Peter Handke's *The Ride Across Lake Constance*: The Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

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The theatre of Peter Handke is exceptionally self-conscious, not simply in terms of the self-referentiality which is so common among modern playwrights, but in its overall assertion of itself as a self-sufficient entity. In its persistent characterization of itself as something apart from the elements of reality, dependent upon no references outside of itself, the theatre of Peter Handke is the culmination of the modern dramatist's concern with his own art. The remark which Beckett made of Joyce's work may be appropriately applied to that of Handke: "it is not *about* something; it is *that something itself."1

The challenge of finding a form of "pure" fiction has been articulated in the theoretical writings of Gustave Flaubert, Virginia Woolf, and Oscar Wilde,2 among many others. And it has been implemented no more successfully perhaps than in Beckett’s *The Lost Ones*. As Raymond Federman points out, that short novel attempts to be “the perfect voiceless fiction, which sets out to free itself of all connections with creator, narrator, voice, teller...” It “establishes its own rules of order and chaos” and presents a form which, relieved of its mimetic function, is “free to create new meanings.”3 One would think that in drama the fact of physical presence would make the challenge of creating a self-sufficient world even more difficult, but Handke has succeeded in creating just such an illusion in *The Ride Across Lake Constance*.

In an essay entitled “The Film and the Theatre: The Misery of Comparison,” Handke points to the nearly automatic need we have to compare:

... I see, outside in the street, two streetsweepers cleaning the sidewalk with huge brooms. Both have orange and white striped
uniforms like bicycle racers, both have white, crumpled stockings like tramps or like characters in a Beckett play, both have faces like Southerners, both wear caps like those in photographs of prisoners of war from the First World War, both walk stiffed-kneed like bums, all three—now a third joins them, and a fourth—wear black mittens like the snow removal crew in the winter, all five are alike with their gigantic brooms and shovels, which make them appear quite small, like figures in a painting by Breughel.

But—one of the streetsweepers swept faster than the other, and the other streetsweeper wore his cap lower on his face than the one, and the other other streetsweeper had a much more German face than the other streetsweeper, and the other other other streetsweeper seemed to perform his work more unwillingly than the other other streetsweeper, and finally—meanwhile the men have moved from my view—the last streetsweeper came to mind because he had, it seemed, shoved the broom forward more powerfully than the others.4

For centuries the drama has been like life; indeed, its main task has been to represent life. But Handke feels there should be no apparent mimetic relationship between the two; drama should be pure fiction, which does not depend for its understanding on any comparison to the real world. It should be “intensely[ly] artificial,” “endlessly unusual, unfamiliar,” with the result that:

An unheard-of simultaneity of sight, breath, and discrimination is created. The space forms a theatrical unity, in which one becomes increasingly self-conscious and tense, almost to the point that the socially protective adhesive tape with which everyone wraps himself is ripped, is no longer visible, not only without, but also within, in the consciousness of the viewer.5

In Handke's theatre, nothing is intended to be representational. Props, language, action, and actors correspond only tangentially to the usual patterns and characteristics of reality, with each attempting to signify nothing but itself. The event on stage exists on stage and claims only to be a theatrical event. Following a production in Paris of the Bread and Puppet Theatre from New York, Handke spoke of his conviction that direct presentation of actions and words should replace the traditional dramaturgy which uses only those actions and words which serve the story. Handke hopes to create a theatre in which actions and words

become incidents which show nothing else, but present themselves as theatrical events. Actions act themselves and words
talk themselves. The viewer, who awaits in the theatre the resolution of every word and every action, the thematic sense, the story, will be left with the action alone. The raising of a hand is a story. Buzzing is a story. Sitting, lying, and standing are stories. A very exciting story is the striking of a hammer against iron. Every word, every sound, every movement is a story: they lead to nothing, they remain visible for themselves alone. Every utterance is made; no action results naturally from the preceding action; no utterance means anything other than itself—it signifies itself.6

