

SCOTT ABBOTT

## Storm still

Klartext und Poesie in Peter Handke's *Immer noch Sturm*

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... Storm still ... Tearing off his clothes ... Storm still ...  
(Shakespeare, *King Lear*)

*Das erste Opfer des Krieges ist die Wahrheit? Nein, die Sprache.*  
(Peter Handke, *Unter Tränen fragend*)

Thomas Assheuer's review<sup>1</sup> of the premiere of Peter Handke's *Immer noch Sturm*<sup>2</sup> builds to an assertion that the play is an act of »Sprachnationalismus«: »Dimitter Gotscheff tut alles, um Handkes Sprachnationalismus zu überspielen. [...] [Er] will nicht den Handke, der Diktatoren nachrennt, weil sie westlichen Sprach-Invasoren "Widerstand" leisteten« (*Die Zeit*, 17. August 2011). It is tempting to accept Assheuer's summary judgment, especially since the public has long known that Peter Handke is a »friend of the Serbs«, that he is »loyal to the "Butcher of the Balkans"«, and that he »approves of the Srebrenica massacre« (quotations from Ruth Valentini's influential 2006 *sifflet* in *Le Nouvel Observateur*<sup>3</sup>). The published text of the play by the dictator-loving reactionary Peter Handke is even worse than the production, Assheuer claims, although he cites no actual examples.

Uneasy with vilifications unsupported by evidence, I decide to read the play with this question in mind: Has the skeptical and dialectical author who laid bare the coercive structures of language in his early *Kaspar* and in so many subsequent works succumbed to the siren call of nationalism?

The first sentence of the text (»Eine Heide, eine Steppe, eine Heidesteppe, oder wo.« (IS 7)) is a question without a question mark, and already readers are subject to the questions a play raises as a product of language. In the play's final sentence, the Slovenian speaking characters remain »erkennlich höchstens an den Handzeichen, mit denen wir einander noch zuwinken« (IS 166). From the first sentence to the last, then, the setting and characters are indistinguishable from the language that is their substance.

The language spoken by a Slovenian minority in southern Austria is threatened by the occupying Germans (as previously by German-speaking Austrians) and the narrator's uncle Gregor, about to join the Slovenian partisans, tells his nephew that after the war they will be »Frei vor allem, unsere Sprache zu sprechen.« (IS 125) This hope, repeated throughout the play, is hope for *a* language, for the local language, for the Slovenian language, but as members of the family discuss threats to their own language, they play out a dialectical investigation into more universal possibilities of language in the contexts of war and peace.

Early in the play the narrator's mother greets him as a familiar because of their shared language, a language she calls elsewhere »die Stuben- und Küchensprache, die Natur-Sprache« (IS 88): »An unserer Sprache sind wir alle Versammelten hier zu erkennen, erkennen wir uns wenigstens untereinander, jeder von uns Unsrigen den andern als einen Unsrigen.« (IS 14) Valentin responds to his sister by arguing that the language that binds them together also isolates them. He has achieved whatever suc-

<sup>1</sup> Assheuer, Thomas: *Es regnet vergehende Zeit*. In: *Die Zeit*, 17.8.2011.

<sup>2</sup> Handke, Peter: *Immer noch Sturm*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2010. (IS)

<sup>3</sup> Valentini, Ruth: *Peter Handke à Pozarevac*. In: *Nouvel Observateur*, 6.4.2006.

cess he has had, he claims, because he left behind their »Haus- und Sippensprache. [...] Ja, verdammt soll sie sein, diese Sprache« (IS 14). He attributes his brothers' deaths, his sister's lost fiancée, and his father's beaten-down existence to their shared language. And when Gregor announces he is going to desert the German army and join the partisans, Valentin mocks his motivation:

»Was für eine Entscheidung, Bruder? Für unsere Mutter-, Vater-, Kinder- und Haus-, Herd- und Stall-Sprache, für unsere slawischen oder illyrischen oder ostgotischen oder sonstwelche Urlaute, in denen angeblich, wie du behauptest, die Seele von unsereinem sich ausspricht, die angeblich die Sprache der Liebe und des Landes selber ist? Für die Sprache, die mir zum Beispiel höchstens zeitweise ein bißchen Stallwärme gibt?« (IS 82)

When Gregor answers »Ja, für die, meine, unsere Sprache« (IS 82), Valentin asserts that his own emigration from the enclosed language and geography of home into the languages of Germany and England and America is a move into a broader, more open existence.

