaking. However the artificial nature of these fade-ins, evident in the consistency with which the three narrative levels reappear, is a clear indication that this is not a representation of an individual consciousness. Rather, these are stories which cross over each other, not necessarily connected in one individual consciousness but more nearly a model of the simultaneity of possible narratives. These narratives are not really created by a remembering subject in search of itself; rather, they themselves construct a subject

within the space of various fictions. "What's left are stories, someone who tells them. First that then this and the other thing, as they come into one's thoughts" (BP 152).

That something is left over and preserved formulates a wish evidently directed against the transience, against the decay and disappearance of what can be narrated. Expressed positively, this is a wish for the presence and availability of what can be narrated, for the possibility of grasping life by putting it into writing, along with its own fictional spaces—i.e. dreams, thoughts, and self constructions. Such a hope can only be called utopian: "The story, life. If one could only find the right words, if one could only succeed in transforming everything back to the beginning into writing. One would, perhaps, possess a part of truth" (BP 144). The transformation of life into writing can succeed only as long as writing does not have to write about writing itself, as long as it brackets writing out, always circling around the border between life and writing, a border which Peltzer seeks to dissolve by naming and reflecting on the problem, for reflection on writing is itself a part of life, and life itself is, paradoxically, also written and narrated.

The turn toward reflection about narration itself occurs, not coincidentally, in the final pages of the novella, where the previous narrative construction is expanded by a fourth level I have already mentioned. A caesura signaled by a majuscule and a large gap in the text occurs, and a first-person narrator named Ulrich makes his appearance (BP 122). Ulrich recounts how he experienced September 11 in Berlin, how a female friend told him what was happening, how he could hardly believe the news reports, and how, concerned for the safety of two female friends who live in New York, he tries but fails to establish telephone contact with them. Over the course of several pages Ulrich reports on the pictures to be seen on every television channel, probably all over the world. The succession of paragraphs clarifies the succession of television images, as well as the narrator's inability or unwillingness to put these images together into a coherent story. The following passage demonstrates the narrative technique:

[B]izarre, the two smoking columns like massive smokestacks, the Pentagon is like a burning cake from which a piece has been broken off, helicopters, fire engines, jeeps,

oh my God, oh my God, screams a woman inside the pictures on the television set

due to heavy calling your call cannot be completed at this time

the south tower collapses onto itself, cut, then the other, as if they had pores—but those are the broken windows—which exude crazy gray-black columns of rising smoke, in between the tiny figures of people waving for help with towels and clothing, they are jumping out of the windows, I switch the channel, I can't bear to watch this. . . . (BP 125-26)

If the sight of people jumping from windows in the World Trade Center is unbearable, then it is also, and to an even greater extent, incomprehensible. It marks a problem that recedes from rational understanding, because even at these points of individual suffering what is happening proves to be irrational in its fateful contingency—even if the action of the attack itself in its strategic calculations, its motivations, and in the mistakes of various intelligence agencies, can be understood at the level of pure feasibility (see Jäger, “Kriegsmaschinen”). But the irrational suffering of individuals raises precisely the already-mentioned problem of narratability. In the interrelationship between “real” life and “fictional” stories, it is not just the former that preserves itself in the latter; rather, in the telling of stories life opens up possibilities for itself, and although these possibilities cannot rationalize suffering, they do offer a kind of consolation in that things go on: in this text through Ulrich's overcoming of his worries about his friends, who escaped the catastrophe, through a love story that continues, and through work on the other three levels of narration, which, like any other project, must be brought to an end. In Peltzer's words:

[A]nd it can't be brought to a conclusion beforehand, as if the story, which was interrupted by the attack as one loses one's page in a book and can't find it again quickly, needed precisely so many days to continue on to its end, to that point . . . at which it would inevitably break off, because what would come next would belong to a different context (another book with a different story), as intersecting traces from a specific past and a specific present,

material wandering around in one's head, pieces of pictures, sensations. . . . (BP 133-34)

This is how Peltzer reflects the necessary caesura caused by September 11, a caesura that could not have been avoided, since Peltzer's ambition is the adequate representation of reality. What this means here is Peltzer's willingness to suspend the continuation of the previous three levels of narration, to accept the risk posed to the narration by a foreign narrative body, to open the narration up to a political event which, in its horror and its omnipresence, demands the analysis of background more than narration—unless one were to attempt, as Kathrin Röggla has done, to narrate in a kind of mixed form, in which diary-like notations are combined with analytical reflections and collages of political rhetoric. Such a form, however, marks primarily a deep dissatisfaction with theoretical deficiencies, since it is evident that no attempt at explanation sufficiently illuminates the events of September 11.

