

THE PRINCIPLE OF “LANGSAMKEIT” IN PETER HANDKE’S  
IN EINER DUNKLEN NACHT GING ICH AUS MEINEM STILLEN HAUS

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to explore the “difficult” nature of Peter Handke’s prose with special attention to the author’s principle of “Langsamkeit.” Operating according to this principle, the author aims to slow down the reading process and resist the reader’s tendency to “devour” the text: a practice which often frustrates readers. Related to this aim is Handke’s effort to resist the “burden of history” (i.e. the politically charged literary atmosphere of Post-World War II Austria and Germany) by creating a self-referential text in which the author’s *Engagement* lies almost exclusively in his ability to reflect on language and discourse.

Related to Handke’s principle of “Langsamkeit” is a more “classical” concern for form and composition. Handke pursues an aesthetic agenda inspired by authors like Goethe and Stifter and largely based on his study of various painters—especially Paul Cézanne. However, his aesthetics can also be classified as typically postmodern in that he attempts to undermine the temporality of the narrative. In Handke’s novels, static motifs are often foregrounded so that description serves as more than a simple background to plot. In this thesis, an interpretation of *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* (1997) reveals the „untranslatable“ elements of the text—the descriptive events which cannot be grasped according to causal relationships between narrative units. The goal is to demonstrate how visual and spatial motifs in Handke’s prose undermine the traditional causality of the narrative structure.

This thesis is dedicated to my father Ken Jones: the scientist who raised two humanities nerds.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE “DIFFICULTY” OF PETER HANDKE

For the Austrian general public the name Peter Handke evokes a variety of different associations. Many know him for the play *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, a piece which earned him his initial notoriety as a young writer. Others remember the speech he gave in 1966 at a meeting of Group 47, a highly reputable society of Post-WWII “avant-garde” authors, in which he rather daringly accused certain senior members of “Beschreibungsimpotenz”—a sort of descriptive ineptness. (The media attention he attracted with this speech earned him a reputation as the “Popstar” of the German and Austrian literary scene.) More recently, the author has stirred up controversy with his travelogue *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, in which he criticizes Western media’s one-sided portrayal of the events surrounding the war in Bosnia.<sup>1</sup> Finally, when asked for their opinion of Peter Handke, many are apt to express their outrage over the fact that he gave a speech at accused war criminal Slobodan Milošević’s funeral. Others dismiss this gesture as the publicity

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<sup>1</sup> Handke’s ties to Yugoslavia stem from his mother’s Slovenian nationality. When asked in an interview with Deborah Solomon of New York Times Magazine: “Why are you so moved by the former Yugoslavia?” he answered: “I’m Austrian, but my mother was Slovenian. Her brother became a partisan of Yugoslavia between the two World Wars, and when Hitler annexed Austria—my uncle was Austrian—he was forced into the Nazi army” (Solomon, 1). Needless to say, the connection with Yugoslavia has had a profound influence on his life and career. His novel *Die Wiederholung* is a fictionalized account of a teenage trip to the land of his mother’s ancestors. As an adult he engaged in intensive study of Serbo-Croatian and eventually reached a level of proficiency which allowed him to translate texts from Serbo-Croatian and hold speeches in the language. He made many trips to the former Yugoslavia following the war there. His travel journals are an attempt to challenge the media’s portrayal of the conflict by refusing to submit the images portrayed in his journal to the formation of any sort of meta-narrative. In 2002 former Yugoslavian president and alleged war criminal Slobodan Milosevic asked Handke to appear at his trial before the UN’s ICTY. Handke refused, but attended the trial as an observer and published an account of the events entitled “Der Tablas Von Daimiel.”

stunt of a writer who notoriously enjoys media attention,<sup>2</sup> but few express approval for this act, although most are not properly informed about the exact content of the speech.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do the author's public appearances seem to attract controversy, but his work itself seems at times to baffle critics. Few writers have met with such venomous critique from scholars and readers alike as Peter Handke. Some readers find his work to be lofty, prophetic, and fraught with conspicuous pathos, while others simply put down his novels because they are too "tedious." Marcel Reich-Ranicki is considered to be Handke's most harsh critic. Of Handke's novel *Langsame Heimkehr* he writes:

Der beschwörende Prediger und raunende Heilsverkünder Handke schreibt—von wenigen schönen Passagen abgesehen—eine hochpathetische, angestrenzte und umständliche Prosa, deren schiefe Bilder und preziöse Vergleiche die Dürftigkeit der Gedanken nicht verbergen können ... (Pichler 131).

One may ask oneself how an author so valued by some readers could receive such a harsh critique from the most influential voice in German literary criticism. It seems that when a critic attacks Handke's prose he does it *passionately*. In a New York Times book review Neil Gordon calls his narrative techniques "punitive rather than exuberant." He is bothered by the

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Pichler's extremely interesting portrayal of Handke's Group 47 appearance raises the question as to what extent Handke's appearance was purposely aimed at receiving media attention. The description of him with his Beatles haircut and "Schirmmütze" certainly conveys the impression of a young "Popstar," as the title calls him (Pichler, 69-76).

<sup>3</sup> Handke was criticized greatly for the speech he gave at Milosevic's funeral in 2006. He gave the speech in Serbo-Croatian and due to inaccurate translation, his words have been seriously misinterpreted by the Austrian media. He was accused of disrespect for the victims who died at the hands of Milosevic when he allegedly expressed happiness for being close to Milosevic, who defended his people. As Handke pointed out in a letter to a French newspaper that published criticism of his speech, his words were twisted and taken out of context. The actual content of the speech is as follows: "The world, the so-called world, knows everything about Yugoslavia, Serbia. The world, the so-called world, knows everything about Slobodan Milosevic. The so-called world knows the truth. This is why the so-called world is absent today, and not only today, and not only here. I don't know the truth. But I look. I listen. I feel. I remember. This is why I am here today, close to Yugoslavia, close to Serbia, close to Slobodan Milošević" (d'Aymery).

“namelessness of characters,” the “constant, busybodyish rhetorical questions,” the “seemingly endless digressions,” and the “profoundly and deliberately obscure asides” (Gordon).

There is no denying that Handke’s literary practices present a relatively high degree of “difficulty” for the reader. Handke himself attributes the difficult nature of his prose to what he calls “Langsamkeit.” As he points out, many readers want to “devour” the text; they are accustomed to simply “skimming through” the pages of the novel—a practice that his prose seems to resist: “Ich verstehe, dass diese Langsamkeit viele enerviert, die ein Überfliegen, ein Verschlingen, ein bloßes Story-Aufnehmen der Bücher oder der Sprache gewöhnt sind...Nie, nie schnell werden, nie suggerieren, immer Abstand halten zu den Dingen und Scheu sein!” (Pichler 129-130). For Handke “Langsamkeit” means maintaining a certain degree of distance to the matter at hand; he consciously avoids “persuading” the reader. Those who are accustomed to a highly consequential narrative that neatly finds its resolution at the end of the tale are bound to be irritated or disappointed. Once the reader accepts the “Langsamkeit” of the text he no longer finds it to be so tedious: Letting go of his desire to “devour” the text, he gives himself over to the act of “observing” and begins to appreciate the rich imagery of the text.

It is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate the “Langsamkeit” of Handke’s prose through an interpretation of the novel *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus*. I chose this novel for three reasons. First because it greatly lacks scholarly response. Secondly, because when I first picked up the book I was at once put off *and* intrigued by the highly romantic (and lofty?) tone of the title. And thirdly because I was highly impressed with the novel’s ability to capture the essence of certain objects, landscapes and localities. Whereas an attempt to retell the plot left me tongue-tied, I was readily able to close my eyes and imagine the various localities described in the novel.

This thesis can be divided into five interrelated sections. In Chapter One a discussion of postmodernist literature will establish the terminology necessary for describing the ways in which Handke creates an “open” text, thus avoiding what he calls “persuading the reader.” Key terms such as “ready-made,” “self-reflexivity,” and “spatial form” will be described in respect to their historical and theoretical significance. Next, the chapters entitled “Distortion,” “Psychological Content” and “Story” will include an in-depth examination of the plot of *Dunkle Nacht*. The goal of these chapters is to provide concrete examples of how narrative techniques are employed to “slow down” and disrupt narrative flow in order to realize the principle of “Langsamkeit” in the novel. The chapter entitled “Inwardness?” will argue that the author’s main concern in respect to “character” has little to do with “psychological content.”<sup>4</sup> As this chapter will show, the author is primarily concerned with the protagonist as a *vehicle of perception*. Embedded within this discussion of “inwardness” is an attempt to counter the arguments of critics like Reich-Ranicki who accuse Handke of being “hochpathetisch,” self-centered or overly romantic. Passages will be identified in which what may appear to be overly-romantic or self-centered language is actually a meta-fictional reference to the codedness of discourse. Chapter Six is a discussion of Handke’s concept of “commitment” (in the sense of political *engagement*). The section on “commitment” aims to demonstrate how the author succeeds in maintaining distance (“Abstand”) to the matter at hand rather than attempting to form a specific argument or thesis. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, chapters Seven and Eight explore the novel’s imagery by discussing select descriptive passages in detail. This section aims to demonstrate how

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<sup>4</sup> See Barthes pg. 104-105



descriptive events or “static motifs” often hold more significance than temporal and causal elements of the novel.<sup>5</sup>

In *For a New Novel* Alain Robbe-Grillet writes: “We thus see the absurdity of that favorite expression of our traditional criticism: ‘X has something to say and says it well.’ Might we not advance on the contrary that the genuine writer has nothing to say? He has only a way of speaking” (45). This thesis will attempt to bring a new perspective to Handke scholarship by assuming that Handke’s “way of speaking”—his use of language, the descriptive passages, the composition of his narrative, etc.—is more important than any sort of universal truths that his work may appear to convey. Readers who recognize his spirit of “playfulness” will find themselves challenged to think along with the author, thus experiencing what it means to be a reader in the postmodern era: to be active and to view the text as an open process—as a living dialog between author and reader.

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<sup>5</sup> Although the term “descriptive event” is my own invention, Christoph Parry introduces the idea that a descriptive passage can be something more dynamic than a simple backdrop to narrative action (Parry, 109). The term “static motif” was introduced by the Russian formalist Tomashevski (Kestner, 108).

## CHAPTER ONE: POSTMODERN “PLAYFULNESS”

When asked in a 2006 interview with Deborah Solomon of *The New York Times Magazine* if he would consider himself an “avant-garde” novelist and playwright Handke responded with the statement: “Me? No, I’m a classical writer. I’m a conservative classical writer” (Solomon). By describing himself as “classical” and “conservative” Handke emphasizes his indebtedness to authors like Goethe and Stifter. By following in the tradition of these writers and of the painter Paul Cezanne, he is able to find justification for the conscious decision to distance himself from the burden presented by history (specifically the history of Austria and Germany). Handke justifies his “Poetik der Verdrängung” by adopting the ideals of classical literature (Zschachlitz 439).

In the same interview, Solomon asks Handke to clarify exactly what he means by “conservative classical writer” and he says: “With a lot of air in it. With a lot of snow flurries and summer breezes in the books” (Solomon). One can certainly sense a degree of irony to this answer, for Handke is no doubt aware that the poet’s view of language has changed in the modern/postmodern era.<sup>6</sup> In *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* he acknowledges this when he writes: „der Himmel (wie Stifter in seinen Erzählungen noch so ruhig hinsetzen konnte) war blau“ (169). One could thus conclude that the term “conservative classical writer” reflects only Handke’s idealized self-image. What really shapes his work is the knowledge that a conservative classical style is only viable in this era as a function of the postmodern aesthetic: appearing as part of a pastiche of various literary “artifacts,”<sup>7</sup> or as a mere trace of the original. Just as

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<sup>6</sup> Due to structuralist and poststructuralist theories.

<sup>7</sup> The term artifact is used by Barbara Theisen in *Silenced Facts: Media Montages in Contemporary Austrian Literature* in describing how Austrian authors use the montage-technique to form a text out of ready-made language (1).

postmodern architecture embraces historical forms, not as pure models (as was the case with early twentieth-century historicism) but as objects of a composition marked by fragmentation and montage, Handke looks to classical, romantic and even medieval literature as a “tool box”<sup>8</sup> of possible styles and forms.

