

AN INTERVIEW WITH PETER HANDKE

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Peter Handke, who is perhaps best known in the United States for his play *Kaspar*, has written nine plays and nine novels, as well as poetry, short stories, radio plays, essays, screenplays, and reviews. Handke is a deeply thoughtful, softspoken, unceremonious man of 37, who seems very unlike the image of the arrogant, angry young man suggested by his intemperate remarks at the 1967 Group 47 meeting in Princeton. Perhaps best described as a "post-contemporary classicist," Handke uses a spare, self-conscious style which reflects a range of literary and philosophical kinships, including Kafka, Wittgenstein, Lukács, Jakobson, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Barthes, and Hölderlin. His more recent narratives suggest a spirit of self more like the Goethean "I" of mankind than a narcissistic, modern "me." Handke is continually in search of new orders for experience, new interpretations of meaning, new ways of revitalizing language.

The interview which follows was held in Berlin on July 23, 1979, in the apartment where Handke was staying for a few weeks between moving from Clamart, a suburb of Paris, to Salzburg, in his native Austria. It is one of three to appear thus far in English, the first being a translation of Artur Joseph's interview concerning Handke's plays, published in *The Drama Review*, 15, 1 (Fall 1970), and the second being an account of H.R. Lottman's meeting with Handke, which appeared in *Publishers Weekly*, 212, 11 (September 12, 1977). The present interview is the first by an American scholar and the first in English to include questions on Handke's fiction. Although Handke's English is good, he preferred that the interview be in German, and what appears here is a slightly edited translation. Though perhaps insufficient in capturing the precise language of Handke's replies, the text which follows casts considerable light on the intent and achievement of one of the most significant voices in contemporary literature.

Berlin, July 23, 1979

Translated with Dietrich Büscher

JS: The subtitle of your recent novel, *Das Gewicht der Welt*, which is tentatively scheduled to appear in English as *Fantasies and Prejudices*, suggests that you wrote this book every day over a period of one year and five months, from November 1975 to March 1977. Was this so?

PH: Yes. There are possibly two or three days which I combined, but for the most part all these dates are accurate. It is the nature of a journal that it be written daily and that nothing be left out for any day in a year.

JS: Were the daily events of your life during those months the specific stimuli for your journal entries?

PH: Yes, only these.

JS: Yet in the preface to this book, you say that it is a previously unknown literary possibility for you. Do you think you are misrepresenting the book by calling it a journal, making it appear to be fact when it is fiction?

PH: I see no contradiction between "journal" and "fiction." "Journal" is only an objective description of notes which are made day by day. "Journal" is also a term I used because I did not find any better term. It is, I believe, more a novel. For me it is a sort of novel or epic of everyday occurrences. But this can only be said afterwards, after one sees the result.

JS: In "Die Literatur ist romantisch" ("Literature is Romantic") (1966), you write about a new definition of literature, a literature without fiction, without wordplay, without rhythm, without style. And you say that the word "realistic" would only be applicable for such a literature. Do you consider *Das Gewicht der Welt* (*The Weight of the World*) "realistic"?

PH: No.

JS: Do you consider any of your writing "realistic"?

PH: I try to avoid distinctions such as “realistic” or “romantic,” for in the process of writing, these distinctions no longer occur. When I used the term “realistic” in this essay it must have made sense, and I think that everything in this essay is clear. But one cannot write according to a set of rules. The essay was not a set of rules; it was an attempt to make things clear at that time. I really don’t know what “realistic” is.

JS: You once called your play *Der Ritt über den Bodensee* (*The Ride Across Lake Constance*) “realistic.”

PH: Where did I say that?

JS: It was some years back, in an interview for the Munich *Abendzeitung*.

PH: Such words certainly do get used, but one would have to know the sentences, the vibrations, the situation. There are times and places in which any word can be used, but it is not applicable in general. I can imagine that one can say “realistic” *this* day in *this* place on *this* topic, and that the word is then completely appropriate. I have no idea where one gets then, for to hear the term “realistic” immediately stops my every creative impulse. But I really don’t like being asked whether that which I write now is the practice of that which was, so to speak, the theory. When writing, there is no theory and practice; there is only practice. And in practice, a new theory is generated in every sentence. But at the same moment that it comes into being, this theory is immediately invalidated.

JS: Do you feel the same way about “Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms” (“I Am an Ivory Tower Dweller”) (1967), the essay in which you explain your attack upon the impotence of the descriptive language used by your colleagues at the Group 47 meeting in Princeton?