By opening his text to the present, Peltzer is not just narrating current events; rather, he is narrating about narration itself, about the hopes and responsibilities associated with a narration concerned on the one hand with the present and with precision and justice, but on the other hand with the future, with the possibility of continuing the narration, as the final words of the novella once again make clear:

Taking a step forward, one sees in the window one's own outline, a greenish glowing figure wearing a thin nylon jacket, with a briefcase under one's arm, there are probably papers inside. What else? Some pages, copies, stories. A first sentence out of nothing. (BP 157-58)

The word "sentence" 'Satz' in the last sentence refers not just to the grammatical meaning of the word but also to a movement, a leap which leads out of nothingness, a leap that still carries within it the claim once formulated by Hölderlin and prominently taken up and carried on by Heidegger: the claim that what remains is established by the poets. But this in turn means that one must ask once again what Peltzer intends to establish here. Is this a picture

of the present, realistic and full of detail, told in precise language, with a complex narrative structure, circling around the model of a narrative consciousness? Is the narration itself a form of preservation or even salvation, in spite of all concessions made to the complexity of reality in the workmanship and technical detail of the narration, a complexity necessary in order to avoid giving an inadequate picture of reality via naive realism? No doubt all of the above are characteristic of the narration, inscribed in it; but nevertheless, as might be expected after the analysis of Peltzer's previous novels, this novella transcends these elements in insisting on a utopian hope, on a future which does not simply resolve itself into literature but which, inasmuch as literature is committed to a political utopia, also preserves the future of literature.

In the center of the narration and in the middle of the book there is an open-air movie-screening that occurs in the eponymous Bryant Park. A colorful crew of interested people has assembled here in the middle of New York to see the classic movie version of *Moby Dick*:

One feels very small in this basin, like an entity that can be absolutely neglected at a personal level, without significance, while at the same time one senses that one is part of a larger structure, a member of another and more powerful body, in whose fullness one expires (and that is beautiful and uplifting). (BP 83-84)

In the face of these movie images a community comes into being, a community in which differences do not count, in which the solidarity of humanity shines forth, in which an equality and a brotherhood evidently made possible by gazing at art triumph for one brief moment. This artistic solidarity contrasts with the television news images and the despair that they cause. It contrasts also with the penetrating realism of the television news, with the unbearable images of people jumping out of the towers and the simultaneous war hysteria expressed in television captions—almost demands—about “America at War.” These images, as we saw, threatened the integrity of the narration, demanded a caesura in writing which Peltzer successfully integrates into his novella. He continues his writing, insisting on the possibility of a human

community in which the sense of equality might bring more happiness than a differentiation and an individuality that, at any rate, can always be perceived and are always present. Thus Berlin is opened up not just to the world of the present but also to a future world in which, as Hardt and Negri write, the terror of empire is answered by the hope of the multitude.

In closing, let me bring the question which forms the background of this essay into the foreground. Peltzer's *Stefan Martinez* is a beautiful novel about Berlin in the 1980s, but it is too replete with literary experimentation to be thoroughly convincing as a strict formal accomplishment. *Bryant Park*, on the other hand, in spite of its stylistic elegance, departs from Berlin almost completely and hence cannot really be counted as a Berlin book. Which leaves *Alle oder keiner*, and indeed this novel will remain as the most successful Berlin novel of the 1990s, a novel about the theoretical, political, and cultural transformations of the present. This novel is no mere imitation of Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* but rather something new and different, simultaneously of its time and beyond its time, a veritable *Berlin Heinrichplatz*. And with that our waiting could come to an end, were not for the fact that the city continues to change, and that Ulrich Peltzer continues to write.

Notes

1 Peltzer was born in Krefeld in 1956 and has been living in Berlin, where he studied philosophy and psychology, since 1975. In the last few years he has received a number of prizes and fellowships.

2 Peltzer's first novel, *Die Sünden der Faulheit* [The Sins of Laziness], appeared in 1987. It is an experimental mystery set in Berlin during the 1980s.

3 Another love scene seems to support this supposition. This scene is filled with empty spaces, in-between spaces covering about fifteen blanks motivated by the perception of sexual intercourse: "What happens to one, not to know any more. That's the way it is with her. All seeing and hearing erased, one pours oneself for seconds without

consciousness or memory. Only in her, in her softness, which gives itself to one. She makes a present of the short beautiful wild nothing" (SM 209).

4 "K-Gruppen" is the word used to refer to the numerous Communist, Marxist, Trotzkyist, and Maoist groups which formed in the 1970s and fought bitterly over the correct path and correct ideology.

5 Since Berlin was subject to the four-powers agreement, and since the *Bundeswehr* therefore had no authority to act there, many young men who had failed to be recognized officially as conscientious objectors, as well as those who did not want to serve at all in either alternative civilian service or in military service went to Berlin, until Berlin lost this not-to-be-underestimated attractiveness as a result of reunification.

6 After the report of Florencio's death, taken from the newspaper, comes a narrative about acquaintances in Berlin, their skills at cooking and knowledge of wine on the occasion of a small celebration to announce a pregnancy.

7 As part of the tradition of the workers' movement, May Day has been the day of workers in Germany for over a hundred years; or, if one prefers such terminology, it has been the International Day of Struggle of the Working Class. It is now an official holiday. Since May 1, 1987 there have been calls every year for a "Revolutionary May 1 Demonstration" in Kreuzberg, in the course of which there are always acts of violence: the torching of automobiles, the plundering of stores, battles with the police. Initially intended as a true political signal, these activities are by now a ritual intended to provoke the police, and large numbers of young inhabitants of Kreuzberg participate in them. In Berlin jargon these events are referred to as the "Kreuzberg May Festival Performances" [Kreuzberger Maifestspiele].

8 This narration, however, as one might almost expect by now, begins in Naples and becomes comprehensible only gradually.

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