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Forms of Identity

Stations of the Cross in Peter Handke's Die linkshändige Frau

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Griffen, Austria

Surrounded by a high, crumbling, brick-and-wood wall, the graveyard is on the west side of the former monastery. With little trouble we locate Maria Handke's well-tended grave, damp today from the rain.

Over the church's massive front door hangs a statue of Mary, her foot balanced delicately on the neck of a fine green dragon. We swing open the worm-eaten door and enter a working church housed in a partial ruin. Oak pews shine darkly with woodwax and use. Altar rugs cover platforms of unpainted pine. The scent of mildew. Pyramidal piles of fine plaster dust gather at the base of disintegrating walls.

German and Slovenian signs direct parishioners to the confessional. German-language pamphlets are stacked on a table to the left and a table to the right displays similar pamphlets in Slovenian. Naive paintings of the fourteen Stations of the Cross have Slovenian captions: 1. Statio Jesus je k'smerti obsojen.

Fat little red prayer books (Gotteslob) with red, gold, and purple bookmarks dangling from each volume stand in racks behind each pew. Leafing through one I find the Kreuzweg -1. Station: Jesus wird zum Tode verurteilt. The book declares itself Eigentum der Kirche. I decide that is a misnomer and slip the book into my pocket (actually, Žarko's pocket; he has loaned me a good wool jacket for the trip).

We leave the church and step out again into the dripping rain.

Žarko Radaković and Scott Abbott¹

»Das Mystische ist der Anfang des Geistes und verhindert zugleich Weiterentfaltung.« (DGB 368)

While the protagonist of Peter Handke's *Die linkshändige Frau* rests with her son during a hike up a low mountain near their home, she tells him that years ago she saw some paintings by an American painter:

[...] vierzehn in einer Reihe, die die Leidensstationen Jesu Christi darstellen sollten – du weißt, wie er Blut schwitzt auf dem Ölberg, wie er gegeißelt wird, undsoweiter ... Diese Bilder bestanden aber nur aus schwarzweißen Flächen, ein weißer Untergrund, über den längs und quer schwarze Streifen gingen. Die vorletzte Station – "Jesus wird vom Kreuz genommen" – war fast schwarz zugemalt, und die Station danach, die letzte, wo Jesus ins Grab gelegt wird, auf einmal völlig weiß. Und jetzt das Seltsame: ich ging an dieser Reihe langsam vorbei, und wie ich vor dem letzten Bild stand, dem ganz weißen, habe ich plötzlich darauf das fast schwarze als flimmerndes Nachbild noch einmal gesehen, einige Augenblicke lang, und dann nur noch das Weiß. (DF 106-107)

Although the woman's description of the paintings is inexact in several respects (most notably in that all of the stripes or »zips« are vertical in the actual series), she clearly means Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross: Lema Sabachthani*, now in the National Gallery in Washington,

¹ Radaković, Žarko / Abbott, Scott: *Ponavljanje* (=Biblioteka Peščanik 10). Beograd: Vreme knjige 1994, S. 38. (Amerikanische Ausgabe: *Repetitions*. Brooklyn: Punctum Books 2013, S. 19-20.)



D.C. In late April of 1966, while Handke was in New York City after the meeting of the Gruppe 47 in Princeton, Newman's fourteen paintings were being exhibited there at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Marianne's attempts to construct a new self after she decides to leave her husband Bruno share the form of the Christian *Via Dolorosa*. Most strikingly, a fourteen-part structure underlies the entire story. Paul Savage, a student of mine, noticed that references to day's end and beginning divide the narrative into fourteen distinct days (other, intermediate days pass with no mention). The first section, Bruno's return, for instance, ends in the night (DF 21) and the second section begins with the words »Im ersten Morgengrauen war die Frau [...]« (DF 21). A reference to a new day begins section three as well: »An einem folgenden Morgen saß die Frau [...]« (DF 34). That section ends in the night and the fourth section begins with the woman in the supermarket on the next day (DF 41). A transition between »in der Nacht« and »Am hellen Tag« (DF 56) marks the juncture of parts four and five. Similar junctures between one day and the next can be found on pages 61, 69, 72, 78, 80, 93, 102, 108, and 131, dividing the story into fourteen distinct sections. Given Marianne's reference to the paintings of the fourteen Stations of the Cross, this fourteen-part structure associates her experiences with the stations of the Christian narrative.