In the interview mentioned above, Deborah Solomon playfully asks: “Do you think a conversation between two people can communicate anything?” Handke answers: “Sure, but you have to know that this is a game. It can become at moments very touching and serious, but it starts as a game and it should end as a game” (Solomon). When Handke emphasizes that this “conversation” “starts as a game and should end as a game” he is drawing from both structuralist and poststructuralist theory. Published after his death in 1953, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophische Untersuchungen* discusses what he calls the “language-game” (Shawver). Wittgenstein recognizes that linguistic expression is not an autonomous act, but takes place within a system of rules which he likens to a “game.” Responding to notions such as this, modern/postmodern authors tend to “make a statement” not by referring to reality, but by drawing attention to the nature of the “language-game” of social, political and literary discourse. As a result of modern/postmodern heightened awareness of the codedness of discourse, language becomes not only a *means of expression* but also an *object of reflection*. Handke’s “Langsamkeit” “makes a statement” in that it forces the reader to “consume” language differently. This is not to say that a self-reflexive use of language is a new invention; rather it is recognizable in the works of any good poet who views language as an object of reflection rather than a simple means to an end. However, what distinguishes a typically modern/postmodern use of language is that self-reflexivity becomes a principle of composition (through montage and ready-made borrowing) rather than simply a stylistic feature.

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<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein introduces the notion of the “toolbox of language” (Shawver).

Rather than trying to draw a definite distinction between modernism and postmodernism, one could simply argue that there is a certain progression from a highly critical, anti-representational reaction to mass culture to a less pragmatic and more formalistic and playful form of literature which actually takes advantage of the textual environment created by mass culture. It is difficult to pinpoint an exact moment at which this progression occurs. Already in the 1950's Andy Warhol displays a rather "playful" gesture when he embraces pop culture as an object of artistic reference. Furthermore, the precedent for creating what came to be called "ready-made" art had already been established in the 1930's with Duchamp's "Fountain" which was nothing more than a urinal found in a junk yard which the artist submitted to an exhibition. However, Duchamp's and Warhol's art is inevitably more politically charged than later works simply because they are the first of their kind. Warhol does something rather subversive by adopting methods of mass reproduction into his art and suggesting that pop culture is a legitimate object of artistic reference. In postmodernism, the modern subversive act becomes a well established artistic principle.

James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's highly experimental poem "The Wasteland," both published in 1922, already display a self-reflexive awareness of narrative codes and linguistic structures. However, in countries most effected by WWII, the highly experimental projects of the pre-WWII period could not be fully realized until after the war. In Post-WWII France, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* contributed to the deconstruction of the linear narrative. Robbe-Grillet proclaimed the dawn of a revolution in literary practices in which spatial considerations were to gain supremacy over character and plot. In Austria, members of the *Wiener Gruppe* contributed greatly to experimental literature during this time. Authors like H.C. Artmann and Friedrich Achleitner worked with montage techniques and created concrete

poetry—the purpose of which was to comment on the codedness of language, to question the validity of language as a representation of reality (the “problem of referentiality”) and to experiment with genre conventions (Theisen 18-33). This so-called “anti-representational” literature—concrete poetry being perhaps its most extreme form—met with much criticism at the time of its conception because of its so-called “apolitical” nature. The reaction was similar to that of those who criticized Duchamp’s “Fountain,” claiming that it didn’t qualify as art (Theisen 1-12).

When Handke was a student of law at the University of Graz he joined a group of writers who were considered to be the successors to the *Wiener Gruppe*, the *Grazer Gruppe*. Among its members are writers like Barbara Frischmuth, Elfriede Jelinek and Gerhard Roth. Authors of the *Grazer Gruppe* maintained the *Wiener Gruppe*’s notion of language as the object of artistic reflection and continued to emphasize the text’s formal significance over its representational value. However authors of the *Grazer Gruppe* extended the *Wiener Gruppe*’s experimentation with single words and phonemes to include the larger structures according to which literary discourse operates (Theissen 18-32). This can be likened to Roland Barthe’s transition from the study of words and sentences to the study of entire narratives. Barthes sees the sentence as “the rough outline of a short narrative” and the narrative as a “long sentence” (84).

In regard to Handke’s work, the influence of the *Wiener Gruppe*’s formal experiments reveals itself quite clearly in the author’s second novel, *Der Hausierer*. This novel is a kind of postmodern detective story in which the author reveals the schema according to which a particular chapter will operate and then realizes this schema quite literally. At the beginning of the first chapter he notes the way in which the mystery surrounding the crime of the detective story creates a state of hyper-signification in which every object described possesses a

disproportionate degree of importance, as it could possibly be an important clue (“[Die Mordgeschichte] bestimmt ihre Gegenstände so, dass deren Verhältnis zueinander unbekannt und rätselhaft bleiben muss” [8]). Until the murder is resolved the objects are suspended in a “game of possible relationships” (8). In the novel, what follows is a literal realization of this schema. The protagonist, a peddler, arrives in a new town and observes. His perception is marked by hypersensitivity to otherwise banal objects and occurrences. He notices that the sidewalk lies a bit too high off the street. Soap suds leak out from under a shop door. A tarp is pulled over a car. The hands that rest on the steering wheel are in leather gloves. Details are singled out from the whole so that the person pulling the tarp is absent from the description and the hands in the leather gloves are described independent of the body (Are they his hands? Should we suspect him?). Focus is shifted from the subject to the object of the action (as the culprit remains unknown). Meaning is generated as the reader tries to create a syntax for this fragmented text and engages in this “game of possible relationships.” Many postmodern authors adopt the literary schema of the detective story because it is rather formulaic in nature and presents the perfect model for an exploration of a particular “system of references” from which the “language-game” draws its rules. Objects portrayed in the detective story automatically take on a secondary significance determined by their possible role in the murder mystery.

The progression towards postmodern literature is marked by an increasingly fragmented narrative perspective. Whereas the realist novel of the nineteenth century uses framing to establish credibility, modern/postmodern authors often frame the novel in such a way that the credibility of the narrator is undermined or brought into question. This technique was already popular in baroque and romantic literature, but here it is more markedly an artistic principle than a function of plot. Similarly, although one could argue that the subject is most fragmented in

postmodern art, the loss of a centralized perspective cannot accurately be attributed solely to postmodernism. In the fine arts, for example, the central perspective began to dissolve as early as the Impressionist period. Lines that usually designate position and depth are replaced by fields of color, making it increasingly difficult to determine where the artist/viewer stands in relation to the object (Parry 57-58). The equivalent of this in literature is a montage of different narrative voices, or a subject who seems to jump from one perspective to the next. According to Lyotard, "...the subject moves from position to position, now as sender, now as addressee, now as referent, and so on. The loss of a continuous meta-narrative therefore breaks the subject into heterogeneous moments of subjectivity that do not cohere into an identity" (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

This concept is realized in Handke's *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus*. Because the story is being told by a narrator who interviewed the protagonist for the purpose of writing a book, the perspective shifts from third person to first person as the narrator occasionally inserts direct quotes which stem from his interview with the protagonist. It is not clear what parts of the story are real, the invention of the narrator, or part of a dream. The narrator comments on the fact that the protagonist purposely leaves out details of the story because he believes that some things are best left ambiguous (165). Furthermore, the accuracy of the narrative is undermined by several temporal inconsistencies. In a realist rendering the author normally tries to portray nature as accurately as possible, making sure that birds appear during the correct seasons and that leaves don't fall to the ground in July. This narrative does exactly the opposite—continually drawing attention to its own temporal inconsistencies. Sometimes this gives the narrative a dream-like effect and at others the author seems to be commenting on modern man's lack of awareness of his natural surroundings: as if to say that the cycles of nature

no longer have the same effect on a person's consciousness. As the protagonist swims in a river he hears the "summer sound of crickets chirping," while at the same time blackened red and yellow fallen leaves float by, and a newly hatched chick chirps as if it were late spring (195). In another passage the narrator states that, according to the calendar on the wall, it is full moon, but then he finds out that the calendar is from last year—it is in fact a crescent moon (228).

Postmodern literature calls into question the concept that narrative is primarily a "temporal" construction. In this case "temporality" refers to the logical succession from one plot element to the next, just as in a sentence the rules of grammar dictate word order so that one word logically follows from the other. In the essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" (1977) Joseph Frank introduces a concept called "spatial form theory" which aims to describe the techniques by which novelists can subvert the temporality inherent in narrative to create new narrative structures (Daghistany 13). Completely violating the strict distinction between the role of literature and that of the fine arts (asserted as far back as the eighteenth century by Lessing in his essay "Laocoön"<sup>9</sup>), Frank argues that the "temporality" of narrative can be subverted to achieve "spatial form." He compares a work of fiction that has achieved "spatial form" to an impressionist painting: "The impressionist painters juxtaposed pure tones on the canvas, instead of mixing them on the palette, in order to leave the blending of colors to the eye of the spectator" (Daghistany, 20). In a similar way a writer who successfully "subverts the chronological sequence inherent in narrative" provides the reader with units of meaning, but not with a "syntax": "In the case of the reader, his alertness to reflexive reference, his ability to construct

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<sup>9</sup> When discussing the conventional view of narrative, drawing from Lessing's *Laokoon*, Parry writes: "Epic narrative and visual art, we have been told, are fundamentally incompatible... The visual media exist in space, the epic unfolds in time. The visual media capture the moment, (epic) poetry captures movement in the succession of moment..." (Parry, 22).



syntax for the work, creates a whole out of the discrete parts of the narrative” (Daghistan 21). Thus, in order to achieve “spatial form,” a text must be “self-reflexive,” that is, it must make reference to itself, to its own artificiality (Klinkowitz 43). In “The Novel as Artifact,” Klinkowitz writes: “Successful spatial-form fiction must create its own meaning out of the artifice of fiction, having compositional elements do the work otherwise assigned to externally imposed meaning” (43). Thus, in a work of spatial-form fiction the author creates a degree of openness. “The reader is no longer chained to the temporal succession of events noted on the page” (Klinkowitz 45).

Spatial form is not only related to narrative structure. It also has to do with the composition of images. By subverting the chronological sequence inherent in narrative, the author emphasizes form and description over temporality. He rescues objects from the “realm of signification” by turning the image itself into the subject of discourse. Where the author of a linear narrative reflects on the functional composition of the narrative (in terms of the succession of events), the literary architect of “spatial form” turns his attention to the composition of individual images or scenes, thus forcing the reader to pause and observe. “The organization is not merely that of a story but of significant image patterns, of collocation and juxtaposition” (Vidan 134). The chronological syntax is replaced by a spatial syntax which consists of interrelationships between images. As is demonstrated in the final chapter of this thesis, Handke’s use of motifs of color and locality creates a *spatial syntax*. Just as the painter composes his painting in such a way that the eye is impelled to move from one image to the next, the writer moves the reader from one object to the next by visually relating one to the other.

Being careful not to submit oneself to the “myth of progress” by arguing that postmodern literature has necessarily “improved upon” earlier stylistic and formalistic concepts, one could argue that modernism’s high valuation of “innovation,” which served as the necessary

prerequisite for a transformation in the relationship between author-reader-text, gives way to a more romantic postmodern sensibility. A postmodern author like Handke can at once draw from the narrative structure of the medieval epic romance, incorporate a classical appreciation of aesthetics, and adopt the modernist spirit of experimentation.

## CHAPTER TWO: DISTORTION

In *For a New Novel* Robbe-Grillet writes: “A novel, for most readers and critics—is primarily a ‘story.’ A true novelist is one who knows how to ‘tell a story.’ ... Hence to criticize a novel often comes down to reporting its anecdote ... with more or less emphasis on the essential passages: the climaxes and denouements of the plot” (30). As Robbe-Grillet argues, the emphasis on “anecdote” is becoming a thing of the past: “... the plot itself has long since ceased to constitute the armature of the narrative. The demands of the anecdote are doubtless less constraining for Proust than for Flaubert, for Faulkner than for Proust, for Beckett than for Faulkner” (33).

This assertion that the “demands of the anecdote” have become less constraining for contemporary authors is quite intriguing, but requires clarification. Barthes recognizes an interesting dynamic that exists between “function” and “discourse” in narrative. According to Barthes, the lowest level—the foundation of the narrative structure—consists of “functional” units. A “functional” unit expresses a concept that is “necessary to the story.” Of the various “functional” units, the “cardinal function” is the most consequential in that it acts as the “hinge-point” of the narrative; it opens, continues or closes an alternative that is “of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story” (101). Thus, we may think of the “cardinal function” as a unit which creates narrative action. For example, the death of Cinderella’s father is most definitely a “cardinal function” in that it “sets up” the later action of Cinderella becoming a slave to her evil stepmother.