PH: I am glad that I wrote that essay. Naturally, there are theoretical expressions or explanations of aims and imaginations. They are, as I found out, always very dangerous because for those who read them they create a pressure to relate narratives or poems to such explanations. But I am also to blame, if I have written such

an essay.

JS: Were you to write these essays today, then, they would be different.

PH: Yes, definitely. I don't want to write any more essays.

JS: In "Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms," you say that in your opinion, a story is no longer necessary in fiction, and that more and more of the vehicles of fiction are falling away. While this is the case in *Das Gewicht der Welt* and your first novel, *Die Hornissen* (*The Hornets*), it seems to me that some of your work--for example, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (*Short Letter, Long Farewell*), *Wunschloses Unglück* (*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*), and *Die linkshändige Frau* (*The Lefthanded Woman*)--have more of a traditional narrative. Do you agree with this observation?

PH: These narratives and novels really have no story. They are only daily occurrences brought into a new order. What is "story" or "fiction" is really always only the point of intersection between individual daily events. This is what produces the impression of fiction. And because of this I believe they are not traditional, but that the most unarranged daily occurrences are only brought into a new order, where they suddenly look like fiction. I never want to do anything else. I don't think I could do a grotesque fantasy or a fresco-like representation of society, presenting a great many people who all come together, in a great epic. I once thought I could do that, but I now think that this is no longer right, that it no longer works. With my greatest effort I can expand myself, I can continue to expand myself. This is my only epic ability. But I cannot do this with various characters, these tricks of the novelist. I cannot do that. What I can do is write an epic poem, a narrative, which always has something lyric about it, because everything I write is first verified through myself. I find it silly to write a social novel--for me. It may be that this is possible for someone, but everything, every tree which I describe, must also be myself. I cannot imagine writing any other way than that through which I achieve an expansion of self. Goethe also said that in Germany, or perhaps everywhere, there is a stupid discussion about new, subjective sensibilities. There is a beautiful sentence by Goethe:

if one relies only on his own good "ego" then that is already right, and then any action or non-action would be right. He doesn't mean that a special "ego" is good, but that the "ego" of mankind is good. That is always so; that was always so in literature. This need not be the theme, but as long as a writer relies on his own good "ego" he will also be able not to describe other people well but to do them justice, even when they are presented as fragmentary in his narratives or poems.

JS: The American critic Lionel Trilling, as well as others, remarked that he feels the novel as a genre has exhausted itself, that its time is up. Do you think this is so?

PH: I have often heard this. I believe every generation and every time has the need to read narratives which go beyond a mere report, beyond a mere description, beyond journalism, to read a creation of man which is not the repetition of daily occurrences one finds in newspapers or on television. And I think that perhaps the novel--and I really don't know what "novel" is, but that a definite narrative posture--can do justice to society. I don't say "novel," but the posture of narrating the common experiences of the past--there once was, or I went, or he went, or the woman went--I imagine that this is an eternal language and that this is also the freest language. That does not mean "novel," but the narrating language, and I've already told you that all my narratives, or whatever one calls them--novels--are more epic poems. And I think that this is a form which suits our time. There is no expansion of character or plot, but an "I" is writing a narrative poem about the time in which he lives, about the self, and about others. But I think this was always so, that the novel, as it is understood, has been a bastard, more something to entertain people, and it will always remain so, and it will always exist. But I no longer think that the novel can continue to hold its place as an expression about a society and about a time.

JS: You have said many times that the only thing that concerns you as a writer is language. Is this still true?

PH: Yes. I mean that language is a very valuable proof of life, not only for me as a writer, but also that I have language. Most language which presents itself as language is no longer language.

There is almost no language any more. It is only when I live and have a feeling that there is a future, that language appears, not only for me as a writer. Language is the most valuable thing there is. Most people have no language at all. There is a sigh of relief through the masses when there is someone who has a language. What is this language? I believe this language is only poetic language. That is what language means. All other languages are a set of rules, routines. At its best such language is a routine of living. But normally it is something that kills and closes in; it is something aggressive, something evil. Even when I talk with psychoanalysts, or theologians, or with almost everyone, I think that what they have as language is evil. Only someone who has a design of man also has a friendly, an open, a precise language. There are, of course, a few theologians and philosophers who know this, who know that their language is stuck in conventions. The only thing which is valid for me, where I feel very powerful--powerful without power--is when I succeed in finding form with language. I think language for me is form, and form is permanence, because otherwise there is no permanence in human existence.