As opposed to Valentin's enthusiasm for foreign words and languages, his father hates them: »Tragödie: das Wort will ich nicht gehört haben! [...] Mit eurer Fremdsprache habt ihr unsere heilige Heimatluft entheiligt!« (IS 21-22). One who uses foreign words, he claims (and German words like »Schrank« instead of the local »Kasten«, »Jacke« instead of »Rock«, qualify as foreign), »[d]er hat schon die Heimat verraten« (IS 23). In addition to the grandfather's strong feelings about foreign words, he demands that his family eschew the words »Gott« (»Kein Wort von Gott hier bei uns!« (IS 37)), »Liebe« (»Die Liebe! Das Wort will ich nicht gehört haben. Noch niemand hat bisher bei uns hier von Liebe geredet.« (IS 62f.)), and »Geschichte« (»In unserm Haus: keine Geschichte! [...] "Was für eine Sprache du sprichst, Sohn. So hat noch niemand in unserer Sippe geredet."« (IS 108)). The words the grandfather values over those abstractions are the names of local things: »Motten und Blutegel. Blei und Glimmer. Wasserläufer und Kuhmist. Meßkelch und Hühnerleiter« (IS 161).

The grandfather's distaste for abstraction is intensified by the language of two official letters the family receives over the course of the play. The first one reports the death of Benjamin in ideological terms: »[...] tapfer vor dem Feind [...] für Führer und Fatalant« (IS 66). Although »Gott« doesn't appear in the letter, the grandfather can hear a metaphysical echo and emits a string of curses on Germany that ends with blasphemy: »Der Herr hat's gegeben, der Herr hat's genommen, verflucht sei der Name des Herrn in Ewigkeit!« (IS 67). It is the *name* of the Lord that he curses, a name like the names for which his sons have died: »Führer« and »Vaterland«. The second letter informs the grandparents that their son has given »... sein junges Leben für den Virener und unser großes deutsches Fatterland ...« (IS 115) and again provokes blasphemy: »Und darauf die Mutter: "Du lästerst." Und darauf der Vater: "Ja. Ja!" Und darauf die Mutter: "Lästere weiter! Lästere. Lästere für mich."« (IS 117)

In addition to cursing the obscenity of nationalistic rhetoric, the family responds to the news conveyed by the letters with cries that are beyond articulate language: »Und dann läßt sie nur noch etwas wie einen Japser hören, einen Laut, wie solche Laute, ob des Schreckens, des Abscheus oder auch der Freude und des Entzückens, überhaupt eins der gemeinsamen Familienmerkmale gewesen sind.« (IS 65) The sounds of grief that are not words and the elaborate curses against the German language itself (»Nie wieder jemand Deutschen hören, mit seiner Luftzerhackersprache, mit seiner Eintongabelstimme, mit seinem Trommelfelldurchstoßbrüllen, mit seinem sonoren Kreidefresswolfsäuseln.« (IS 67)) are antitheses to the official language that attaches »father« to »land« to produce an abstract entity fundamentally different from the *Jaunfeld* that is this family's concrete geographical center.

If the language of the Third Reich (which uncomfortably resembles the language of the Austrian majority before and after the war) is the language of power, and if the language of the *Jaunfeld* is the

familiar and largely passive language of home, then what language might be used by the partisans to oppose the Nazis? *Klartext* is the answer: direct, unmediated, clear, and unencoded language. Ursula explains the need for *Klartext* when she tells Gregor that she is a member of the »Osvobodilna fronta« and Gregor wonders what that means. »Befreiungsfront« (IS 92), she answers, and asks if he no longer understands his own language. »Doch«, Gregor answers, baffled not by the Slovenian word but by the abstraction it conveys, »aber nur wenn sie ausdrückt, was man sehen, hören und riechen kann. Wenn sie allgemein wird, begreife ich sie nicht« (IS 92). This is their father's argument when he forbids the words »Gott«, »Liebe«, and »Geschichte«, but Ursula will have none of that: »Du wirst den Nutzen der abstrakten Sprache noch kennenlernen, Gregor. Du wirst lernen: ohne die Abstraktionen fehlt dem Kampf der Zusammenhalt. Ohne Doktrin kein kommunes Ziel. [...] Ohne Literatur keine Basis« (IS 92).