In 1966, Handke, then only twenty-four, stood before a Group 47 meeting in Princeton and disparaged the writings of the older members of this postwar gathering of German intellectuals for placing too much emphasis on description: "He railed against . . . impotent narrative; empty stretches of descriptive (instead of analytic) writing . . . monotonous verbal litanies, regional and native idyllicism, which lacked spirit and creativeness."7

Yet to say that Handke's drama—or Beckett's, for that matter—has no relationship whatsoever to reality would be to affirm an impossibility. For Handke's drama, even in its disavowal of that relationship, ultimately says a good deal about reality. As Stanley Kauffmann says of Handke's plays, "the whole is all."8 Despite the individual insignificance of every aspect of the theatrical event in mimetic terms, the "whole" of a Handke play is metaphor, which may finally be the way in which the art of the future finds justification.

Possibly the greatest influence (whether direct or indirect) on the philosophy of Handke is his fellow Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein. That early twentieth century philosopher holds the distinction of being the only philosopher of reputation who has developed two original philosophical systems, the second of which both expands upon and refutes the first. In both the earlier Tractatus (1920) and the posthumously-published Philosophical Investigations (1951), Wittgenstein supports a linguistic investigation of reality, suggesting that all philosophical problems are created by linguistic confusion.9

In the Tractatus, Wittgenstein posits a "picture theory" which holds that there is a direct correlation between the arrangement of words into a sentence or proposition ("der Satz") and the elements of the reality that sentence or proposition represents. Just as reality is the totality of facts, so lang-
usage is the totality of propositions. And the words of those propositions relate to one another in the same way in which objects are related in reality. All “pictures,” then, are models of reality and share the same form as reality, making language limited in being able to represent all possible situations but not the form itself. In the later *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein rejects the theory of a common logical form, thus freeing language from the limitations he had earlier suggested were imposed upon it by its very nature.

Like Wittgenstein, Handke is fascinated with the possibilities and the powers of language. The dialogue of *The Ride Across Lake Constance* (1971)—which Handke considers the culmination of his dramatic career to date—leaves the reader totally disoriented, unable to recognize a logical pattern in the language or any correlation between the language and events which are taking place or objects which are being named. Yet *The Ride Across Lake Constance* emerges as a powerful comment on the nature of reality. Through bold and unconventional use of language, Handke accomplishes an annihilation of the predeter-

The set of *The Ride Across Lake Constance* is arranged in a manner which evokes instant recognition for the theatre audience; the furnishings are those typical of the nineteenth century drawing room, characteristically arranged. The stage directions read:

> All objects are in such a position that it would be difficult to imagine them standing elsewhere; it is as though they could not bear being moved ever so slightly. Everything appears as though rooted to the spot, not only the objects themselves but also the distances and empty spaces between them.  

Within moments of the play's opening, however, it is clear that the carefully arranged furniture is not before us because Handke wishes to create an impression of realism, but rather because he wants to undercut that impression, for in the context of Handke’s unrealistic drama, the realistic drawing room quickly becomes precisely what it is: an obviously artificial stage set.

Emil Jannings and Heinrich George begin the play with
a conversation more accurately called a linguistic game than communication. What would constitute the exposition in traditional dramaturgy becomes an introduction to the language games that will be played and the questions regarding the relationship between reality and illusion that will be raised. Indeed, the first scene ends with George's declaration that "life is a game" (p. 87), a comment intended not as an epiphany but as a reference to just another cliché expression which has lost its meaning (like "born loser," "born trouble-maker," "born criminal") and, by implication, to the relationship of the theatre to reality, which has also become stale from habit. Earlier in their exchange Jannings had pointed to the blue sky on a cigar box label and proclaimed with profundity, "that blue sky you see on the label, my dear fellow, it really exists there" (p. 74). The sky is not a representation, just as the play is not a representation; both possess an autonomous reality. Jannings and George discuss an incident of the past, now reduced to a story, and question its present reality (pp. 75-76). And they name things, considering what each name designates and finding it ridiculous to speak of kidneys flambé, something that is not present, but quite satisfactory to talk of Jannings's rings, which have physical presence and correspond to and confirm the mental image of them (pp. 80-81). Jannings and George look around the room and pronounce names: "Car," "Cattle prod," "Bloodhounds," "Swollen bellies," "Trigger button" (p. 581). But, of course, these names bear no relationship to what is on stage.