JS: How important is the writing of Roland Barthes for you?

PH: It was important for me fifteen years ago, for structures. It helped me to see structures, and that is a pleasure, because there is formlessness in every phenomenon, every "I" for itself, and all are confused. It helped me at that time to see an order, not a hierarchical order but a structural order. But all that is long forgotten, and in spite of that I am grateful. Poetic writing must continue on much further.

JS: Do you consider yourself primarily an Austrian writer?

PH: I consider myself a German-language writer and I am Austrian. That is the answer. And somebody else can by all means call me an Austrian writer. That is also true. But I can only say I am a German-language writer and I am Austrian.

JS: But can one compare you with any particular Austrian writer?

PH: I think everyone who works conscientiously with language

and with a sentence can be compared with anyone else who tries the same. I hope to be compared with someone who takes seriously what a sentence is.

JS: In "Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms," you say that Kleist, Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Faulkner, and Robbe-Grillet have changed your consciousness of the world. Since 1967, when you made that statement, would you add any new names to this list?

PH: There are so many and so few great writers. Perhaps I should have gone a little bit further back into history and tried to re-read from the beginning on. Years back in school I was fascinated by Homer, by Pindar, by Heraclites, and I have re-read everything which I, and perhaps many others, read too early, this time more slowly. Goethe. But there is one who I only now totally comprehend and who for me writes a holy scripture in a complete objective sense, and that is Hölderlin. I had not understood him in this way before. But now I can read his work as far better writing, as moral, high-standing, holy scripture, where one is not forced to believe but, because sentences stand like mountain ranges, can simply believe, or at least see an ideal. At the moment I am also reading many scientific essays, because this gives one such a strange kind of concentration and quietness and, above all, a creative impulse, a completely objective creative impulse. A writer is always threatened by a creative impulse which goes anywhere it likes. While I am reading geological description, for example, my creative impulse remains contained and, in spite of that, very strong. This creative impulse does not become pictures, but goes, so to speak, into grammar, giving grammar new life.

JS: You and Wim Wenders have made films together and you personally made a film of your novella *Die linkshändige Frau*. I know that films have always been an interest of yours. Is there any possibility that you will in the future prefer filmmaking to writing?

PH: I think I will make a film, or perhaps two, if I can. But the greatest difficulty is that there cannot be any arbitrary crossing of borders, because one loses one's identity very easily, an identity which as a writer is difficult to have anyhow. It is very difficult for me to say, "I am a writer." Only sometimes, in moments where I

know what is, where I can say what is, by writing, am I a writer. But this identity is not an everyday one, as with a doctor, or a German professor, or whatever. When I made this film, I didn't count on coming so close to losing my identity, which is fragile anyhow. And there was a long time afterwards when I was nothing. And one must be very philosophical to endure the fact that one is nothing. You understand, one cannot simply say, now I'll make a film again, and now I'll write a book again; it doesn't work like that. It is a very, very dangerous and adventurous thing. If I make a film again I know that I have to be very, very careful. It was very, very difficult then to find my way back to sentences, to writing, and not to feel totally like a dilettante or a pretender when I afterwards tried again to write a story or, as we said, a narrative poem. It is also a great problem that two sentences come together. What does it mean, that one sentence follows another? It was as though everything were isolated and I were lying by adding one sentence to the other. That is how I felt then when I was writing.

JS: Even though your first success was as a dramatist, you have not written a play since *Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus* (*They are Dying Out*) in 1973. Do you feel you have exhausted drama as a genre for yourself?

PH: I have a certain vision of a play, but that would be one person who addressed the people for three hours. That is my conception of drama, if it could be written, but very serious and with passion; this would be drama. Everything else in the theater strikes me as tricky--for me. At one time I felt very identifiable as a playwright: when I wrote *Der Ritt über den Bodensee*. Then I thought that this is pure theater, this is totally new theater, which is fully realized, and since then I have lost that. That can be done only once; I could not go further with that. Then I imagine still another pure drama: one person on stage who addresses the people: something like *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (*Offending the Audience*) again, but different. But to reveal this in scenes, I would have to conceive the whole drama very rationally, scene for scene. What gives writing truth has to be created in the imagination, not through thinking, not through planning, not through collecting, not through observing; all these things have to happen before, but the imagination creates truth. With most writing one reads, one notices that it has not gone through the verifying creative impulse. It is worked out