In a work of literature such as Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* there are very few “cardinal functions”: in fact in this case there are only two: the “wait established” and the “wait

rewarded or disappointed.” The first, argues Barthes, can be “catalysed,” or drawn out infinitely so that the audience never actually finds out what the object of this “waiting” is. Some would argue that this is in fact what makes the play interesting. This act of disturbing the narrative at the functional level is called “distortion” and is actually present—to varying degrees—in all narratives. Barthes illustrates this point by comparing a real-life occurrence with its likely portrayal in narrative. He writes: “On meeting in ‘life’, it is most unlikely that the invitation to take a seat would not immediately be followed by the act of sitting down; in narrative these two units, contiguous from a mimetic point of view, may be separated by a long series of insertions...” (119). Russian formalist Tomashevsky distinguishes between “static” and “dynamic” motifs. Static motifs describe people, things, setting, color, and are “free” in the sense that they are not a crucial part of the narrative sequence. Dynamic motifs describe the actions and behaviors of the characters and are “bound” the chronological and causal sequence of the narrative (Kestner 108). An abundance of “spatial motifs” creates distortion by disturbing the narrative on the functional level.

Distortion is a natural occurrence in all forms of narrative, although certain forms of narrative lend themselves better to this convention than others. For example, the level of distortion that occurs in a novel can rarely be achieved in film. This is because film is a highly temporal medium. Barthes writes: “... writing contains possibilities of diaeresis—and so of catalysing—far superior to those of film: a gesture related linguistically can be ‘cut up’ much more easily than the same gesture visualized” (120).

It has been established that the narrative structure of Beckett’s play lends itself particularly well to “distortion.” This can also be said for *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus*, a novel in which the narrative composition is based on the ready-made

structure of the hero's cyclical journey (the odyssey). The idea of the "odyssey" is almost as devoid of functionality as Beckett's idea of "waiting." It is less a consequential than a spatial relationship which drives the plot, since the basic structure of the narrative is based on the cyclical movement *out and back*. Thus the basic "story" of *Dunkle Nacht* consists of three parts: the hero getting struck by lightning, which causes him to embark on a journey, the hero travelling to the city of Sante Fe where he experiences many "adventures," and the hero returning home. Although there is a small degree of consequence attached to the lightning strike it is almost impossible to speak of the plot in terms of the relation between "cardinal functions." It is not entirely clear why the hero embarks on a journey and there is no explicit motivation for his return. The idea of a lightning strike as the necessary motivation for a development in plot is rather obviously arbitrary and artificial. The pharmacist could have just as well been visited by a ghost in the night or inspired by a rare vision. These motivations are equally as plausible as the lightning strike. Whereas for Beckett it is simply the abstract idea of "waiting" which provides the impetus for the creation of his narrative, Handke borrows an entire ready-made narrative structure from the tradition of oral literature—more specifically from the Arthurian medieval epic romance *Yvain Knight of the Lion* recorded for the first time by Chrétien de Troyes in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and later translated into German by Hartmann von Aue. There are many references in *Dunkle Nacht* to *Yvain*—the most explicit being at the end of the novel when the narrator explicitly mentions the tale's title ("Das Epos von 'Ivain oder der Löwenritter' aufgeschlagen" (293).

In "Spatial Form and Plot" Eric S. Rabkin refers to a plot based on the "memory of conventional romance" as inherently "synchronic" and opposed to diachronic act of "reporting events" (93). Through this "synchronic" act of borrowing, the plot of *Dunkle Nacht* becomes the

object of “composition” rather than being tied to the temporal sequence of events; the author simply borrows motifs from the epic tale and places them within his narrative composition.<sup>10</sup> Thus the intertextual relationship between *Dunkle Nacht* and *Yvain* contributes to the novel’s “spatial form.”

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<sup>10</sup> In “Time Sequence in Spatial Form” Ivo Vidan talks about the “compositional” quality of the “spatial form” novel (133).

### CHAPTER THREE: PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTENT

By continually borrowing motifs from *Yvain Knight of the Lion*, Handke not only creates the opportunity for distortion, but also liberates himself from certain conventions common to what Barthes calls the “psychological novel.” According to Barthes, in the modern novel characters possess “psychological essences” whereas characters in oral literature are often “subordinate to the action” which they carry out (106-107). We don’t question why the evil stepmother in Cinderella abuses her stepdaughter; we simply accept that she embodies the idea of the “evil stepmother.” In *Dunkle Nacht* Handke’s protagonist corresponds to Barthes’s description of oral literature in that he becomes an “agent of an action” rather than an individual with a “psychological consistency.” This concept is obscured by the fact that Handke provides us again and again with bits of information which appear to establish the protagonist’s individual “psychological consistency.” However, a closer look reveals that these fragments are nothing more than metafictional references to the language of the psychological novel.

At the beginning of *Dunkle Nacht* we are introduced to the main protagonist, a pharmacist in a suburb of Salzburg called Taxham. Although the reader may notice that the narrator is very much preoccupied with the portrayal of Taxham as a distinct locality as well as of the pharmacist’s house and the general topography of the area, there is a relatively high degree of psychological content in this first chapter. This fact is misleading, because this psychological content hardly represents a genuine attempt to establish “psychological consistency.”<sup>11</sup> The pharmacist never actually becomes an “individual” operating independent of “actions.”<sup>12</sup> The fact that the pharmacist is often mistaken for someone else, or overlooked by members of the community may be a reflection of this very circumstance. In the following passage the skier

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<sup>11</sup>See Barthes, 106

<sup>12</sup> See Barthes, 105-107

recognizes him as a man who had saved his life during an accident in the Rocky mountains, claims to have seen him swimming in the Black Sea and then suspects him to be a an influential government official working behind the scenes:

Später habe ich dich noch einmal gesehen beim Schwimmen im Schwarzen Meer, ganz weit draußen, wir saßen mit Freunden auf einer Yacht und glaubten, du seist ein Schiffbrüchiger, aber du hast uns nur ein Zeichen gegeben, wir sollten weitersegeln, du hattest genau so ein Tuch um den Kopf wie das jetzt. Du bist hier in der Regierung, im Hintergrund, ziehst die Fäden (95-96).

The pharmacist's identity is constantly reinvented by other characters. His "psychological content" is unstable. The poet claims to recognize a similarity between the pharmacist and his own father (96-97), and later in the novel someone recognizes him as the actor from a Western, while another mistakes him for a famous doctor (150).

Further adding to the deconstruction of the psychological novel, passages which express psychological content are characterized by an overly dramatic, highly sentimental tone. For example, in the following passage we learn that the pharmacist has disowned his son:

Der Apotheker dachte an seine Toten. Dabei kam ihm sein Sohn in den Sinn. Aber der war doch gar nicht tot? Nein, er hatte ihn verstoßen. War das nicht ein zu starkes Wort? Hatte er ihn nicht bloß einfach aufgegeben, aus dem Blick verloren, abgetan, vergessen? Nein, ich habe ihn verstoßen, "sagte er. „Ich habe mein Kind verstoßen“ (28).

This sudden injection of psychological content by way of a father-son conflict appears rather artificial. It seems to have been conjured up out of thin air and has little consequence for the rest of the narrative. At the end of the novel, the father-son conflict is resolved in a quite contrived



episode as the son appears out of nowhere to drive by the father and say: “Du hast mich nicht verstoßen” (263).

This having been established, it seems apparent that this passage is a reference to nothing more than the psychological novel itself and its rhetoric. A reader who is aware of the self-reflexivity of Handke’s texts may recognize this passage as a reference not to the psychological content of the protagonist, but to the codedness of the word “verstoßen.” The pharmacist himself questions the appropriateness of the word to express the conflict with his son, but can’t seem to resist using this word, the mere mention of which creates a high degree of pathos. The word occurs in excess in this passage. It is a code word which immediately establishes a dramatic tone in the text: the pharmacist seems trapped within this linguistic code. Handke often experiments with dramatically-charged words such as “verstoßen,” with the intent of proving that the mere utterance of these words creates a sort of “instant meaning” so that their content becomes almost irrelevant. Many of the negative critical responses to Handke’s works mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis stem from a misunderstanding of this playful use of language. He often uses the phrases “selbstlose Daseinslust“ or “Bedürfnis nach Heil“ and words such as “Glaube,“ “Seele,“ “Reich, “Sündigkeit,“ “Reinheit,“, “Erlösung,“ etc. with the intention of deconstructing these words and exposing the highly coded role they play in narration (Graf 276-277).

The motif of *das Wiedererkennen*, or the idea of being “recognized” as oneself—often after a long absence—is a common motif in epic literature. In fact this motif occurs at the end of *Yvain Knight of the Lion* as Yvain and Gawain finally “recognize” each other after a long and nearly fatal duel. The scene in which the pharmacist recognizes one of the musicians in the city of Sante Fe as his long lost son, while seeming to represent an important development for the pharmacist’s psychological person, is simply one of *many* realizations of this motif in the novel

and therefore exists more as a metafictional reference to epic literature than as “genuine” psychological content.<sup>13</sup> For example, not only does the pharmacist have a long-lost son, but the poet has a long-lost daughter with whom he is also reunited (164), and the bartender in the pharmacist’s *Stammlokal* is an old widower whose children have long since abandoned him (it seems he has lost hope of a reunion) (204). At the end of the novel the narrator is *recognized* by a child as “der Apotheker von Taxham” (289), mirroring Gawain’s recognition of his cousin Yvain as the famed “Knight of the Lion” (187). The repeated motif of *das Wiedererkennen* disturbs the narrative structure at the functional level by relativizing the importance of these occurrences. There are so many similarities between characters that everything appears as a mere copy of the original. Therefore, although the reader is likely to attach a high degree of importance to the father-son conflict either because of the power of the word “verstoßen” or simply because he is accustomed to searching for psychological content in a novel, this conflict simply belongs to the category of metafiction. It is nothing more than a reference to itself, and an interpretation of the novel that defines plot in terms of familial conflicts would do nothing more than reiterate the highly sentimental rhetoric which Handke sets out to deconstruct.

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<sup>13</sup> See *Dunkle Nacht* pg. 51, 150, 164, 166 for just some examples.

## CHAPTER FOUR: STORY

In Chapter One the narrator points out that the pharmacist's daily routine in Taxham forms a *triangle* as he goes from his house to the pharmacy and then to his favorite "hang-out," the *Erdkellerrestaurant*, for dinner (19). This routine is disturbed when the pharmacist is caught in a rain storm in chapter two and is struck by lightning (although he is not sure if it was really lightning: it could have been a blow to the head). This blow to the head changes the pharmacist in some way so that he suddenly decides to embark on a journey—thus creating narrative action in the novel. The motif of the sudden and violent storm also occurs in *Yvain* as a catalyst for narrative action. In this case the source of the storm is a certain enchanted fountain, which releases a sudden and violent storm if tampered with. Yvain journeys to the realm of the enchanted fountain where he purposely unleashes the storm to attract the attention of the fountain's keeper, Lord Askalon, who defeated his cousin Gawain in a duel and must suffer revenge.<sup>14</sup>

Whereas in *Yvain* the storm is an indirect motivator, in *Dunkle Nacht* the blow to the head brings about a clear transformation in the consciousness of the pharmacist: "ab jetzt, und das unbefristet, konnte er keinen Schritt mehr tun ohne das Bewusstsein dieses neuen Zustands, welcher sich ihm aufdrängte als ein allseitiges Umstellen ... Der Kampf konnte beginnen" (*Dunkle Nacht*, 81-82). After being struck he seeks shelter in the *Erdkellerrestaurant*, where he finds out that the strike has rendered him mute. The innkeeper bandages his wound and serves him a hot meal. This is the beginning of the pharmacist's journey *out and back*. He offers a ride to two fellow guests: a previously well-known poet and a former ski champion. The three continue southward in silent awareness of the adventure which lies ahead.

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<sup>14</sup> This could also be a reference to the storm in *King Lear* (Shakespeare).

This passage truly creates a disturbance on the level of functionality, not only because it presents a sudden break with the pharmacist's "triangular" lifestyle, but also because there is no motivation for the actions of the protagonists. They become "agents of action" rather than individuals operating according to a certain psychological motivation. They embody the idea of the "knight errant" as it appears in *Yvain*. This means that the sole motivation for their actions lies in this idea of the wandering hero, the hero in quest of adventure. They are overcome by a strong desire to simply wander without any real goal in mind. In the novel this sensation is described as follows: "ein Nicht-so-recht-Wissen-wohin, in solcher Richtungslosigkeit aber von einer todesverachtenden Energie ... als seien sie nicht bloß Gesetzlose, sondern stünden zudem über gleichwelchem Gesetz" (99).

The idea of the "knight errant" is what Barthes calls a "code of recitation"—a sort of fixed narrative unit common to oral literature. As Barthes points out, oral literature is different from written literature in that the mark of a good storyteller is that he be able to master the "codes of recitation" which include plot elements as well as fixed phrases and metrical patterns (114-115). These pre-formed codes act as a mental map as he must tell the story from memory. By manipulating these codes he can alter his story in order to cater to a certain audience. A medieval audience would be fluent in these "codes of recitation" and therefore immediately recognize the motif of the "knight errant."