Repeating this fourteen-part structure, the »translation« of *The Lefthanded Woman* (Jimmy Reed has a song with this title, but the lyrics bear no resemblance to those in Handke's story), has fourteen clearly distinguishable parts, several of which correspond, if sometimes obliquely, to events in the Marianne's story. Part ten of the song, to give but one example, has a corresponding event in the story: »Sie lachte mit andern in einem Spiegelkabinett« (DF 101) – »[...] in einem Spiegelkabinett standen welche und lachten.« (DF 98)

Supporting the thematic context created by her descriptions of Stations of the Cross and the fourteen-part structures of the story and the song, several details further emphasize Marianne as a kind of Jesus figure. The first words of the story announce that she is the same age as Jesus when he began his ministry: »Sie war dreißig Jahre alt [...]« (DF 7).² Soon thereafter, after telling Bruno to move out, she looks in the mirror and says »"Jesus – Jesus – Jesus."« (DF 24). And when the actor tries to take up with her near the end of the story he tells her that he read a message about Jesus at a streetcar stop and thought of her: »" [...] ER liebt dich, er wird dich erlösen, und ich dachte sofort an Sie [...]« (DF 113).

But there must be some mistake. This isn't Thomas Mann's Jesus/Dionysos Mynherr Peeperkorn, nor is it Steinbeck's socialist Jesus Jim Casey. The year is 1976, the author is Peter Handke, and the book is, or could be expected to be, the latest work growing out of Handke's skeptical interrogation of language and the ways it mediates our experience. In a June 6, 1976 note published in *Das Gewicht der Welt*, Handke explains his need for new myths not burdened by the guilt of the old ones: »Immer wieder das Bedürfnis, als Schriftsteller Mythen zu erfinden, zu finden, die mit den alten abendländischen Mythen gar nichts mehr zu tun haben: als bräuchte ich neue Mythen, unschuldige, aus meinem täglichen Leben gewonnene: mit denen ich mich neu anfangen kann« (DGW 160). With new myths, then, one might redirect one's life, might begin oneself anew. Just a few years later, in *Phantasien der Wiederholung*, Handke states that »Kein Jesus soll mehr auftreten, aber immer wieder ein Homer [...]« (PW 7). A few pages later, however, he suggests that the old myths might be useful in the right context: »Seltsam, daß das Wort "Gott" mich etwa im "Parzival", dem Epos, gar nicht stört (eher rührt), beim Meister Eckhart, im Traktat, aber wohl: da beklemmt es mich sogar« (PW 13).

Die linkshändige Frau is no epic. Still, it is a story rather than a tract, fiction rather than purported truth. And its references to Jesus are not an isolated occurrence. Loser's renewal at Easter



² See Theodore Ziolkowski's chapter on the thirty-year-old hero in Ders.: *Dimensions of the Modern Novel.* Princeton: Princeton University Press 1969, S. 258-288.

³ See Ziolkowski, Theodore: *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1972.

in *Der Chinese des Schmerzes*, for instance, and Parzival's three drops of blood, the crucified Christ, and the pilgrimage to Emmaus in *Das Spiel vom Fragen* are related Christian images. While putting these images to use, however, Handke consistently empties them of metaphysical content, releases them from the normative grip of the Church, restructures them as open stories as opposed to the closed structures into which they had petrified.

The traditions represented by old myths, including the Stations of the Cross, might be seen as related to the entire set of norms working on Marianne, of which Bruno's patriarchal dominance (evident most clearly in the scene in which he jams Marianne into a phone booth, suggests she needs electroshock treatment, and then burns a photograph of her, DF 35-36) is just one. When Bruno returns from his business trip he assumes that her identity is limited »wife« (»Die Frau war mit dem Verkaufsleiter der lokalen Filiale einer in ganz Europa bekannten Porzellanfirma verheiratet [...]«, DF 8). In Bruno's ensuing absence, no longer burdened by his defining presence, without that familiar wifely role to play, Marianne creates a new self. The re-creation doesn't take place *ex nihilo*, but through new experiences with the people she knows and meets, with the texts she translates, and in the context of the old stories (like the Stations of the Cross), seen now from a new perspective. Thus the break with the oppression Bruno represents is not an utter repudiation of the ruling social tradition, no absolute revolution with a utopia in mind, but rather a rupture that allows Marianne to reorder the influences on her.