according to a pattern, but that is not what is exciting, warming, liberating. I don't mean that the imagination creates special pictures, grotesqueries, or whatever, but that the language which the creative impulse makes is worthy of being written. If it has, so to speak, risen up through the imagination like a sunken land, then it can be written. It is that way with me with plays. One can really only dream writing. Everything that is written, if it is to be good, must be rational, and writing is an extremely rational act. Every sentence is rational in so far as one tries to avoid, and avoiding is rational. But positive sentences must be created through dream. That is very, very difficult. That is why almost no one understands what literature is, what kind of an exhausting process it is--every single sentence. As I said, with plays this does not come to me any more. There are beginnings in me, but they somehow stay stuck. Perhaps they'll come up again; everything has to come into floating. Or perhaps a man loses this in the course of his life and writing then stops.

JS: Two last questions please. A colleague of mine recently commented that students in America today are reading Handke the way his generation read Hesse, even before their works were being taught in the university curriculum. Can you explain why the young intellectuals of American feel such an affinity for your work?

PH: I believe because they are independent people. I know that there are also people here who read what I write, but they are not a congregation as they were in the past. They are independent people. They have no ideology, they are skeptical, and at the same time they have longing, and they are objective and at the same time they don't want to perish in objectivity. This might be the case everywhere. But there are not so many. That flatters me, of course, but I don't have the impression that there are many in America. I'm proud that this is so anyway. There is a nice saying by Ingeborg Bachmann which goes, "I long for you, reader." I don't look down upon readers. All I want is to be read. I think it is something extremely beautiful for a human being to read. I don't want to say anything about American literary criticism, but what I really want is not to be criticized but only to be read. On the other hand, I must say that sometimes I am pleased to read something precise where I can see that this critic has a sympathetic understanding of what I have written. That is very, very good for one

who writes. I believe that to receive no encouragement but to be portrayed always as an enemy is very, very damaging to this good creative impulse which a writer needs. This creative impulse is the most valuable thing which one can have; that is all I know. It is only there when one feels the divine in oneself. And in the literary world this valuable creativity can easily be destroyed. If I have learned anything at all, I have learned that I have to be careful of my creative impulse, of this difficulty, which perhaps everyone has, of this good, of this new-world-creating creative impulse, where everything, so to speak, can become language and where one thinks he can bring the world to shine with language, and not to betray it as it almost always happens with language. Every beauty is destroyed by language. What one really wants with writing is the fact that beauty achieves permanence. But I'm going on too long. You began with Hesse, and I think he is a very honorable writer. But a comparison is not possible.

JS: And finally, can you tell me something about your new novel, *Langsame Heimkehr* (*Slow Homecoming*), which you recently completed?

PH: I can only say I have expanded myself as never before with this writing. It is an attempt to reach a world harmony and at the same time to reach a universality for myself as someone who writes, an attempt which may have been too daring. Sometimes this is so in this narrative--or in this epic poem, as you will surely call it. I have the feeling that for centuries this has not been tried: to capture this harmony with language, and to pass it on contagiously, because we have, especially in the German-language part of the world, the problem with our history, and because of this we have almost no future. Because of what happened forty or so years ago, we have no more power for beauty; no one can really live the right way here, and there is no nature. Or there is nature, but there is no language for nature, what Hölderlin speaks of as the great nature, which was still possible in his time. In Austria, too, there is, naturally, no difference. This is the great problem with the past and, because of the past, with the future. And because of this we have the problem with the poetic creation of human beings living together. And in this which I have written, without wanting it, it came to the conflict between these two.

I wanted to create beauty, so to speak, the quiet beauty, with

language, and then I noticed that I came into conflict with the history of my ancestors, which is also in me. This is how it happened. I don't know whether the story is not torn into pieces by this, but in any case I was able to narrate this conflict. I did this in the quietness in the form. I think that it has a form, which is the most important thing. Short on feelings and long on form. (Laugh). And because of this it became fragmentary; the story stops abruptly. With the greatest effort of which I am capable, I brought everything in this story to a beginning, and with that the story ended. All problems with home, with language, with family, with history, with nature, I have tried to bring to a new beginning, but not in a philosophizing way, not in an essayistic way, but in a narrative way, in the narrative language. And then I suddenly noticed that the story was ended. I was immensely relieved and at the same time it was a great shock for me, because I thought it would be a story of 300 pages and it is only 200. What I really wanted was that it start in America, in Alaska, for ten pages, and that the rest happen across Europe. And now all 200 pages take place there, and it stops in the plane above Europe. It will make sense, but that, too, is a great shock. What do I mean "great"? It is a shock.