What, then, constitutes reality? Are the rings which are present in the phenomenological world and which can be identified by language the only reality? Or are the kidneys flambé, which can be recalled and named but are not now visible, just as real? And what of objects that have physical presence but are either referred to by names which traditionally designate certain objects now without physical presence, or those which do not have the equivalent in an acceptable language pattern (such as "fiery Eskimos")? Are these reality? Is the world the totality of things, or is it, as Wittgenstein's Tractatus suggests, the totality of facts, or is it the totality of possibilities? And what then are the responsibilities and the limitations of language? Language in the play is made up of non-sequiturs, examinations of the logical possibilities of a premise, alogical pro-
gression, and confusions with respect to the designations of language, all designed to disturb our comfortable sense of the relationship of language and action to reality.

In one instance (p. 90), we see how language can be prescriptive. As Porten descends the stairs, George and Jannings count: “One, two, three, four, five, and seven!” When she hears “seven,” she is just about to place her foot on the sixth step, becomes greatly disturbed, and retreets to the top of the stairs. She resumes her descent. “One, two, three, four, five, six, and seven!” But there is an eighth step, over which Porten stumbles; she is again upset, and rushes back to the top. On her third descent, she is accompanied by von Stroheim: “one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine!” But there are only eight steps, and at the count of “nine,” they bounce on the floor, their knees buckle, and they stagger. It is a fine example of the lesson taught by the Einsager in Handke’s earlier play, Kaspar: “If you see the object differently from the way you speak it, you must be mistaken.”

Jannings and George engage in a game of commands (pp. 93-95), each in turn demanding an object: “The boots!” “The newspaper!” “My glasses!” “The mustard!” “The hairbrush!” “The photo album!” “The pincers!” “The scalpel!” “The scissors!” “The pliers!” “The monkey wrench!” “The soldering iron!” “Hand over all your money!” “The sun!” When questioned “Why the sun?” Jannings defends his command: “Those are my words. I don’t know why.” And George insists, “Your saying so doesn’t change anything.” He has suggested the other side of the coin: where Porten’s descent suggested the power of language to control reality, we now have the suggestion of a reality that exists independent of language, which may be designated by, but not altered by, language. Von Stroheim strongly objects: “Wrong! Entirely wrong!”

Other examples of the relationship or nonrelationship of language to reality occur. Porten asks, “What snowstorms?” long after snowstorms are mentioned (p. 92). George asks for the first time: “Once more: I offer you my fauteuil. . . . May I offer you my fauteuil?” (p. 91). Bergner cries, “Watch out! the candlestick is falling!” The candlestick remains motionless on the table (p. 92).

Von Stroheim and Porten tell stories of their awareness of the relationship between language and reality. Each has experienced an epiphany, an instance in which each for a moment
fully understood language as a correlative of reality. Von Stroheim tells his story: "I was sitting by a lakeshore in the morning and the lake was sparkling. Suddenly I noticed: the lake is sparkling. It is really sparkling" (p. 114). And Porten tells hers: "Something similar happened to me one time when someone told me that his pockets were empty. 'My pockets are empty!' I didn't believe him and he turned his pockets inside out. They really were empty. Incredible!" (p. 114)

The action sequences in The Ride Across Lake Constance do not conform to any recognizably real action; they consist of unmotivated acts and alogical responses, yet the pattern these actions form appears familiar. Jannings and George, for example, engage in a series of gestures which are observed by Bergner, apparently without judgment: the two slap each other's thighs, pull each other's ears, and pat each other's cheeks; then Jannings shows George the back of his hand, George makes a circle with his forefinger and thumb and holds his hand in front of his face; Jannings holds his hands above his head, clasping one hand with the thumb and forefinger of the other hand and letting the clasped hand circle about (p. 88). Each gesture bears no apparent causal relationship to the next, but the series is smoothly enacted and is followed by an outburst of laughter by the two men and exclamations of "Exactly!" "You guessed it!" There has apparently been some form of communication, some understanding involved in the silent actions, but it is one that is alien to the audience's preconceived notions of logically motivated and interpreted action.