The discarded Christmas tree of the story's first paragraph (the Christianity whose rituals Handke experienced most intensively as a student in the Catholic boarding school in Tanzenberg) is detritus; but as the children prove when they chop it up to make a fire, the old tree can be used for something new. Similarly, the abstractions of the Barnett Newman paintings reproduce the Stations of the Cross as largely empty but useful forms in which the tradition is present and yet conspicuously absent. Newman's Jewish background makes the Christian ritual structure an unusual thematic choice, although in his other work he also draws on non-Jewish cultures for the subjects of his abstract paintings (»Chartres, « »Prometheus Bound, « »The Slaying of Osiris«). Newman emphasizes his distance from the actual religious institutions that propagate the Christian story: »No one asked me to do these Stations of the Cross. They were not commissioned by any church. They are not in the conventional sense "church" art. But they do concern themselves with the Passion as I feel and understand it; and what is even more significant for me, they can exist without a church«.4 He similarly dissociates himself from Christian faith when he argues that the »first pilgrims walked the Via Dolorosa to identify themselves with the original moment, not to reduce it to a pious legend; nor even to worship the story of one man and his agony, but to stand witness to the story of each man's agony«.

The Stations of the Cross work similarly in *Die linkshändige Frau*. Like Newman's abstractions, they become an early example of the empty forms (*Leerformen*) so important for Handke's subsequent work. In *Die Wiederholung*, for example, a blind window is the empty formal reminder of the lost *Kaiserreich*: »Und auch seine Wirkung kam aus dem fehlenden Üblichen, dem Abwesenden: dem Undurchlässigen.« (DW 136) The window repeats traditions of the Habsburg kingdom and thus passes on some of its meaning. But in its blindness (or its abstraction) the window also escapes the absolute meanings that tended to oppression and violence in the monarchy. It is important for Handke that the forms are inherited and thus have the weight of history and that they are empty.⁶

The empty forms drawn from the Stations of the Cross are like the forms of the biblical sto-

⁶ For more on this topic, see my *Postmetaphysical Metaphysics? Peter Handke's "Repetition"*. In: Stephan, Alexander (Hg.): Themes and Structures. Studies in German Literature from Goethe to the Present. A Festschrift for Theodore Ziolkowski. Columbia/S.C.: Camden House 1997, S. 222-233.



⁴ Newman, Barnett: *Selected Writings and Interviews.* Berkeley: University of California Press 1992, S. 187-190.

⁵ Ebd., S. 188.

ries referred to in *Phantasien der Wiederholung*: »Jeder Mensch erlebt wohl die biblischen Geschichten, aber ohne die Ereignisse darin; jeder geht einmal nach Emmaus, aber da kommt ihm nichts entgegen als – die mächtige Leere« (PW 87). In the dialectic established between the mystical and the mundane, between tradition and the new, between the metaphysical and the postmetaphysical, between the traditional Christian meaning of the Stations of the Cross and the almost empty forms of the fourteen-part story and song, Marianne creates »meaning« for herself, begins herself anew.

Handke's postmetaphysical use of traditional forms is reminiscent of Derrida's concept of the trace, of writing under erasure. In *Of Grammatology*, he suggests that »the value of the transcendental arche [archie] must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of arche-trace must comply with both that necessity and that erasure. It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity.«⁷ The problem is that the language with which we speak belongs inescapably to the history of metaphysics. The best we can do as we attempt to move beyond metaphysics is to speak that language while placing it under erasure, a strategy also attempted by Heidegger for slightly different purposes.⁸ Describing Structuralist anthropology in words close to Handke's project, Derrida writes that »Lévi-Strauss will always remain faithful to this double intention: to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes.«⁹ With these examples I don't mean to suggest that Handke's text is an exercise in Derridian or Structuralist or Heideggerian philosophy, but rather want to place my reading of Christian structures in *Die linkshändige Frau* within the context of language being used by contemporary thinkers. I am not reading in a vacuum, nor is Handke writing within one.

After seeing the left-handed woman both among others and alone, the singer of the song about her says that she has been in his house and has betrayed herself, or perhaps she wanted to give him a sign. In the first case she would have been trying to remain alone, an individual apart from the constrictions of society, and thus the inadvertent signs she left would have betrayed her to the person reading them. Or, she may have been reaching out for contact with someone who could read the signs she left. Finally, the singer says he wants to see her »Alone among others.« This paradoxical condition is central to the story. Marianne's life with Bruno lacks solitude and her first attempts to live without Bruno lack a sense of community. Near the end of the story, however, she has learned at least the rudiments of remaining alone among others. Looking into a mirror, she says to herself: »Du hast dich nicht verraten.« (DF 130).