Gregor asks what she means by literature. Poetry? Novels? Ursula says that in war there is no use for such nonsense: »es ist eine Zeit, hart zu werden und auf Linie einzuschwenken kraft einer Sprache, die andere Saiten aufzieht. [...] Literatur, das heißt jetzt: Kampfschriften, Flugblätter, Zeitungen, Manifeste« (IS 93). »Klartext« (IS 93), she continues, is language without veils, necessary so that the clarity of partisan action is mirrored in the clarity of partisan language.

Ursula chooses a partisan name for Gregor – »Jonatan« – and congratulates him: »Nun stehst du auf der guten Seite der Geschichte, Kamerad Jonatan. [...] Die Geschichte wird uns am Ende recht geben. Die Geschichte [...] spricht die Wahrheit. Die Geschichte ist die höchste, die letzte, die unwiderrufliche Instanz.« (IS 95) The speaker of this supposed *Klartext* is naively unaware that the agit-prop she asserts as unmediated truth is, as Nietzsche formulated it, a mobile army of metaphors (»Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne«). Her paean to history is highly mediated, whether through Hegel's *Weltgeist* or Christian teleology or through the simple language of the *Jaunfeld*. And when Ursula continues her speech, she moves ever farther from the *Klartext* she claims to speak, piling one cliché onto another: »Die Augen geheftet an den Horizont, laßt uns konfrontieren die widrigen Winde. Wir sind die Patrouillen der Freiheit, und unser Volk ist dasjenige welches. Gott hat es berufen [...]« (IS 96) »Die Augen geheftet«? »Die widrigen Winde«? »Gott«? *Klartext*?

Where does their misbegotten belief that they are speaking straightforward and truthful *Klartext* lead the partisans? To violence against their own. When a comrade is found with stolen butter, he is sentenced to death: »Verstoß gegen die Partisanendisziplin hat mit dem Tode bestraft zu werden!« (IS 111) The passive violence of this legalese is simply stunning. (When the Serb Novislav Djajic was arrested in Germany in 1997 for purported war crimes, the arrest order consisted of a single sentence: »Der Ausländer ist festzunehmen.« Handke retells this story in *Die Fahrt im Einbaum*<sup>4</sup>.) Having experienced this partisan violence personally, Gregor tells the narrator that »Jenseits der Sprache bricht die Gewalt los. Höchste Gewalt tötet die Sprache, und mit ihr den Einzelnen, dich und mich. In der Sprache bleiben.« (IS 140)

But not so fast. There must be a place for a history told in dispassionate and non-abstracted language, and so the narrator attempts to tell a factual story of the Slovenian partisans in Austria: »Und erst in der Folge fange ich an, mich zu äußern, klar und deutlich – soweit jemand wie ich dazu fähig ist.« (IS 71) He tries to speak with the objective voice of a news anchor and immediately finds himself stuttering and misspeaking. Still, he continues with the history of the partisans who first called themselves *Grüne Kader* as they gathered in the woods, hoping for help from Russia but disappointed when the non-aggression pact was signed. The narrator wonders how those lonely individuals »die

<sup>4</sup> Handke, Peter: *Die Fahrt im Einbaum oder Das Stück zum Film vom Krieg*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1999.

Kraft gefunden haben, einander durch die Fichten-, Föhren- und Tannennadeln hindurch zusammenzupfeifen« (IS 72). He answers his own question with facts: »Fest steht, daß fast alle die Kerle kräftige Bronchien hatten. Gemäß unserer Geschichtsschreibung – wobei die Geschichtsschreiber danach in der Regel die Grünen Kader selber waren – hatten die Waldmenschen [...] im Kirchenchor gesungen [...].« (IS 72) A reader who follows the logic of this narrative will note that the metaphor-laden question about how they had the strength »einander . . . zusammenzupfeifen« leads to a far-fetched answer precipitated by the word »pfeifen«: they had powerful windpipes from singing in church! The historical *Klartext* is immediately subverted by its own language. Having done his best, but with mixed results, the narrator is immediately overwhelmed by a flood of questions: What good was the victory? What kind of peace resulted? And so on until, completely frustrated, he says »fragt alle, nur nicht mich! – Jetzt wollte ich endlich den Klartext reden, dem auszuweichen man seit jeher mir vorwirft – wieder nichts ...« (IS 74).