In the medieval tale the ideal of the "knight errant" is what ultimately causes conflict between Lady Laudine and Yvain. Yvain's fellow knights convince him that, despite his happy marriage, he must leave the court in search of adventure. Lady Laudine makes him promise to return after a year's time and when he breaks this promise she forsakes him (de Troyes 78). Interestingly enough, this sort of marital conflict caused by the fact that one partner spends too

much time away from home also appears in *Dunkle Nacht*, but in this case it is actually the pharmacist's wife who is continually absent. At the beginning of the novel there is no trace of her in the house, but the pharmacist finds a packed bag in the hall with a plane ticket on top (30), and at the end he returns home to an empty house: "[sie war] wohl wie üblich ausgegangen" (290).

The figure of the wildly passionate widow, who becomes the unlikely object of the pharmacist's desire, represents an obvious foil to his alienated and detached wife. The pharmacist meets her during the first night of his adventure. She is an old friend of the ski champion and accommodates them as they are weary of travelling. One might argue that the widow in *Dunkle Nacht* is a direct reference to Lady Laudine, the wife of Lord Askalon in *Yvain*. In the medieval romance, Lady Laudine lives in the realm of the enchanted fountain and in *Dunkle Nacht* the widow lives in her own isolated "realm" next to two springs which are channeled into one big fountain. When the travelers arrive at her house they find that her husband has recently died. Similarly, in the medieval epic Lady Laudine becomes a widow as Yvain defeats Lord Askalon in the duel.

One of the most puzzling passages of the novel occurs as in the middle of the night the widow enters the pharmacist's bedroom and beats him up so violently that he falls out of bed, at which point she disappears. The absurdity of this passage stems not only from the lack of motivation for this violent act, but also from the fact that the pharmacist actually finds pleasure in being beat up (106). This embrace of violence is a motif uncommon to the psychological novel (which often aims to show how violence causes suffering) and seems to stem from the medieval epic with its concept of the brave knight who actually welcomes violence as an

opportunity to glorify himself.<sup>15</sup> It is no coincidence that, earlier in the novel, the pharmacist reads the following passage from a medieval epic: “In dem Mittelalterbuch auf seinem inzwischen abgeräumten Tisch wurde ein Schwertstreich gegen jemanden geführt, von dem man dabei das Herz in der Brust offen liegen sah” (90). Handke is obviously referencing the medieval epic’s treatment of violence here.

The widow continually embodies this concept of violence, as on one occasion she attempts to throw a boulder down from a cliff onto the pharmacist’s car, and on another appears out of nowhere to strike him on the head (116, 267). In each case he is invigorated by these acts of violence: “er beschloß ... der Zeuge dessen zu werden, was ihn bedrohte ... die Sinne offenzuhalten, während dieses Tödliche nah und immerzu nah war ...” (116-17). Here the figure of the widow in *Dunkle Nacht* could also be seen as a reference to the figure of Dido in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.<sup>16</sup> Dido is also a widow (her brother having killed her husband) and the ruler of a “realm.” She falls in love with Aeneas and they consummate their love in a grotto during a rainstorm. She falls into a fit of rage when Aeneas leaves her.<sup>17</sup> This drives her to commit suicide by throwing herself onto a funeral pyre (83-108). Later in the tale when Aeneas encounters her in Hades and begs for forgiveness she is still so filled with anger that she averts her eyes and says nothing. In *Dunkle Nacht* the pharmacist encounters the widow in the city of Sante Fe and he tries to greet her, but she simply stares at him as if she wants him to go away (172). Dido’s stubborn silence is also referenced in the “muteness” of the pharmacist. At the end of the novel the widow tells him that he can no longer remain silent, he must open his mouth and start talking (266). This technique of synchronic borrowing, in which character traits from the referenced text

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<sup>15</sup> See Yvain, 184

<sup>16</sup> The pharmacist is compared to Aeneas by the widow at the end of the novel (287).

<sup>17</sup> The widow’s frantic packing of belongings the night the pharmacist arrives could be a reference to Aeneas’s sudden departure (de Troyes 104).

distribute themselves among different characters in the primary text, undermines the traditional concept of “retelling” by disturbing the linear relationship between subject and object of reference. Thus the correlations: “pharmacist = Yvain” and “widow = Lady Laudine” are no longer completely accurate. By disturbing this linear relationship, synchronic borrowing further contributes to the “spatial form” of the novel.<sup>18</sup>

With the sort of “Selbstverständlichkeit” common to the fairy tale,<sup>19</sup> the pharmacist is not at all surprised as he later finds that the widow has sewn a letter into his jacket pocket, which contains a map leading the three travelers to the city they are seeking as well as a personal threat: “Du hast in einem unrechten Zorn deinen Sohn verstoßen. Dafür ist dir auf deiner Stirn ein Mal gewachsen, an dem du sterben wirst. Zwar hat man es dir fürs erste herausgeschnitten. Aber ich werde dafür sorgen, dass es dir nachwächst. Und wenn ich dich noch zehn Mal schlagen muss. Denn auch mir hat es wehgetan ...” (156) The motif of the threatening letter is also found in Handke’s *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*, in which the protagonist’s wife Judith continuously sends him death threats. Just as in *Der Kurze Brief*, the pharmacist feels compelled to seek the widow despite her threats.

*Dunkle Nacht* is destined to frustrate those who judge a novel in terms of the climaxes and denouements of the plot. The reader expects a denouement as the travelers arrive at the destination of their journey: the city of Sante Fe, where the poet wishes to take part in a festival and search for his illegitimate daughter. However, their arrival in the city actually presents nothing more than the beginning of a series of new “fables.” This is consistent with the narrative

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<sup>18</sup> In “Secondary Illusion: The Novel and the Spatial Arts,” Joseph Kestner mentions “parallelism” as one of the narrative techniques by which spatial form is achieved. According to Kestner, parallelism exists when different characters are in similar situations (122). The idea presented here, which I call “synchronic borrowing,” is even more radical (and more synchronic) than Kestner’s notion of the term.

<sup>19</sup> Kunkel, 2

structure of the epic tale, which, as Barthes remarks, consists of a “whole made of multiple fables” (104).

The arrival in Sante Fe represents a denouement only in the sense that the poet is reunited with his illegitimate daughter, who happens to be the “Festkönigin” or queen of the city’s annual celebration. The pharmacist experiences a similar reunion as he recognizes the boy playing the accordion in a band of gypsies as his estranged son, but is unable to approach him and later watches him leave the city with the “Festkönigin.” However, even this narrative sequence that seems at first to find its resolution is disturbed once more by the daughter’s sudden and unexpected arrest. Just as in *Yvain* the hero’s adventures are told in succession as independent fables with little or no causal continuity, the events which occur in the city of Sante Fe appear as independent vignettes. For example, there is a passage in which the travelers begin performing manual labor along with the city’s blue collar workers: spontaneously painting walls, paving streets, etc., and another in which the locality of the *Herberge* where the pharmacist is staying is described in detail. One passage tells of the pharmacist’s frequent visits to an “out-of-the-way” bar in the “Unterstadt” while another depicts the encounter with his two travel companions who have become vagrants, spending the entire day wandering through the city and bothering passersby. Each episode presents the *possibility* of a complete narrative sequence. For example, the reader may expect that the description of the *Herberge* is the beginning of a narrative sequence which traces the progression of a relationship between the pharmacist and the owner of the *Herberge*, but this is not the case. The description of the *Herberge* does not serve as a background for narrative action, but is itself the topic of discourse.

Handke’s artistic concept of “Langsamkeit” finds its realization here. The episodic nature of this portion of the novel provides much occasion for “distortion” so that spatiality takes



precedence over temporality. The same episodic structure that allows the author of the medieval epic to recount a series of heroic feats is used by Handke to create a series of descriptive passages. This slows down the pace of the narrative considerably. However, the structural integrity of the “story” is not at risk. Since the narrative is based on the cyclical structure of the hero’s journey *out and back* the author can “close the circle” at any time simply by sending his hero back home.

This is exactly what happens when at the end of the summer the pharmacist journeys back west by foot through a sort of steppe landscape. Once again the episodic nature of the medieval epic romance is realized in the narrative. Although he is out of reach of any sign of civilization, the pharmacist encounters a group of cyclists, a stray dog, a group of fledglings, an armed man in search of his wife’s rapist, and a medieval search party. The steppe is almost like a stage where various characters appear and disappear.<sup>20</sup>

In the medieval romance, Yvain goes mad, tears off his clothes and goes to live in the wilderness after being forsaken by Lady Laudine. His only companion is a hermit with whom he trades meat for bread and water. Similarly, the pharmacist finds shelter during his first night in the steppe with a hermit who inhabits an abandoned chapel. He also encounters a peddler, a character from Handke’s second novel *Der Hausierer*, with whom he trades goods.

Just as Yvain returns to Lady Laudine at the end of medieval romance, the pharmacist meets the widow at the end of his journey through the steppe. He is overcome by love and regains his ability to speak. This presents yet another occasion for metafictional reference to the codedness of language. The following passage clearly parodies its own sentimentality: “Sein Herz beginnt zu bluten. Gibt es das also? Ja, das gibt es. Endlich blutet also sein Herz, und er kann wieder sprechen, zuerst nur in einem Schrei: ‘Was wollen Sie von mir?’ Was willst du von

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<sup>20</sup> Like the heath in *King Lear* (Shakespeare).

mir? Sag, was willst du von mir?’” (280). A similar quotation of this overly sentimental language occurs as the two lovers arrive in Salzburg and prepare to say goodbye: “...er sagte: ‘Bleib bei mir.’ Und sie sagte: ‘Nein. Weißt du denn nicht, dass es zu spät ist, für uns beide jedenfalls—für andere zwei vielleicht nicht.’ Und er sagte: ‘Du hast mich doch um Hilfe gebeten.’ Und sie sagte: ‘Du hast mir schon geholfen.’” (288). This dialog clearly mocks the language of an overly dramatic romance. A reader who attaches too much significance to these words will inevitably be led astray.

The novel ends in the autumn as the pharmacist returns home to find everything more or less as it was. It seems at first as if his journey were all just a dream (“Sein Wagen stand vor dem Haus, mit knackendem Motor, wie gerade erst da abgestellt” [289].) until a few small clues suggest otherwise (290, 293). The expectations associated with both the road movie and the *Entwicklungsroman*—namely that the protagonist returns home a changed man—are deconstructed in the epilogue when the narrator asks the pharmacist if he has changed as a result of his journey and he replies: “Zwischendrin habe ich mir einmal geschworen, wenn ich je hierher zurückkäme, dann als ein anderer! Aber das einzige, was sich an mir scheint’s geändert hat: ich habe größere Füße bekommen, mußte mir neues Schuhwerk kaufen” (302). However, some closure does exist. Just as Yvain becomes famed as the “Knight of the Lion” at the end of the medieval tale, the pharmacist finally becomes “recognizable” as the “Apotheker von Taxham” (289). Of note is also the fact that the narrator “alludes to” the outward appearance of the pharmacist here in the epilogue for the first time, commenting on the fact that such a description makes him uncomfortable:

Ich weiß nicht warum es mir seit jeher widerstrebt hat, Leute, ihre Gesichter, ihre Körper, zu beschreiben ...Trotzdem ist das vielleicht der Moment, das Aussehen

des Apothekers anzudeuten: Er war nicht besonders groß, dafür breit, breite Schultern, und das am auffälligsten Breite, überhaupt das einzig Auffällige an ihm war seine Nase: deren Flügel ständig geblähte Nüstern (300).

This passage is rather comical in that it first claims to finally describe the pharmacist and then simply focuses in on his nose, commenting that the nostrils are always flared. Thus the seeming closure created by the narrator's attempt to finally describe the protagonist is negated by the fact that the one distinguishing feature described is more of a caricature than a characterization.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INWARDNESS?

A great deal of scholarship pertaining to Handke's oeuvre attempts to describe the nature of what most agree is a certain marked stylistic transition. The novel *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* is generally considered to mark a turning point in this respect and the novel *Slow Homecoming* is considered to be the culmination of this transition. Not all scholars agree on what this transition consists of, except to say that Handke's prose has evolved from a highly experimental style to something more conservative or, in the author's own words, "classical." Some attempt to position this transition in the context of literary history, viewing what seems to be the increased importance of *introspection* in his later works as typical of "New Subjectivity," a trend in German literature which arose in the 70s and 80s and was characterized by a turn *inward* towards the *self* (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 13).<sup>21</sup> However, Christoph Parry offers a more fitting approach to describing exactly what this transition consists of in his study *Landscapes of Discourse*. Parry attempts to portray the transition in Handke's work in *aesthetic* terms, drawing parallels between literature and the visual arts (Parry 40-41).