Bruno's gaze has been debilitating, and as she contemplates her image in the mirror she surely sees after-images of the self he and others have helped constitute. If Marianne is to change, that dependence must be altered. Altered, but not eradicated. To destroy all outside influence would mean a total loss of self. She needs the other's gaze as much as she needs to be free from it. So at least four times in the story she stands before a mirror and evaluates the images others and the mirror impose on her. Those self-conscious observations allow her, in each case, to proceed with her work. After the first session before the mirror she decides to translate, after the second she rearranges the house, the third gives her strength to type a translation, and after the final one she draws.

In that final scene, after her last, triumphant session before the mirror, Marianne shakes a dice cup, a gift from her father, as was the compass she uses in her hike up the mountain. I interpret the compass as a tool that helps her set a course in accordance with societal norms, leading to an ability to be »among others.« She and her child use the compass as they climb together, and while there she remembers the paintings of the stations of the cross, another compass of sorts.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques: *Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*. In Ders.: Writing and Difference. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1978, S. 284-285.



⁷ Derrida, Jacques: *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1976, S. 61.

⁸ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's preface to Derrida, Jacques: *Of Grammatology.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1976, S. xv-xviii.

The dice, on my reading, represent contingency or chance, the risk of striking out on one's own, self-definition in the face of community values. At the end of the story, as she shakes the dice cup, Marianne risks an individual vision without which the experience of community is, for the most part, inhibiting.

Having successfully been both alone and among others, Marianne can begin anew, and she does so with a pencil in hand. She looks at the drawing the driver has left behind, leans back, and begins to draw:

[...] erst ihre Füße auf dem Stuhl, dann den Raum dahinter, das Fenster, den sich im Lauf der Nacht verändernden Sternenhimmel – jeden Gegenstand in allen Einzelheiten. Sie zeichnete nicht schwungvoll, eher zittrig und ungeschickt; doch dazwischen gelangen ihr ab und zu Striche in einer einzigen Bewegung, fast einem Schwung. Es vergingen Stunden, bis sie das Blatt weglegte. Sie schaute es lange an; zeichnete dann weiter. (DF 130)

Marianne's drawing resembles a drawing Ernst Bloch discusses in an essay that reads like an exposition of the final images in Handke's story:

[Ernst] Mach nennt die sonderbare Zeichung: "Selbstanschauung Ich"; in der Tat, keine kann freier von spiegelhaften Ergänzungen sein, keine unmittelbarer in der sinnlichen Gegebenheit. [...] Eine Verkürzung von oben, wie sie Tiepolo von unten, für den perspektivischen Barockblick von unten erzeugt hat; nur daß hier genaue Erlebniswirklichkeit kunstlos festge-

halten worden ist, nicht das Spiel eines großen, gestellten kulturdekorativen Könnens. [...] [Der Spiegel] zeigt unsere Gestalt, wie sie andere sehen: dieser häufige Anblick setzt sich in die Selbstanschauung ein. Aber [Machs Zeichnung schlug] ein Loch in diese Eitelkeit. Ein Loch auch in die Bestimmungen von außen. [...] Kein Mensch ist, was er hat und vorstellt; er ist nicht einmal, was er sich idealistisch ergänzt, sofern diese Ideale aus dem Bisherigen sozialen Außen, aus der Glänzbarkeit seines Standes und dergleichen geschöpft sind. Der wirkliche Mensch liegt noch außerhalb dieser Spiegelbilder. [...] Der wirkliche Subjekt des menschlichen Daseins ist nicht, wie es angesehen wird, sondern fast noch so, wie es sich sieht.¹⁰



Like Ernst Mach, Marianne draws her feet, the surrounding room, and the sky as an act of self-definition. This view of herself differs strikingly from how others viewed her and from what she saw in the mirror. In Bloch's words, she thus approaches »der wirkliche Subjekt des menschlichen Daseins.« Bloch mentions Tiepolo's religious paintings of figures seen from below as they ascend into heaven; and Handke repeats or quotes this in the photo the child takes of his mother on the mountain: »Auf dem Bild war sie sehr von unten zu sehen, herabschauend, gegen den Himmel; kaum die Baumspitzen mit darauf.« (DF 107) She has just told about seeing the Stations of the Cross, and now, for the child, Marianne is seen in one of her »stations«, foreshortened