In another sequence involving von Stroheim and Porten, gestures which begin as apparent signs of affection end in apparent violence, and the final act is palpably alogical. Von Stroheim first places his finger under Porten's chin, lifting her face, then strokes the back of her head and pats her fondly on the shoulder. These actions are followed by his drumming two fingers on her cheek, snapping his fingers against her teeth, lowering her eyelid with his finger, and patting her rather hard on the buttocks. The sequence culminates in Porten's being positioned with her back to von Stroheim, Jannings kicking George, and Porten tumbling across the stage as though it were she who had been kicked, leaving von Stroheim standing with the left knee raised, ready to kick her (pp. 96-97).

Not all action sequences are ones which, in not conforming
to our traditional patterns, appear absurd. Some are actions which have usual associations but here are stripped bare, revealing simple, dissociated actions:

**Porten:** Someone keeps looking over his shoulder while he's walking. Does he have a guilty conscience?

**Bergner:** No, he simply looks over his shoulder from time to time.

**Porten:** Someone is sitting there with lowered head. Is he sad?

**Bergner:** . . . No, he simply sits there with lowered head.

**Porten:** Someone is flinching. Conscience-stricken?

**Bergner:** . . . No, he's simply flinching.

**Porten:** Two people sit there, don't look at each other, and are silent. Are they angry with one another?

**Bergner:** . . . No, they simply sit there, don't look at each other, and are silent.

**Porten:** Someone bangs on the table. To get his way?

**Bergner:** . . . Couldn't he for once simply bang on the table? (pp. 107-08)

In Handke's theatre, every act and every word finds significance in itself; it does not represent. In traditional drama and in life, no action or word is free from the previous one and no action or word exists for its own sake, for in traditional drama, as in life, action and language are arranged in patterns which have set interpretations. To Handke language and action have become clichés, binding rather than liberating the thought which translates them. In his drama language and action still constitute the play and they still fall into patterns, but the patterns are not the recognizable or expected ones. They are fresh combinations which have been freed to create new meanings. *The Ride Across Lake Constance* rejects clichés, presenting instead that "intensely artificial and endlessly unusual" event of which Handke speaks, and creating a self-conscious theatre which exists not mimetically but as its own spontaneous reality.

It is interesting to note the status of the dramatic character in Handke's "self-sufficient" world. The *dramatis personae* of *The Ride Across Lake Constance* are not characters in the usual sense. They are actors, and nothing more: "The actors are and play themselves at one and the same time" (stage direction, p. 69). In an effort to negate any dual identity, Handke refuses even to give them fictive names. In the German text, the names of famous actors (Jannings, George, Bergner, von Stroheim, Porten, Kessler) are used, simply to avoid designations of "Actor A" and "Actor B." But in performance, all of the
actors are called by their own names. The result is that there is none of the usual consciousness on the part of an audience of an actor's assuming the part of a character for the sake of performance. Here we are viewing a role-playing individual who possesses no reality beyond his role. We are actually witnessing character-in-the-making. As the play progresses, the actors

discover who they are onstage in terms of each other, give each other identities, play identities, are captured by their identities— their identities become their roles or vice versa; are held together by the relationships they establish with each other—which at first are only a playing, but into which they get locked.\textsuperscript{14}

This singularity of character is part of Handke's direct presentation of the stage as a separate reality; the audience is not responding to the distinction between fiction and reality, even with respect to the actor himself.

At the core of Handke's examination is the question of the integrity of the concept of character in both drama and life. Traditionally, character in drama is formed primarily through action, including, of course, verbal action. So long as that action remains original, there is the possibility of original character. Once it becomes locked into patterns, however, the possibility ceases, and what is produced is the kind of interchangeable personality Ionesco dramatizes in \textit{The Bald Soprano} and Handke suggests through the entrance of the identical Kessler twins at the end of \textit{The Ride Across Lake Constance}. Handke's drama, through the destruction of pattern, attempts to renew the possibility of character both in drama and in life.