Many critics are too eager to attach an external significance to Handke's stylistic evolution. As is evident in his aesthetic treatise *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire*, it is his contemplation of the role of spatiality, perspective and form that motivates what has been perceived as a turn *inward*. Handke is interested in the "self" merely as a *vehicle of perception* and not as an object of psychological realism. In *Dunkle Nacht* the fact that the protagonist is a "mushroom expert" says little about his psychological person, but positions him as a unique *vehicle of perception*; unlike most people who are constantly looking *ahead* to reach their next goal, the pharmacist looks *down* in search of mushrooms and perceives small details on the

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Halsall agrees that critics often misinterpret the nature of psychological content in Handke's prose. He cites the "negative reaction" on the part of German critics towards Handke's "inwardness" or "subjectivity" (46).

ground. Thomas F. Barry acknowledges this fact in the article “‘Sensucht nach einem Bezugssystem’: The Existential Aestheticism of Peter Handke’s Recent Fiction” when he says: “Despite the sometimes classical, sometimes romantic vocabulary which appears in Handke’s most recent works, the fundamental experience—the union or linking of consciousness to the world—is the same as it always has been in his writing” (266). From *Die Hornisse* to *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* all the way up to his most recent novels like *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* and *Der Bildverlust oder durch die Sierra de Gredos* Handke’s primary concern lies with the varying perceptual paradigms of his protagonists.

It is interesting how the condition of the “self” in Handke’s prose presents a frequent topic of discussion, even though, as some would claim, the author attempts to avoid references to the psychology of the individual. In the article “Raumglück?” Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt writes: “Die Anstrengung Handkes ist auf die Erledigung jeglichen Ich-Inhalts aus. Es muß immer wieder betont werden: Kein Schriftsteller steht der Introspektion so fern wie Handke ...” (75). The mere fact that Goldschmidt feels the need to emphasize that no author is so uninterested in introspection as Handke suggests a general ambivalence with regard to the nature of psychological content in Handke’s prose. This ambivalence arises from the fact that what appears to be a genuine attempt at “introspection” is often simply a metafictional reference to the rhetoric of the psychological novel

A reader reviewer on “amazon.de” found *Dunkle Nacht* completely uninteresting except for the following passage, which is fraught with stereotypes about the relationship between man and woman, and resembles the drunken rant of a bitter and lonely man:

Zwischen Frau und Mann ist neuerdings Feindschaft gesetzt. Männer und Frauen sind heutigentags untereinander zerfallen, ohne Ausnahme ... Nicht nur werden

wir nicht mehr geliebt, sondern sogar bekämpft ... Früher oder später wird die dich liebende Frau, so oder so, von dir enttäuscht sein, und du wirst nicht einmal wissen, warum. Sie wird dich, wie sie erklärt, durchschaut haben, ohne dir aber zu sagen, worin sie dich durchschaut hat. Und sie wird dich keinen Moment mehr vergessen lassen, dass du durchschaut bist. (Lassahn)

Though it is too long to be quoted here, the passage continues to bemoan the hostility of women and perpetuates a series of stereotypes, which apparently speak to this particular reader quite effectively. It is interesting that the reader should isolate this text as the only worthy passage in the novel. This is a prime example of how Handke's prose is often misunderstood by the impatient reader: he fails to recognize the fact that this passage actually represents a meta-fictional critique of the very sort of discourse he is praising. The subject of the hostile woman does not arise from the author's desire to comment on reality. It itself exists as yet another "metafictional" reference to both the figure of Lady Laudine in *Yvain* and to Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid*. The personality of both figures is characterized by an unforgiving demeanor and the potential to be rather hostile.

Even scholars who recognize the importance of spatiality in Handke's prose seem inevitably to revert to a psychological interpretation. In "'Sehnsucht nach einem Bezugssystem': The Existential Aestheticism of Peter Handke's Recent Fiction" Thomas F. Barry suggests that Handke's emphasis on description represents a sort of "therapy of images." He writes: "...it is (imaginative) fiction which allows him to see through his artificial world and to achieve a more authentic sense of self. It is a therapy of images that Handke found in his reading and writing" (262). To suggest that Handke's unique aesthetic perspective is the result of a "therapy of images"—an attempt to heal the *alienated self*—is to do the text a great injustice, for exactly the

opposite is true: the motif of the *alienated self* is nothing more than a means by which Handke creates certain aesthetic paradigms in the text. For the author, the *alienated self* presents nothing more than the occasion for a new perceptual paradigm.

In *For a New Novel* Robbe-Grillet discusses the changing concept of “character” in the “modern novel.” In the traditional sense of the term, a character is more than a simple “banal *he*.” He must have a proper name, parents, a profession, childhood memories, etc. He is more than just “the simple object of the action expressed by the verb” (27). In the modern novel, however, characters are nothing more than “puppets” which no longer display a dimension of psychological realism (28). As Robbe-Grillet points out, the “K” of Kafka’s *Das Schloß* possesses a mere single initial in place of a proper name, has no family, no face and is probably not even a land surveyor at all (28). The protagonist of the “modern novel” accommodates many different interpretations but is subordinate to none (28).

In the case of *Dunkle Nacht*, where “meaning” in the form of “psychological content” is generated, it is also deconstructed so that the text actually “mocks” its own meaning. At the beginning of the novel we learn that the protagonist prefers riding toward the sun so that he may avoid the *unpleasant* experience of *seeing his own shadow*: “Es war dem Apotheker dann auch recht, weiter eher nach Osten, der Sonne zu, zu fahren: so vermied er den eigenen Schatten vor sich—ein Anblick, der ihm seit je unangenehm gewesen war” (32). This passage seems to be a reference to the protagonist’s “existential angst,” the shadow being a metaphor for the sort of “existential awareness” that makes the pharmacist uncomfortable. However, the author clearly intends to use this metaphor in an ironic fashion, for in a later passage he deconstructs this ready-made system of references in which “avoidance of shadow = existential angst” by reasserting the *spatial significance* of the shadow over its metaphorical connotation:

Was ihn beim Weitergehen zunächst störte, war, mit der östlichen Sonne im Rücken, vor sich ständig den eigenen Schatten zu sehen ... Später aber betrachtete er in seinem Schatten die Einzelheiten am Boden, die sich so deutlicher abzeichneten. Und gegen Mittag war dieser ohnehin fast aus seinem Blick; ihn in den Augenwinkeln zu haben, war ihm jetzt willkommen, denn das gab in der, Horizont nach Horizont, eher gleichförmigen Savanne ein Gefühl der Fortbewegung und des unauffällig Begleitetwerdens“ (239).

Where existential rhetoric bans the shadow to the “realm of ideas,” Handke restores to it a certain degree of material “immediacy.” It is actually the aesthetic benefits of the dark-light contrast (and not his own psychological growth) that allow the pharmacist to overcome the discomfort of seeing his own shadow. With the shadow in front of him he can better observe details on the ground and with it on his side (at midday as the sun is overhead) the vast openness and monotony of the steppe becomes less intimidating.

Much of the “existential content” of Handke’s prose consists of references to ready-made narrative structures borrowed from Kafka, whom the author names as perhaps his most influential literary role model (Pilipp 117). Like Kafka, Handke often creates characters who experience alienation in relation to the “outside world.” Both authors are interested in the idea of a sudden transformation, a “crucial existential moment” in which the protagonist either *reconnects with* or *disconnects from* everyday reality (Pilipp 126-127).

The “sudden transformation” that occurs in the first sentence of *Die Verwandlung*: “Als Gregor Samsa eines Morgens aus unruhigen Träumen erwachte, fand er sich in seinem Bett zu einem ungeheueren Ungeziefer verwandelt” is referenced in the first line of *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*: “Wer hat schon einmal geträumt, ein Mörder geworden zu sein und sein



gewohntes Leben nur der Form nach weiterzuführen? ” (Die Stunde 7). Handke’s Gregor Keuschnig becomes disconnected from reality as the result of a dream in which he commits a murder, and Kafka’s Gregor Samsa wakes up from a dream to discover the reality of his altered state (Pilipp, 132-33).

While the examination of parallels between Handke and his role model Kafka presents an extremely interesting topic of discussion, a better understanding of Handke’s concept of “character” is best achieved through an examination of differences in regard to the role of the “sudden transformation” in the prose of both authors. Whereas Kafka aims to comment on certain social, familial, or psychological conflicts that lead to the protagonist’s alienation, Handke uses this alienation as an occasion to explore the relationship between the self and the “world of objects.” “Whereas an existential novelist might portray a character as alienated and leave it at that, Handke finds such a predicament to be only one part of a complex semiotic process from which true fiction can properly begin, not end” (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 66). This is not to say that Kafka is not interested in aesthetics. In fact, when readers think of *Die Verwandlung* the first thing that comes to mind are images of the gigantic cockroach, his little black legs, the rotting apple sticking out of his back and the small dusty room within which he is trapped. However, in contrast to Kafka, Handke never offers his reader the privileged perspective of the omniscient narrator. The view of the world which he offers is completely dependent upon the point of view of the protagonist, regardless of whether the story is told in first or third person. Handke completely submits himself to the point of view of the protagonist in order to study the world according to different subjective points of view.

In *Dunkle Nacht* the “sudden transformation” occurs after the protagonist receives a blow to the head. This alters his perception in two ways: First, it renders him mute, thus establishing

his role as the silent observer or mystic. Second, it creates in him a sense of adventure that mirrors that of the “knight errant.” This causes him to “wander,” which creates the occasion for the kind of episodic rendering of causally unrelated scenes which dictates much of the novel’s narrative structure. In both cases the “sudden transformation” brings about a new perceptual paradigm.

In order to fully appreciate the aesthetics of the Handke’s novels one must recognize the unique relationship between author and protagonist. Behind the author’s seemingly arbitrary creation of character traits and character conflicts lies a rather consistent and purposeful aesthetic agenda rooted in the careful, almost painterly, study of perception and perspective.

## CHAPTER SIX: COMMITMENT

Handke's second novel *Der Hausierer* was criticized in the magazine *Spiegel* because of its self-referentiality. According to the critic, the horror that the novel tries to create is too removed from reality:

... im abstrakten Schema des Schreckens kann ich meinen Schrecken nicht entdecken. Mein Schrecken ist konkret, der betrifft, was ich sehe, im Kino und auf der Straße, im Fernsehen und in der Zeitung [...]—mein Schrecken betrifft Bolivien und Vietnam, er betrifft auch Los Angeles und West-Berlin. (qtd. in Pichler 84)

In a letter to the editor Handke responds facetiously:

Ich habe l'art pour l'art produziert, während anderswo Menschen an Widersprüchen starben. Ich werde mich ändern ...Gerade habe ich mir schon ein Plakat mit dem Bild Che Guevaras beschafft und es in meinem Zimmer an die Wand geklebt, und wenn heute Abend die Tagesschau Bildberichte aus Vietnam bringt, werde ich mir überlegen, wie ich aus diesen Bildern Literatur machen kann. (qtd. in Pichler 85)

When under the subheading "Commitment" Robbe-Grillet writes: "The thesis-novel has rapidly become a genre despised more than any other ... Yet only a few years ago, we saw it reborn on the Left in new clothes: 'commitment,' 'engagement'; and in the East too, with more naïve colors, as 'socialist realism'"(35) he is criticizing the same sentiment expressed by the critic above, who seems to believe that a work of art must necessarily comment on a political or social issue. Thus it is no surprise that Handke looked to Robbe-Grillet in search of a model for

literature which avoids this problematic notion of “commitment” (Pichler 54).<sup>22</sup> According to Robbe-Grillet, the author’s “commitment” lies not in the realm of politics, religion, and social conflicts, but in the realm of language: “commitment is, for the writer, the full awareness of the present problems of his own language” (41).

This is not to say that it is the intention of the *nouveau roman* to ban anything and everything resembling social, religious, or political discourse from the novel.<sup>23</sup> For example if we consider how this concept comes into play in *Dunkle Nacht*, we see that the social discourse surrounding globalization is very much present even though Handke does not show “commitment” to any sort of school of thought surrounding this phenomenon. Globalization is not discussed overtly as a theme, but it manifests itself in the landscape and serves to lend a unique quality to the setting. In the following excerpt the main protagonist, the pharmacist, has embarked on a journey south-westward through Europe with his two travel companions. His journey is shaped by postmodern changes in the landscape due to the phenomenon of globalization:

Statt hoch auf den Pässen durchquerte man den Kontinent beinahe ausschließlich unten in Tunnels ... Obwohl sich die Staatsgrenzen vermehrt hatten—es gab so viele wie noch nie—, blieben diese, sehr oft mitten in wieder so einem Tunnel, unbemerkt, zumal auch alle Grenzkontrollen abgeschafft waren, nirgends mehr ein Grenzer sich zeigte (120-121).