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¹⁰ Bloch, Ernst: *Selbstporträt ohne Spiegel*. In Ders.: Verfremdungen I. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1962, S. 13-17.

against the sky as in a Tiepolo painting. Where she saw the afterimage of the penultimate Newman painting while looking at the final painting, the child reports his own afterimage: "Ich sehe noch immer die Bäume vom Berg".« (DF 108)

The camera, the mirrors, Bruno's oppressive gaze, and the child's gaze remain in play, but they are finally joined in the story by the self-constituting drawing. The changing stars of the night sky that make the self-portrait an ongoing process are thus contrasted with the static sky the child's photo captures. Handke's story exploits the Christian Stations of the Cross not out of a sense for Christ's divinity, but because that narrative form is part of our cultural vocabulary, because those words exist, because that is a useful language game (and that is exactly what this is, a Wittgensteinian language game) we are used to playing. And this form, the form growing out of a story of a man/god walking a path that will lead to his death and his resurrection, lends itself nicely to a story about a woman moving along a difficult path that leads to a new life.

Despite the fact that he sees himself as a »religiös geschädigter Internatsmensch« Handke told Žarko Radaković that he returns again and again to the forms developed by religions, »die klassischen Formen [...] unglaublich ergreifende, die tiefstgreifenden – gerade die Formen, die die tiefsten Inhalte ausdrücken, die die Menschheit überhaupt erreicht hat.«¹¹ These are the religious forms of *Die linkshändige Frau*, the Christian structures that, emptied of metaphysical content, can suggest dialectical possibilities as Marianne reconstitutes her life.

Afterword

Adorno and Horkheimer similarly address the use and misuse of metaphysical forms and recommend a dialectical process they call, after Hegel, »bestimmte Negation«: »Gerettet wird das Recht des Bildes in der treuen Durchführung seines Verbots. [...] Dialektik offenbart vielmehr jedes Bild als Schrift. Sie lehrt aus seinen Zügen das Eingeständnis seiner Falschheit lesen, das ihm seine Macht entreißt und sie der Wahrheit zueignet.«¹²

For decades Peter Handke has appropriated various images for truth while simultaneously indicating their falsity or arbitrariness. A recent work serves as a reminder that the process is ongoing. In the novel *Der große Fall*, two scenes work back-to-back to establish a structure both full of and empty of meaning. The actor who is the protagonist feels a powerful hunger: »[...] es war der Hunger auf Speise, auf Frau und auf Geist, alles in einem [...]« (DGF 174). He finds a church where he hopes to assuage that hunger. Signaling the ambiguity of the coming experiences, the narrator notes that the cross on the church might also have been a TV antenna (DGF 176). While the priest reads the mass silently, the actor recites his own refrain: »Der Leib der Frau ist die Herabkunft der Allgegenwart des Geistes in der Nacht. Mit der Frau zusammen setzt die andere Sprache ein, hebt das Anderslauten an. [...] Die Frau, der andere Buchstabe. Nicht ich komme über die Frau, die Frau, sie kommt über mich, und mein Fleisch wird Geist« (DGF 179-180). After the profound, if ideosyncratic, experiences in the church, the actor walks on, approaching the inner city whose threshold is marked by a newly constructed public toilet. And should there be any lingering thought that this is a story written by a religiously addled and aging Peter Handke and not by the strictly dialectical writer he has always been, what follows should dispel that notion. The front of the toilet spreads out in a way that reminds the actor of the nave of the church he has just left. And inside, from the dome, a gentle light radiates over the azure-blue tiles while »die feierliche Orgelmusik, die rundum schallte, war das stetige Wasserrauschen« (DGF 220-221). In this profane and holy environment, the actor washes himself and undergoes a transformation similar to the one he experienced earlier in the church. The forms of the toilet, as also the forms of the church, act on the perceptions and desires of the actor to bind and heal and testi-

¹² Horkheimer, Max / Adorno, Theodor W.: *Dialektik der Aufklärung.* Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1988, S. 30.



¹¹ Žarko Radaković' interview of Handke in the Salzburg Sheraton Hotel, February 27, 1985; page 27 in original transcript.

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