It is not that Handke lacks interest in the historical events. As he prepared to write the play he worked through at least four books about the partisans in Kärnten: Karel Prušnik-Gašper's *Gemsen auf der Lawine: Der Kärntner Partisanenkampf*, Lipej Kolenik's *Von Neuem*, Anton Haderlap's *Pesmi*, and Lipej Kolenik's *Für das Leben, gegen den Tod* (available at the Handkeonline site of the Austrian National Library). Handke has repeatedly addressed the need for historical facts, notably in his account of war-torn Yugoslavia, *Eine winterliche Reise*<sup>5</sup>. There he is quick to note that he has »Nichts gegen so manchen – mehr als aufdeckerischen – entdeckterischen Journalisten, vor Ort [...] hoch diese anderen Feldforscher!« (ERF 122) »Die bösen Fakten festhalten, schon recht. Für einen Frieden jedoch braucht es noch anderes, was nicht weniger ist als die Fakten.« (ERF 133)

Following the inadequacies of his first attempt, the narrator tries once again to tell the history of the partisans in *Klartext*, prefacing his remarks as he often does with a declaration of his own inability to do so: »Und wieder werde ich mich dann an Klartext versucht haben und wieder bald mich verhaspelnd, ins Stottern geratend, immer wieder abbrechend, das Gesagte zurücknehmend, in Frage stellend undsoweiter« (IS 100). He lays out the work of priests for whom »Sprache retten ist Seele retten« (IS 102) and he laments the lack of educated fighters, but his tongue soon grows heavy, he says, and he quits the attempt at *Klartext*. He does not, however, quit the work of the play. The narration continues. The search for something beyond the facts continues. The search for a fitting form continues.

Early in the play, soon after his questions about *where* the play should take place, the narrator contemplates: »Was für eine Art von Zeit soll hier eigentlich gelten?« (IS 13) His possibilities come down to two: the »Türkenschleißzeit, wo ihr alle abends beim Maisschälen im Stall gehockt seid und euch beim Geschichtenerzählen und Liederabsingen eine andere Zeit vorgegaukelt habt« or »die Realzeit, die historische, die beschissene, die auf ewig verlorene« (IS 13). Although he tries to bring real, historical time into the play with his attempts to speak *Klartext*, the play he produces is largely a product of »die andere Zeit«.

All these various and sometimes competing threads of thought about language are reprised in the play's fifth act. Gregor speaks passionately about the language and society he envisions after the war, about a utopia in which the names of the *Jaunfeld* are simple, in which the landscape is free and without threat, in which things are just things: »Und die Heuharfen hier werden nichts als Heuharfen sein. Und der Dachboden der Dachboden.« (IS 138f.) The metaphor-free state Gregor hopes for is impossible to uphold, and soon Gregor is speaking again about power: »Unsere Sprache, unsere Macht.« (IS 140)

<sup>5</sup> Handke, Peter: *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1996. (ERF)

The narrator follows Gregor's conflicted speech with snippets of postwar history delivered in a voice meant to be that of a radio host – one more attempt to speak *Klartext* – and his new history is the old account of reestablished oppression. The narrator is not satisfied with this historical cynicism, however, and asks a key question: »Aber kann die Geschichte nicht auch eine Form sein, und Form heißt Frieden?« Gregor finds that ridiculous: »Fehlt nur, daß du mit der Weltseele kommst.« (IS 152) The narrator posits another possible time and another possible place (as he did to begin the play). Gregor finds that silly as well: »Du und deine andere Zeit. Es ist aus mit der« (IS 153).