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<sup>22</sup> Scholars like Jerome Klinkowitz and Christoph Parry tend to discuss Robbe-Grillet only in relation to Handke’s less recent works, but in doing this they are referring only to the connection with Robbe-Grillet’s novels and are often overlooking the degree to which Handke’s later works also realize the concepts put forth in Robbe-Grillet’s essays.

<sup>23</sup> As sociolinguists would argue, social conflicts are infused in the language and an “awareness of the present problems of language” automatically includes an awareness of the present problems of society (Kress, 33).

For Handke this new system of tunnels creates the occasion for a modern-day aesthetic adventure. In the following passage, the tunnel exit appears as a miniature slide projection against an enormous black background:

Daß es dort hinten hinaus ins Freie ging, war das nicht vielleicht sogar nur eine Täuschung? So starr erschien das Bild des Ausgangs, auch so künstlich, mitsamt dem gar nicht dämmrigen, vielmehr sonnenhellen Licht, daß es in ihren Augen, und das bis kurz vor dem Durchsein, ein Teil des Stollens war. Ein Miniatur-Dia, grellfarben, überbelichtet, stand da vor ihnen auf eine sonst vollständig finstere Fläche projiziert, etwas wie ein Blattgrünflimmern und ein Felsflankenrotgelb.  
(130-131)

In this passage the image of the “Miniatur-Dia” stands for itself as a sort of miniature descriptive event. It exists independent of all social discourse and narrative action. In addition to this, the carefully constructed nouns “Blattgrünflimmern” and “Felsflankenrotgelb” point to the great importance Handke places on lighting and color. The words “grün” or “gelb” would not have sufficed to express this aesthetic experience. Description clearly takes precedence here over political discourse. This is just one example of an “untranslatable”<sup>24</sup> narrative unit; a descriptive event that does not serve as a background to the plot, but exists as a pure “spatial” phenomenon.

In fact the image of the tunnel belongs to the more general spatial motif of the cave. In one passage the narrator uses the phrase “Untertunnelung des Erdteils” (121) instead of simply “Tunneln,” which may lead the reader to think of certain myths or fairytales in which trolls dig secret tunnels under the earth. The expression “Untertunnelung des Erdteils” also evokes the “archetype of the cave” which is associated with darkness, mystery, and spiritual sanctuary and occurs as an important motif in both epic and romantic literature. The word “Stollen” in place of

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<sup>24</sup> See Barthes, 120-121

“Tunnel” in the passage quoted above is also an infusion of romantic imagery into the text. “Stollen” is a word used in connection with mining or “Bergbau,” which was an important metaphor in Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. For Novalis, the image of the solitary miner who descends into the dark shaft to recover precious gems is a metaphor for the role of the poet (Hardenberg, 90). Both Handke’s protagonist in *Dunkle Nacht* and Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* dream of caves. In a passage at the beginning of *Dunkle Nacht* the protagonist dreams that there is a network of subterranean rooms under his house:

[Er hatte] in der Nacht zwei ohne ihn, jenseits seiner Person, spielende Träume. In dem einen grenzten an den kleinen Keller im Haus Fluchten von unterirdischen Räumen, ein Saal übergehend in den andern, prunkvollst eingerichtet, feierlichst beleuchtet, dabei allesamt leer, wie in Erwartung, bereit für ein herrliches, vielleicht auch schreckliches Ereignis, und das aber nicht erst seit kurzem gerade, vielmehr seit Menschengedenken (68).

The reference to Freudian and post-Freudian portrayal of the subconscious is quite apparent here. At the end of the story the protagonist actually enters the basement—a part of the house that he always avoided—and finally feels at home there: a sign that he has processed certain suppressed memories.

As a part of the spatial motif of the cave, the reference to the tunnel clearly has more of a spatial significance than a political one. What has the potential of being a critique of globalization becomes an exploration of spatiality. The spatial motif of the cave occurs throughout the novel and is so interesting that it merits one more reference in this thesis (even if this represents a bit of a digression). The protagonist’s favorite “establishment” is the “Erdkellerrestaurant” located by the airport in Salzburg. The word “Erdkeller” evokes the image

of an underground room, although the effect is somewhat lost in the English translation: “root-cellar restaurant” (Winston 50). The protagonist visits the “Erdkellerrestaurant” after he is struck by lightning. It is here that he finds shelter from the storm. This could represent yet another reference to Novalis’s *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, in which the poet is told a story about a princess and her peasant lover who seek shelter in a dry moss-covered cave during a storm where they ultimately consummate their union and conceive a child (Hardenberg 40).<sup>25</sup> In *Dunkle Nacht* the sentence “Stunden des Nachtregentrommels dann auf das Herbergsdach” (89) skilfully creates this sense of being sheltered from the elements in a cozy cave-like space. The narrator’s description of the *Erdkellerrestaurant* clearly evokes the archetype of the cave as a place of sanctuary. Once again the importance of spatiality and of description becomes apparent here as the carefully chosen words “Nachtregentrommel” and “Herbergsdach” emphasize the idea of being *sheltered* from the storm.

For Handke, this intersection of romantic imagery such as that found in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and the reality of the postmodern landscape is not just an aesthetic principle, but a way of perceiving the modern world. The author has been living in Chaville, a suburb of Paris, since 1990 and finds it to be a special place because of its proximity to the forest of Vélizy. There exists an interesting contrast between the seemingly enchanted forest of Vélizy and what he calls the “Türaufgehwelt” of the modern suburban infrastructure of Chaville:

Ich gehe eine Stunde durch den Wald—und es ist ein unglaublicher Wald, mit Ruinen und Teichen und verborgenen Quellen und Füchsen—und dann gehen automatisch die Türen des Einkaufszentrums vor mir auf, die Musik spielt, die Warenwelt tut sich auf, die Militärhubschrauber landen mit ihren toten französischen Helden. Ich will diese Türaufgehwelt nicht gegen die Igel oder die

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<sup>25</sup> The same motif occurs in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Maro 89).

Steinmetze aufrechnen, die mir als ‚Kitsch‘ ausgelegt werden—aber dieses Ineinander ist ein genaues Bild der heutigen Welt. Das Rhythmische, Epische dieser Welt ist in meinen Büchern, das bilde ich mir wenigstens ein (qtd. in Pichler 187).

Here, Handke’s perception of the “postmodern” landscape consciously avoids an explicit critique of modern technology. The word “Türaufgehwelt” itself has a mythical quality and eludes any sort of absolute value judgement. Instead of condemning the bustle of the suburb and celebrating the tranquillity of the forest he simply tries to capture the aesthetic quality of the “Ineinander” of today’s world. In this way he lives up to Robbe-Grillet’s concept of the author’s “commitment” without completely banning social and political discourse from his work.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: DESCRIPTION AND SPATIAL FORM

The only critical response to *Dunkle Nacht* that comes close to constituting a scholarly work appeared in the Catholic journal *Lebendiges Zeugnis* in 1998. The interpretation, written by Mariano Delgado, is entitled: “Das Lied vom Namenlos—oder: Wenn Dichter Mystiker werden (wollen): Zum letzten Parabel von Peter Handke.” Delgado’s interpretation hinges on various intertextual references to the poem “La noche oscura” written by the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross. As is evident in the following excerpt, the language of the novel’s title was inspired by St. John’s poem:

“In einer Nacht ganz dunkel,  
erfüllt von Sehnsucht und entflammt von Liebe  
- o du glückliche Stunde!  
ging ich ganz unbesehen,  
*als es schon still in meinem Haus geworden ...*” (Delgado, 3)

Delgado scolds critics for not recognizing such obvious references to mysticism and religion which appear throughout the novel. He says: “Es war einmal eine (glückliche) Zeit, da waren die deutschen Feuilletonisten gebildet ... da gedieh die Mystik in den Kirchenmauern und führte doch kein Mauerblümchendasein” (1).

In the subsequent stanzas of “La noche oscura,” the narrator is possessed by a sense of longing, and leaves his silent house. He searches for and finds the object of his desire (whether sexual or spiritual) and becomes one with him, letting go of all his worries. According to Delgado, the plot of *Dunkle Nacht* follows this same schema. For Delgado, a summary of “La noche oscura” (combined with elements from another poem also referenced in the novel) more or less describes the plot of *Dunkle Nacht*:

Da ist einer, der den Mut hat, in der Nacht sein stilles Haus zu verlassen, um sich an einen einsamen Ort zu begeben, wo er dem—auch ihn in Einsamkeit aus Liebe suchenden—Gegenstand seiner Liebessehnsucht begegnet und mit ihm eins wird. Nach dieser „Auferstehungserfahrung“ wird er nicht mehr derselbe sein, denn er sieht „stille Musik“ (*musica callada*), man lebt in einer „klingenden Einsamkeit“ (*soledad sonora*), mitten im Alltag. Dies vorausgesetzt, ist die Deutung der rätselhaften Handkeschen Parabel ein Kinderspiel, jedenfalls in ihrer Hauptsymbolik. (5)

For Delgado, knowledge of this basic schema is central to an interpretation of the novel's symbolism. Unfortunately, by attaching such a high degree of significance to this single poem, he ignores the openness of the novel. Benjamin Kunkel's short review entitled "Living in Oblivion: Peter Handke *On a Dark Night I Left My Silent House*" clearly contradicts Delgado's notion that *Dunkle Nacht* is a novel primarily about spirituality. Kunkel writes: "In addition to being a dream, *On a Dark Night* is a road movie, a metafiction, a mushroom trip, a Romantic quest poem, and an abortive love story" (1). By assuming that the novel aims to "persuade" the reader, Delgado fails to recognize the "Langsamkeit" of the text. He fails to appreciate the importance of the "untranslatable" units of narrative.

Key to Delgado's interpretation is a passage in which the pharmacist lies down at the end of his journey next to a cliff wall, which forms a sort of "clay semi-grotto."<sup>26</sup> He watches the light of the setting sun shining on the cliff wall and decides to "let go" and simply observe. The cliff wall begins to "radiate" light and after he has spent some time observing his surroundings the pharmacist's "estranged son" drives by in his "Hochzeitsauto" and says: "Du hast mich nicht

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<sup>26</sup> The choice of the word "Grotte" clearly presents a reference to the motif of the "love grotto" which occurs quite frequently in medieval romances. In the English version "Lehmhalbgrotte" is translated as "clay semi-grotto" (*On a Dark Night* 155).

verstoßen.” The widow also appears, hits him over the head and demands that he put an end to his “muteness,” at which point the pharmacist decides to get up and finish his journey through the steppe (260-267). This passage provides the key for Delgado’s argument that the novel’s “Hauptsymbolik” revolves around the desire for spirituality in postmodern society. He argues that this passage refers to a sort of spiritual “resurrection.”

What Delgado leaves out of his interpretation are the “untranslatable” units of narrative: the small descriptive events that occur as the pharmacist gives himself over to the act of observing. As the setting sun shines on the wall it turns from reddish-grayish-yellow to *lampengelb*. The narrator notes that the light appears artificial, as if it were coming from a spotlight or a film projector (261). In quiet observation the pharmacist observes the way in which tree roots protrude from the clay wall:

An den Baumwurzelfäden, die mancherorten herausstanden, hingen Lehmbrocken und auch ein paar Moosflecken, von denen jetzt erst, das einzige Mal am Tag, daß die Sonne hinkam, der Morgentau verschwand. (261)

The only thing that turns his eye away from the clay wall is the shell of a hunter’s bullet cartridge, which is covered in spider webs. The image of the hunter’s cartridge becomes a descriptive event independent of the narrative sequence. It is almost as if the image is based on a carefully composed still-life:

Das einzige, was sein Zuschauen zunächst ablenkte, war jene eine Jägerpatronenhülse, mit Spinnweben überzogen bis hinein ins Innerste—so lange steckte sie schon in dem Sand. (261)

This is when the pharmacist seems to give himself completely over to the act of observing: “Und er ließ dann auch sich selber. Er ließ sich. Und er lag erst einmal, ohne zu

atmen; brauchte das für eine Zeitlang gar nicht” (261). According to Delgado, it is almost as if the pharmacist has “lain down to die.” He states that this “seeming grave” becomes the site of a “resurrection.”