An earlier play by Handke, \textit{Kaspar} (1968), confirms the playwright's concern with the creation of character. In that play he approaches the problem through an autistic man who at the play's outset knows only one sentence: "I want to be a person like somebody else was once." That sentence is Kaspar's only contact with reality and claim to identity. Whatever his observation, whatever his action, he gives meaning to it by reciting the one sentence which is uniquely his. It is not long, however, before the \textit{Einsager}\textsuperscript{15} begin the education of Kaspar. These disembodied voices teach Kaspar speech: he learns to clarify objects with sentences, compare perceptions with sentences, and name things. He finds that:

\textit{Everything I can name is no longer ominous; everything that is no longer ominous belongs to me; I am at ease with everything}
that belongs to me; everything I am at ease with strengthens my self-confidence. (pp. 88-89)

Most importantly, Kaspar learns that with language he can control reality:

You can impose order on everything that appears chaotic: you can declare it ordered: every object can be what you designate it to be: if you see the object differently from the way you speak of it, you must be mistaken: you must say to yourself, then it is obvious that you want to be forced, and thus do want to say it in the end. (p. 102)

It is the very a priori order of language, though, that Handke is rebelling against. When Kaspar knows only one sentence, a sentence which bears no relation to external reality but which represents his own unique reality, he is an individual. When he learns model sentences, however, and can apply them to reality, making his conception of reality fit those sentences, then he becomes simply another mass-produced non-individual. Another Kaspar, in fact, physically joins Kaspar I on stage and is followed by several others, all computer print-outs of Kaspar I. When Kaspar first begins learning language, he is able to say “I am who I am.” When his education is complete, he can only say, “I am who I am only accidentally.” Kaspar is locked into language, dependent for a definition of himself upon an imposed linguistic system which precludes creativity of thought and the consequent uniqueness of the individual. The result for Kaspar is existential despair.

Handke is obviously aware of the stagnation of the creation of character not only in drama but in life. His plays dramatize the fact that identity is no longer an individual’s “essence,” but the product of prescribed responses. In The Ride Across Lake Constance, because Bergner has been tender previously, she is expected to be tender now; her past action has committed her present action. Von Stroheim and George demonstrate how one of them can identify a person on the strength of predetermined associations:

*von Stroheim:* . . . Someone fondles an object or leans against it?
*George:* The proprietor.
*von Stroheim:* Someone moves with hunched shoulders among objects, makes a curve around them?
*George:* The guest.
von Stroheim: Someone who is squinting holds an object in his hand?  
George: The thief. (p. 116)

Von Stroheim abhors how readily actions are translated into patterned meanings. He insists it is as ridiculous to interpret someone's feelings or thoughts by his actions as it is to call an easy chair a life preserver (p. 117). And he demonstrates how he can predict responses: by asking Jannings what he has in his mouth he can make Jannings remove his cigar; by asking Jannings why his collar button is open he can make Jannings close his collar button; by drawing attention to Jannings's seriousness he can make Jannings laugh (p. 118). For Handke, character in life has become the fixed entity it has been in drama. Not only do we learn to interpret a person's character by his actions, we also learn to expect certain actions of him. And, even more importantly, the person begins to respond in accordance with our expectations. Bergner asks:


And Jannings assesses her remarks: “You see, she herself uses the categories in which one thinks of her” (p. 124). When this line of characterization is carried to the extreme, the terrifying result is an unthinking automaton, completely submissive to control:

Jannings: . . . They did it once without my saying anything while they were half asleep, or because it just happened like that. Then I said it and they did it again. Then they asked me: “May I do that for you?” and I said: “You shall!” And from then on they did it without my having to say anything. It had become the custom. I could point my foot at something and they would jump and get it. . . . An order resulted; and for people to continue to socialize with one another, this order was made explicit: it was formulated. And once it had been formulated, people had to stick to it because, after all, they had formulated it. (p. 122)