The narrator of Handke's *Eine winterliche Reise* faces a similar disdainful response after arguing that for peace there is something not less important than the facts of the war: »Kommst du jetzt mit dem Poetischen?« Yes, he answers, »wenn dieses als das gerade Gegenteil verstanden wird vom Nebulösen. Oder sag statt "das Poetische" besser das Verbindende, das Umfassende« (ERF 133). *Immer noch Sturm* is itself an example of a poetic form that connects, that includes. The play works to undermine the either/or exclusivities of the »Natursprache« and of the *Klartext* while weaving them both into a dialectical multilingual conversation commonly conjoined by »und«.

During his utopian musings, Gregor begins a litany of things common to the *Jaunfeld*: »Motten und Bluteigel. Blei und Glimmer. Wasserläufer und Kuhmist. Meßkelch und Hühnerleiter ...« The narrator joins in with additions of his own: »Maiandachten und Totenglocken. Waldbunker und Fliegenpilze. Blaue Arbeitshosen und rote Auferstehungsmäntel. Fastentücher und Hakenkreuze. Holzschuhe und Mausefallen. [...]« (IS 161). The Nazi symbol disrupts the idyllic list, but in a way it is little different from the *Meßkelch* or the *Auferstehungsmäntel*. The untroubled and sustaining things of rural life – mushrooms and work clothing – exist alongside symbols and ritual objects that structure rural life. When those symbols promise power, someone needs to say *Hakenkreuz! Heimat* has a history and it has not always been pretty.

Not interested in dialectical thinking, Gregor is incensed by the narrator's intrusion into his utopian dream. And when the narrator signals others to join them on the stage, Gregor rages that they are stuck in a devilish, absolute, and debilitating history. The narrator has another vision, however, similar to one laid out in *Eine winterliche Reise*: »Und [...] dachte ich, Sohn eines Deutschen, ausscheren aus dieser Jahrhundertgeschichte, aus dieser Unheilschette, ausscheren zu einer anderen Geschichte.« (ERF 131)

The alternate (hi)story of *Immer noch Sturm* is the play itself. The form of the story is »das Verbindende, das Umfassende«. The play's language is German – along with plenty of Slovenian, some Austrian dialect, a good bit of English, a little French, a little Russian, and even some Dutch. In and beyond those various languages, the characters talk reasonably, they curse roundly, they emit inarticulate sounds of grief, they praise their *Natursprache*, they attempt to talk in *Klartext*, they assert their resistance agitprop, they employ and rail against abstraction, they curse and praise foreign languages. And finally the narrator leaves behind his past as a passive dreamer to take control of the story: »"Ja, ich bin der Spielleiter. [...] Ich bin erwacht. Ich bin die Macht. Jaz sem oblast. Jaz sem avtoriteta. Ich bin's, der bestimmt ..."« (IS 162)

The form of the play as it comes to an end is light and airy like the ephemeral *Eintagsfliege* (IS 162) Gregor finds contemptible. The play evokes another time and a new place that extend into a series of addenda introduced by the conjunction »und«. Here the opening words of the final ten paragraphs: »Und unversehens [...]. Und im Blick [...]. Und da legt sich [...]. Und so auch [...]. Und ein anderer von uns, [...]. Und dann das paarweise Weitersingen: [...]. Und zuletzt ist auch noch [...] Und schon hat uns [...]. Nachzutragen ist, [...]. Und nachzutragen ist auch, [...].« (IS 160-166). In these additively conjoined scenes the family sings about *Weltverdruß*, first in the »ewig tristen« 3/4-time of the *Weltverdrußwalzer*, and then, true to the narrator's quest for another time, in the new 4/4-time of a

polka: *Weltverdruß-POLKA* (IS 164-165).

This essay began with Thomas Assheuer's claim that *Immer noch Sturm* is a work of »Sprachnationalismus«. That would be true if the play were about a pure and good Slovenian language as opposed to the evil German/Austrian language, if it were about small-town farmers who say the words »Huhn« and »Ziegenmilch« and »Lederhosen« and thus prove that they are authentic human beings. If the play is simply about a minority Slovene population that fights bravely in the resistance against German-speaking Nazis, then it's a play by someone other than Peter Handke. But if, as my straightforward reading suggests, the play is about a complex and conflicted family of Slovenian speakers on the periphery of German-speaking society and thus in a position to raise some interesting questions about language, then Mr. Assheuer has proven that he cannot read. Still storm.