Und dort in dieser Nische ... scheint er sich auf dem Höhepunkt seiner „dunklen Nacht“ zum sterben hingelegt zu haben: „Nicht an- oder ausgeleuchtet vom Sonnenuntergang wirkte die einwärts gewölbte Lehmbahn, vielmehr selbstleuchtend; selber das Ausstrahlende, die Lichtquelle; und der in allen Gelbarten spielende Lehm das verkörperte Licht. Liebe Vorfahren. Lieber Vater. Liebe Mutter“ (262). Adios oder auch Hola! Doch das scheinbare Grab wird zum Ort der Läuterung und „Auferstehung“ in der Beziehung zum Sohn und zur Frau (Delgado, 5).

According to Delgado, the seeming “grave” becomes a site of “purification” and of “resurrection” in respect to familial conflicts. For him this scene brings closure to certain open sequences in the narrative. However, there is no textual evidence to support the assumption that familial conflicts are resolved. The notion of true reconciliation is negated as the guilt shifts from father to son. (“Ich bin es, der von dir weggegangen ist” [263].) There is also no real closure in respect to the pharmacist’s relationship with his wife. She is absent when he returns home and the reader can infer that the couple will continue to leave separate lives (290).

Although Delgado’s interpretation is vastly flawed, it does contribute to a better understanding of the novel in that it draws attention to the theme of *mysticism*, which is significant less for its functionality than for the way it affects the aesthetic point of view of the protagonist. The world of the mystic operates according to a similar principle to that of Handke’s idea of “Langsamkeit” in that the mystic’s quiet contemplation involves a heightened awareness

of his surroundings. As the pharmacist traverses the steppe his point of view is informed by this perceptive paradigm: “Schon seit jeher war er am stärksten ins Zuschauen geraten als Zeuge von einfachsten, undramatischen Vorgängen und Abläufen, etwa, wenn ein Regen stärker oder Schwächer wurde, oder einfach vor sich ging ...”(261). Through the eyes of the pharmacist *as mystic* the minor details of the landscape gain importance. The aesthetic perspective of the mystic provides the context for the kind of descriptive events which appear again and again in the course of the novel, especially in the steppe. These descriptive events or “static motifs” serve a purely spatial purpose and have little or no consequence for the functionality of the narrative. An example of one such descriptive event occurs in the steppe as the pharmacist begins, in the true spirit of the mystic, to simply observe:

Distelblüten tief unten am Boden, schwarz, waren zugleich Seeigel ... die hohen Gräser da—einmal in der Steppe nur Gräser—nickten mit den Köpfen und schüttelten diese zugleich. Ein Wolkenfeld, weiß, geriffelt, schaumig, in der Form einer Dünung. Flache Ovalsteine hier und da oben auf dem Hochlandschutt, in der Mitte mit einem schwarzen Kreis: Kiesel geschliffen von der Eiszeit, im Schmelzen dann abgesunken hier in das Meer, mit Namen „Augensteine.“ (256)

Here the perspective shifts from the ground to the sky and again to the ground as the pharmacist observes first the thistle flowers, then the grass, then the clouds and then the pebbles on the highland scree. The usual sense of time, in the form of days, hours, and minutes, is replaced by a geological sense of time evoked by the “pebbles polished by the Ice Age, which had sunken into the ocean ... as the ice melted” (153). The human perspective is imposed upon the “realm of pure objects” as the narrator notes that the smooth oval stones with a black circle in the middle are called “Augensteine.”

This is just one example of a series of descriptive events which interrupt the narrative on the functional level. The forward-moving motion of the pharmacist's journey through the steppe is often put on pause and the reader's eye diverted towards the ground or up to the sky. On one occasion the pharmacist observes various insects. He sees an ant carrying the wing of a butterfly on his back: "Ein einzelner Schmetterlingsflügel bewegte sich aufrecht, leicht schwankend und im Zickzack, vielfarbig, standartengleich, auf dem Boden dahin: so getragen von einer höhlenschwarzen Ameise" (257). These *minumental* images often comment on an issue of *monumental* importance: but with a childlike playfulness that immediately negates any sense of didactic intention. Just as with the "Augensteine" above, in the following passage the "realm of objects" takes on a certain anthromorphic quality as it is viewed from the perspective of the observer: "Und die Ameisen schienen im übrigen nirgends hier einen Staat zu bilden—höchstens drei, vier kamen jeweils aus einem Loch; kleine Ameisendörfer, und –weiler also nur, die weit voneinander entfernt lagen und nichts miteinander zu tun hatten" (257). This remark carries the tone of a child's musings while a faint reference to European geopolitics lingers in the background.

The author creates spatial form by connecting various images through visual motifs. In the following passage the grasshoppers appear to have the profile of a horse (as the Austrian word for grasshopper is "hay-horse"), and the moths look like sheep (On a Dark Night 153-154):

... ein großes Heupferd einmal trug ein kleineres Heupferd huckepack, worauf dieses herunterfiel und in Luftsprüngen seinen Träger suchte. Beide hatten dann, wieder aufeinander, in der Tat Pferdeprofile gezeigt—währen die Steppenfalter Profile von Schafen hatten. (257)

Here the narrator displays a child-like imagination, infusing his own subjective point of view into the image.

Another such minumental image occurs as the pharmacist is still in Sante Fe. He visits his *Stammlokal*, an out-of-the-way “rincón” in the *Unterstadt* where he shares silent companionship with a worn and bristly bartender who serves only one type of drink. Since there is no menu and the two share no verbal communication, food is served according to the bartender’s whim. One day it is olives, the next fried squid, partridge eggs, crayfish, or the pharmacist’s own mushrooms. It is as if the bartender were a kind of “sorcerer,” making us of his exotic collection of frog’s legs and newts’ tails. What the pharmacist experiences here is more a ritualistic ceremony than a simple visit to the bar:

“Anzubieten hatte er ohnedies nur ein einziges Getränk, das in immer den gleichen Flaschen von oben bis unten seine Regale füllte. Verschieden war nur, was er mir dazustellte an Imbissen. Aber nach diesen, den Oliven, den Pistazien, den im Nu von ihm gebratenen Zwergtintenfischen, den Rebhuhneiern, den Flußkrebse, den Pilzen—von mir gebracht, von ihm stumm zubereitet—, brauchte ohnedies nicht gefragt zu werden; was er servierte, lag allein in seiner Macht!” (204)

The description of the “rincón” mirrors that of the “Erdkellerrestaurant” in that what is portrayed here is the spirit of hospitality, the feeling of anonymous companionship, and the overall calmness that is unique to such a locality. This is a theme that prevails throughout Handke’s oeuvre. Almost every novel contains at least one passage in which the lone protagonist enters a restaurant, bar or café.<sup>27</sup> In each case, small descriptive details serve to capture the unique atmosphere of the given locality. Handke seems to hold these spaces to be sacred, not

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<sup>27</sup> For a few examples see: *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*: 18, 30-32, 35-37, 60, *Langsame Heimkehr*: 135-140, *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*: 52-60.

only because they represent a place of refuge, but because the lone protagonist can go here to find an intermediate state between the self and the outside world.<sup>28</sup> He remains alone but enjoys the presence of strangers. In the case of the pharmacist, he is able to share the silent ritual involved in eating and drinking with the bartender without the necessity of verbal communication.

The minumental image in this passage revolves around the small shallow basin in the white marble counter where the bartender washes his shot glasses. Made of marble and without a drain, this small hollow in the counter resembles the “baptismal basin.” The pharmacist watches in silence as the bartender washes each glass, continually refreshing the water so that it remains perfectly clear. The pharmacist remarks that the most peaceful moment in the “rincón” was when all of the small, delicate shot glasses had been washed and the basin had been filled with fresh water:

... am stillsten war es in dem rincón, wenn alle die sehr kleinen und feinen Gläser gewaschen auf dem Marmor gereiht standen, die Mulde daneben neu mit Wasser gefüllt, alles andere weggeräumt, keiner von uns beiden mehr trank oder aß, wir vielmehr gemeinsam auf die sauber gereihten alten Nippgläser und das bißchen Wasser, das so klare, in der lochlosen Vertiefung blickten ... (206)

The interesting thing about this passage is that the shallow basin is so obviously a reference to the Christian ritual of baptism and yet this reference is of secondary importance. It is the locality itself that is referred to here. Rather than providing a “background” or “context” for a reference to spirituality (as Delgado might argue), the locality of the “rincón” is actually foregrounded: the image of the baptismal fountain serves only to inform the description. This passage is

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<sup>28</sup> The balance between the self and the outside world is recognized by many scholars as an important theme in Handke’s works (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 94).



“untranslatable,” as it serves more of a “spatial” than a “functional” purpose. Here the immediacy of the locality takes precedence over any “system of references” that might be implied by the images.

There are two things supporting this argument. Firstly, it has already been established that the locality of the café, bar, or restaurant as an intermediate space between self and outside world presents a common motif throughout Handke’s oeuvre.<sup>29</sup> This very fact suggests that the locality of the “rincón” has a significance which goes beyond the particular details of this singular description. Secondly, the narrator destroys any sort of seeming “signification” in regard to Christian ritual at the very end of the passage as the pharmacist imagines the round miniature pond with its white marble bottom as a temple garden in faraway Asia where: “ein Besucher und ein Mönch auf einen Felsblock inmitten eines leeren, nur langweilig gerechten Sandbeets blicken, welches zum Beispiel das japanische Meer darstellt” (206). Here once again the narrative alternates between minumental and monumental images: the shallow basin in the “rincón” transitions (in the mind of the pharmacist) into the image of a monk in a temple garden sitting with a visitor in front of a bed of sand. This system of spatial references extends even further as the pharmacist imagines this bed of sand as a representation of the Sea of Japan.

As mentioned above, this same spatial motif occurs again and again throughout Handke’s oeuvre. The locality of the “Kanalstube” in *Der Chinese des Schmerzes* resembles that of the “rincón.” In this case the protagonist, Andreas Loser, is a writer, teacher and amateur archaeologist. Like the pharmacist he is estranged from his wife and son. He occupies an apartment in a new development on the edge of the city of Salzburg in Leopoldskron. Leaving the quiet isolation of his apartment for the first time that day, he takes a bus ride towards the

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<sup>29</sup>Handke shows an affinity for “intermediate” localities such as the restaurant, the airport, the hotel and the theatre. The “Schwelle” is an important locality in *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*.

*Kommunalfriedhof*. He gets out and walks along the *Almkanal* until he comes to a small café called the “Kanalstube” where he is happy to share the anonymous company of strangers after a day of working alone (“ein Tag des Alleinarbeitens”) (54). Like the “rincón,” the “Kanalstube” is hardly a commercial institution: it resembles a private house more than a place of business. The narrator remarks that, unlike the cafés downtown, there are no newspapers to be bought, but a guest can request that the owner fetch his personal copy from his apartment above the café. Further adding to the sense of *Gemütlichkeit*, the narrator describes the stacks of magazines on the windowsills which are as high as the house plants. The banal commercial uniformity of the downtown cafés clearly does not exist here (53). Like in the rincón, the protagonist enjoys the anonymous company of strangers here. In this intermediate space he is able to reach a balance between the self and the outside world: “Es gelingt mir dann ... für alles im Umkreis jener Schimmer von Teilnahme, der, so glaube ich, mich zugleich selber unscheinbar macht ... Wenn ich dann gehe, wird niemand von mir reden. Aber meine Anwesenheit wird geachtet worden sein” (54).

At the end of this passage two boys—foreigners most likely from Yugoslavia—enter the café to collect empty wine bottles. As they leave again, they activate the jukebox: playing Macedonian folk music. As this music plays, a certain spatial transformation occurs in the mind of Andreas Loser. The café becomes an empty garden terrace in West Jordan with a view of the Dead Sea. A pregnant woman in the café who stands up and lifts her hair from the back of her neck appears as a woman on the banks of this Sea:

Etwas, bis dahin ausständig, trat ein: die Gaststätte verwandelte sich in die Gartenterasse eines Restaurants im Westjordanland. Diese Terrasse war leer, erfüllt von knisternden Sandschwaden, dem Klatschen von Palmblättern und dem

Schall der Endlosmusik. Im Osten lag die Senke mit dem Toten Meer, und die Schwangere, die sich gerade aufrichtete, mit den beiden Händen die Haare vom Nacken hob und sich damit den Scheitel bedeckte, saß für die Dauer des Lieds nun da als eine Frau am Ufer dieses Meeres; verkörperte das Meer selbst (58).

Here the archetypal nature of this locality becomes clear. The narrator is not simply referring to this single café, but to a much larger spatial motif.