The characters in Handke’s play operate in a kind of dream world, an anesthetized state of unawareness that automatically accepts the habits of life. No image is more common in The Ride Across Lake Constance than sleep: the play opens with
Jannings seated in an armchair, his eyes closed; George enters and stumbles because his foot has fallen asleep, and Jannings admits that his hand has also. Throughout the play various characters fall asleep, and Handke’s remarks direct that a particular character respond as though he were asleep. And the question “Are You Dreaming or Are You Speaking?” serves as the play’s epigram. The play is populated with semi-comatose individuals no longer capable of seeing or hearing themselves. Their patterns of action and speech, though unfamiliar to us, are much the same as our own patterns, which have been deadened by habit and no longer stimulate thought. In Handke’s theatre, this somnambulistic state is exposed and assaulted until language, character, and the theatre begin “to take on, like the color returning to the cheeks of a nearly hanged man, the signs of a strange and unexpected resurrection.”16 At the end of Handke’s play the audience can exclaim with Bergner, “I saw myself! I noticed myself! I heard myself!” (p. 107).

The title of The Ride Across Lake Constance refers to “Der Reiter und der Bodensee,” a German tale by Gustav Schwab, which tells of a horseman who rode fearlessly across a frozen lake only to die when he reached the other side and was told how thin the ice he had traversed was. Nicholas Hern suggests that the thin ice is a metaphor for the state of somnambulism we and the characters of Handke’s play are in and of which we must remain unaware if we are not finally to “disintegrate with shock.”17 And Botho Strauss points to the analogy between language and Handke’s play:

The ride parallels the functioning of our grammar, of our system of coordinating perception and meaning, and of our linguistic and sentient powers of reason; it is only a provisional, permeable order, which, particularly when, as in Handke’s play, it becomes conscious of its own existence, is threatened by . . . schizophrenia and madness.18

But we may just as readily be jolted into a constructive awareness as into death when we recognize the fragility of the relationship between language and reality, and it is this kind of awareness that Handke is trying to achieve. He is trying to revitalize language, revitalize the signs of reality, so they reflect a meaningful relationship between external reality and an inner, individual reality.

Handke, then, has created a drama which extends the self-
referential theatre of his predecessors to the point of making that theatre the illusion of a solipsistic world. In The Ride Across Lake Constance, in both the world of the play and the characters which inhabit it, Handke has achieved the appearance of the elimination of the dichotomy between reality and fiction which characterizes the theatre. In an attempt to re-evaluate art, reality, and identity, he has gone beyond the illusion of reality to the illusion of self-sufficiency.

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NOTES


5 Handke, “Theatre and Film,” in Hurt, pp. 174-75.


10 Note, for example, Clive Barnes’s remark following the Lincoln Center production of The Ride Across Lake Constance, published in “The Theatre: Peter Handke’s 'Ride Across Lake Constance',” New York Times, January 14, 1972, p. 16: To say I didn’t understand Peter Handke's play “The Ride Across Lake Constance” . . . would be to underestimate shamefully the
cavernous profundity of my ignorance. The play had only been going for two minutes when I realized that I did not know what was going on.


12 As will be discussed later, Handke, for the sake of convenience, uses names of well-known actors rather than designating the actors “Actor A,” “Actor B,” etc.


15 As Nicholas Hern points out in Peter Handke (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1971), Einsager is a “made-up word meaning ‘in-sayers’ but having something of the force of ‘indoctrinators’ or ‘persuaders,’ whose job it is to ‘bring Kaspar to speech by speech’” (p. 62). Roloff translates the word as “prompters,” adding a theatrical connotation to the Einsager’s function as language guides.


17 Hern, p. 94.

18 Botho Strauss, “Versuch, ästhetische und politische Ereignisse zusammenzudenken-neues Theater 1967-70,” Theater Heute 11, no. 10 (October 1970), 61-68; quoted (in translation) in Hern, p. 94. (Because it appears to me a contradiction, I have omitted the word “somnambulism” from the quotation.)