Considering the abundance of “descriptive events” described above, one can conclude that Handke is often more interested in images and localities than in character conflicts and metaphors. Unfortunately, these “untranslatable” units of narrative often become obscured as the reader “consumes” the text. A reader like Delgado, who is too quick to “translate” the image into an “idea,” engages with the text *only* to the point at which his own polemic agenda is reinforced.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: LANDSCAPE WRITER

It was mentioned above that Handke's evolution as a writer is best described in aesthetic terms (rather than in terms of a seeming adherence to the practices of specific literary movements such as "New Subjectivity"). In *Landscapes of Discourse* Christoph Parry calls Handke a "landscape writer" and highlights the ways in which his study of the visual arts has affected his literary philosophy. Handke's aesthetic treatise *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* provides scholars with a large degree of insight into this relationship. In studying various artists Handke attempts to find the ideal balance between subjectivity and objectivity, meaning and form. The Dutch genre painter Courbet, for example, appealed to him because he seemed to be able to capture the universal quality of simple everyday scenes (similar to Handke's portrayal of the "rincón" and the "Kanalstube"):

Courbet hat die tagtäglichen Genreszenen als die wirklichen, historischen Ereignisse gesehen. Und so bilden seine Gestalten, nur indem sie Korn sieben, an einem Grab stehen, eine Tote einkleiden, oder eben in der Dämmerung vom Markt heimwärts ziehen (wie auch seine bloß Sitzenden und Ausruhenden, Schlafenden und Träumenden) in der teilnehmenden Phantasie eine geschlossene Prozession ... (183)

Handke talks about "das Schweigen der Bilder" in reference to Courbet. He admires the painter for the immediacy of his images (182). A parallel can be drawn here to the *nouveau roman* in which the immediacy of the image takes precedence over "signification." "In this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be *there* before being *something*; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own 'meaning'" (Robbe-Grillet, 21-22).

One way in which Handke lives up to the term “landscape writer” is that, like many landscape artists, he experiences “phases” in which he studies a certain locality. In *Dunkle Nacht* it is the steppe, in *Langsame Heimkehr* the Alaskan wilderness, in *Der Kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* urban, suburban and rural America, in *Mein Jahr in Niemandsbucht* the Parisian suburb Chaville and the wilderness of Vélizy, in *die Wiederholung* the Slovenian Karst and in *Chinesische Schmerzen* a “Neubausiedlung” on the outskirts of Salzburg. In *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* Handke names Edward Hopper as a role model in respect to his awareness of the unique essence of certain localities. The landscape paintings of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, with their “in den Föhrenwäldern verborgenen Holzhäuser” (175) inspired him to take a trip to New England to experience the same locality first hand. Although not acknowledged by Handke, Hopper’s interest in the restaurant, café, or bar as a locality seems to parallel Handke’s. He too seems to capture the spatial motif of the restaurant, café, or bar as “refuge” and as an intermediate space between the self and the outside world.<sup>30</sup> Like Robbe-Grillet, the painter shows an appreciation for the immediacy of objects and gestures, but he does more than this: he also achieves a certain degree of universality in his paintings.

The title *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* is a reference to Handke’s most important painter-role model Cezanne. The mountain St. Victoire served as a sort of “object of study” for Cezanne and it is this mountain that the narrator actually visits in the novel. The mountain is located just outside of Aix-en-Provence, where Cezanne was born and spent most of his adult life. Cezanne’s preference for Aix over the city of Paris demonstrates his appreciation of nature and his independence from the Parisian art scene. Cezanne distinguishes himself from the impressionists in that he achieves a balance between the realist portrayal of nature (with varying degrees of

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<sup>30</sup> See “The Nighthawks” (1942), “Chop Suey” (1929), “The New York Restaurant” (1922), “Automat” (1927), “Tables for Ladies” (1930), and “Sunlight in a Cafeteria” (1958).

subjectivity) and an appreciation for abstract constructions. Handke writes: “In einem Brief Cezannes las ich weiter, er male keinesfalls ‚nach der Natur‘—seine Bilder seien vielmehr ‚Konstruktionen und Harmonien parallel zur Natur‘“ (211). As Handke remarks, Cezanne’s paintings seem to present the perfect balance between “nature” and abstraction.

Cezannes Bilder waren mehr als ... reine Formen ohne Erdenspur—sie waren zusätzlich, von dem dramatischen *Strich* (und dem Gestrichel) der Malerhand, ineinandergefügt zu Beschwörungen—und erschienen mir, der ich davor anfangs nur denken konnte: ‚so nah!‘, jetzt verbunden mit den frühesten Höhlenzeichnungen.—Es waren die *Dinge*; es waren die *Bilder*, es war die *Schrift*; es war der *Strich*—und es war das alles im Einklang (211-212).

The painting is at once a reference to the real object, a study of certain formal considerations (color, shape, composition, etc.) and an expression of the artist’s own temperament (Medina, 93).

In his interpretation of *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* Parry fails to effectively demonstrate the ways in which the aesthetic “lessons” of Cezanne are realized in Handke’s prose. His study is more of a survey of the role of spatiality in the narratives of various novels. He points out the way in which color replaces “outline” in Cezanne’s paintings and compares this to Handke’s prose which “[achieves] depth and color through a textual flow that avoids the kind of sharp outlines that would for example arise from a conscious delineation of the various themes of the book” (67).

As Parry fails to make clear, Cezanne’s artistic concept of “color” actually comes into play in a much more concrete way in Handke’s prose. In Cezanne’s paintings color lends a certain everlasting quality to everyday objects. Unlike the impressionist painter he does not attempt to capture the “light and dark effects” of color as they appear before him, but looks to

external models (i.e. other paintings) to find tonal motifs. For Cezanne colors and color contrasts become a sort of “abstract language” (Medina 92). In his paintings color possesses a transcendent quality and exists as a motif without necessarily possessing a symbolic significance. Cezanne’s colors lend an everlasting quality to everyday objects. The repetition of tonal motifs counteracts the arbitrariness of “Alltäglichkeit” in the same way religious ritual creates a sense of continuity and eternity (*Die Lehre* 215). Handke comments on this phenomenon at the very beginning of *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire*: “Einmal bin ich dann in den Farben zu Hause gewesen. Büsche, Bäume, Wolken des Himmels, selbst der Asphalt der Straße zeigten einen Schimmer, der weder vom Licht jenes Tages noch von der Jahreszeit kam. Naturwelt und Menschenwerk, eins durch das andere, bereiteten mir einen Beseligungsmoment, den ich aus den Halbschlafbildern kenne ... und der *Nunc stans* genannt worden ist: Augenblick der Ewigkeit (169).

Like Cezanne, Handke uses color to create harmony in his prose. Contrast and repetition establish the formal significance of color, transcending the realm of symbolism and achieving “spatial form” by emphasizing visual motifs over the causal sequence of events. Various color contrasts occur as the pharmacist observes insects in the steppe: as a flying grasshopper takes flight it reveals the blue hue of its wings under the gray shell (263). As it lands it immediately becomes stone-gray again. In a later passage a stone-gray moth flutters by a gray cliff and is visible only because at the same time its shadow is moving over the cliff (*On a Dark Night* 154). In another passage a yellow jacket is hardly recognizable against the yellow of the clay wall as it attempts to pull a “snail cadaver” from its shell (*On a Dark Night* 158). Here the insects’ ability to camouflage themselves mirrors the medieval epic tale’s motif of invisibility, which is

repeatedly referenced in the novel.<sup>31</sup> (“Im Salzburger Zentrum bewegte sich der Apotheker von Platz zu Platz wie unter einer Tarnkappe” [50]).

The most prominent color in the novel is yellow. The color yellow appears in many different shades and is often contrasted with the color black. As mentioned above, the light at the end of tunnel through which the pharmacist and his companions pass before they reach Sante Fe is a “Felsflankenrotgelb.” This is contrasted by the pitch blackness of the tunnel (131). In the passage referenced by Delgado, the clay wall is first described as “lampengelb,” until this descriptive event reaches its climax, at which point the wall seems to radiate its own light and embodies every color of yellow (262). Furthermore, the pharmacist notices that the “lamp-light yellow” of the clay wall’s smooth areas contrasts with the “shadow-black” of its fissured and raised surfaces (262). In another passage, the pollen-covered legs of the bees glow a “plustriggelb” and contrast with the dark holes into which they crawl (258).

For Delgado, the fact that the clay wall radiates light just after the pharmacist “leaves himself behind”<sup>32</sup> and stops breathing for a moment is a reference to “resurrection.” However, in light of Handke’s thorough study of Cezanne’s aesthetics one could argue that this passage realizes Cezanne’s idea of abstraction in the form of color motifs. In the passage quoted by Delgado, the narrator is careful to note that the light comes not from the setting sun, but is actually “selbstleuchtend:” “Nicht an- oder ausgeleuchtet vom Sonnenuntergang wirkte die einwärts gewölbte Lehmbahn, vielmehr selbstleuchtend; selber das Ausstrahlende, die Lichtquelle; und der in allen Gelbarten spielende Lehm das verkörperte Licht” (262). One could

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<sup>31</sup> The ring given to Yvain by Lady Lunette’s handmaid allows him to become invisible and escape the wrath of Lord Askalon’s subjects (de Troyes 33).

<sup>32</sup> *On a Dark Night*, 156



view this passage as a sort of “descriptive climax” in that the color yellow portrayed here is not an everyday yellow, but a sort of “eternal” yellow—the embodiment of “yellow.”

## CONCLUSION: THE LESSON

The “lesson” that Handke learns from his great role model Cezanne in *Die Lehre der Saint Victoire* is never explicitly stated. Instead the text is a montage of loosely connected elements ranging from biographical information about the painter, to descriptions of particular paintings, to the narrator’s first-hand accounts of his own visit to Mt. St. Victoire. Once again realizing his principle of “Langsamkeit,” Handke continually resists the tendency to persuade the reader. By refusing to lend a definite “outline” to his thoughts, he repeatedly reveals the text as an *open process*: he juxtaposes various images, statements and impressions, thus forcing the reader to create his own syntax (Parry 71).

The exact meaning of the “lesson” of the St. Victoire takes on clarity only in the context of the last chapter, which presents a description of the *Morzger Wald*, a forest just outside of Salzburg. In this chapter realist description continually gives way to abstraction: abstract forms and colors imbue everyday objects with epic significance. From the unique perspective of the “landscape writer,” the forest transforms into a palette of colors: *lichtbraun, fahlgrau, Rostgelb, fernblau* and *düsterweiß*. Various time scales converge as the narrator encounters a cliff wall, which eons ago was nothing more than single particles of gravel transported to this spot (formerly a gigantic lake) by a mass of molten lava. An impression on the forest floor reveals itself as a bomb crater from a past war. A normal woodpile at the edge of the forest becomes an element of aesthetic composition as its lightness of color provides a contrast to the dim background created by the twilight. The colors of the woodpile reveal man’s first footprints, a tree in a grove represents the “Anfangsbaum,” the symmetry of the beech tree’s oval leaves exudes endless serenity (237-249). At the end of this passage the narrator returns to the city with

its common squares and bridges, streets and alleyways, sports arenas and news reports, church bells and shops, golden glitz and fancy drapes (249). Handke realizes, in his description of the forest, the “lesson” that Cezanne has taught him: that an artistic work must always seek a balance between the subjective self (in the form of abstract forms) and the outside world (in the form of everyday objects and occurrences).

The interpretation of *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* presented in this thesis represents a similar sort of „lesson:” a lesson that reveals itself only through *practice*—through the actual act of reading Handke’s “difficult” prose, allowing oneself to abandon the tendency to want to “devour” a text and giving oneself over to the act of observation. The closer one studies the text the more abstract it appears, as visual motifs transform objects into colors and colors into eternal forms.

However, Handke himself recognizes the danger of such abstraction. Like his many protagonists, he too struggles to define himself vis-à-vis the outside world—searching for a justification of his decision to disown the “burden” of history and instead embrace a “conservative classical” sensibility. And yet this burden haunts him again and again, bursting violently into his work in the form of a lightning strike, a sudden violent act, or a swastika painted on a tree (in *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*). Furthermore, the reader repeatedly witnesses the author’s awareness of the codedness of language—a sign of his postmodern sensibility.

Thus the author himself struggles to find a balance between classical harmony and postmodern fragmentation, between form and meaning, inner-self and outside world. The author *as mystic* seeks the tranquillity of his current residency on the outskirts of Paris where he seems to be “zu Hause in den Farben und Formen,” but the author *as adventurer* feels compelled to continually enter into the public eye. His travelogues, while remaining true to the principle of

“Langsamkeit” by continually emphasizing the importance of description and maintaining “Abstand” in relation to the matter at hand, represent the author’s unavoidable compulsion to continually embark on a journey in order to experience “reality” first hand and allow himself to undergo a “sudden transformation” after which he must, once again, redefine himself vis-à-vis his environment.

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