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**Place, Autonomy and the Individual:  
*Short Letter, Long Farewell* and *A Sorrow Beyond  
Dreams***

**Robert Halsall**

THE TWO NOVELS by Peter Handke which were published in Germany in 1972, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (*Short Letter, Long Farewell*, 1977) and *Wunschloses Unglück* (*A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, 1976), illustrate the importance of place in Handke's work from two very different perspectives: the former ends in an exaltation of America as the realization of the utopian dreams of its European narrator, the latter in a dystopian condemnation of the negative influence of his Austrian homeland on the life of the narrator's mother and its contribution to the events leading to her suicide.

The two novels have been seen by some critics as an illustration of two seemingly contradictory aspects of the author's poetics: the former a subjectivist future-orientated mythical projection, the latter a past-orientated striving for "authenticity" in the depiction of real events (Durzak 124). The contrasting interpretations of the narrative position, style, and the relationship between 'fiction' and 'reality' in the two novels illustrate divergent critical attitudes towards Handke and his writing. *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, and Handke's works of the 1970s in general, have in some respects received a more favorable reception in America than in German-speaking countries, principally because of the negative reaction of some German critics to his "inwardness" or "subjectivity" (Barry 107). On the other hand, the overwhelmingly positive reaction of many of the same German-speaking critics to *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* stems from the fact that many saw in this novel a turning away from the inwardness of his earlier works towards a new "realism," a Handke who, as one critic put it, had, in this work, "come to his senses" (quoted in Heintz 59).

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Two important aspects of *Short Letter* are immediately introduced on the book's original German cover. The title immediately alludes to the novel's apparent intertextual reference to detective fiction, in particular Raymond Chandler's novel *The Long Goodbye* (1953). This seems to be confirmed by the plot and subject matter of the novel: the narrator, an Austrian writer, has come to America apparently to escape from a marital crisis. Soon after arriving in America, however, he receives a letter from his estranged wife, Judith, threatening him with death. His ensuing journey across America thus seems to correspond to the plot of a detective novel: a pursuit and counter-pursuit with the aim of carrying out a threat of murder typical of that genre. Although the conventions of detective fiction are employed in *Short Letter*, these function more as a quotation in the sense of an "appropriation and transformation of a set repertoire, whose attraction lies in playful quotation" (Krajenbrink 94). This playful intertextual reference to other genres, both literary and non-literary, of which there are many instances in the novel, is a key feature which has led critics to label the novel postmodern.

The presence of a map of America showing the journey of the narrator from east coast to west immediately suggests that America itself and the narrator's journey across it is not just a setting for the novel, but that this is a journey of confrontation with an idea which America represents for the narrator, and, through this, a confrontation with himself. This view of the role and importance of America is confirmed by Handke in an interview. America as depicted in *Short Letter*, rather than being a depiction of reality, is, according to Handke, "a pretext, the attempt to find a more distanced world, in which I can become more myself" (Karasek 87).

The America depicted on the cover is, in terms of the narrator's personal development, a "Versuchswelt" (Schlueter 94), an experimental world through which he can, during the course of his journey, overcome his feelings of alienation and, in Handke's terms, "become more himself." In Handke's work in general, place is of central importance for the inner development of the principal character. The significance of the motif of the journey (both geographi-

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cally and in terms of inner development) is indicated by Handke by the epigraph which he places at the beginning of the novel from Karl Philipp Moritz's novel *Anton Reiser*. While in *Anton Reiser* the tendency of the principal character, as indicated in the epigraph, "to confine the traveler's attention to the road he was going to travel," to subsume all his experiences of place under a pre-conceived ideal, prevents a real interaction with place, in *Short Letter*, these same tendencies are also apparent in its narrator, at least in the early stages of the journey, but are overcome during its course by means of his inner development (Kraus 175).

Journeys such as the one depicted in *Short Letter* have an important significance for Handke's works generally. The journey represents for Handke a process by means of which the subject, through putting himself into a strange environment, is able to develop an attentiveness for the outside world through perception of the places visited, and to transform these into an inner experience or context (Wefelmeyer 674; Bartmann 116). Cities are a particularly important part of the process by which Handke's subjects transform the objective world into inward experience (Bartmann 126). This tendency differentiates the significance of the journey in Handke's novels from that in Gerhard Roth's *Winterreise* (*Winterreise*, 1980), for example, as in the latter the protagonist carries the experiences of his familiar world with him as projections onto the places encountered on the journey. In Handke's novel, it is not just the change of place that is of importance, but the attitude toward place, which undergoes a transformation during the journey (Melzer 382).

The American cities through which the narrator travels, particularly in the first part of the novel, are a good illustration of this change in attitude. His journey starts in Providence. The opening description of Jefferson Street, which "circles round the business section, changes its name to Norwich Street in the South End, and leads into the old Boston Post Road" (*SL* 3), in what might be seen as a superfluous detail, seems to indicate a city seen by an outsider through a pre-conceived mental image, as if on a plan viewed from above. In a later passage, in New York, the street layout is once

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again important in the description. A stranger in the city, the narrator experiences disorientation, and having set out one way has to go back in the opposite direction (*SL* 25). This disturbing inability to orient himself in a strange environment is also an opportunity for him to see things anew, to gain a new perspective on reality (Nägele, "Welt" 394; "Amerika" 112). The experience of disorientation in the city here could be described as a dialectic of perception of detail and overall context. Because the narrator has lost the overall context (initially provided by his mental image of the city) through disorientation, he focuses obsessively on detail: "In unfamiliar surroundings ... I tried to deceive my own sense of ignorance and inexperience by dissecting the few activities within my reach as though speaking of momentous undertakings" (*SL* 26).

This experience of disorientation brought about by place seems to be the first step in moving from a passive perception of environment to an active one, the "active deformation of reality" (Nägele, "Amerika" 113). The experience of the city, particularly the unfamiliarity and anonymity of the American cities for the European narrator, is an essential part of this transformation. The beginning of this process is evident in a later scene in New York, where the narrator is sitting in a restaurant in Central Park (*SL* 35-37). Here he is at a distance from the city – he is aware of the sounds of traffic and sirens outside the restaurant – and begins to become tired after his earlier frenzied exploration of the city streets. The phenomenon of tiredness alluded to here, to which Handke would later devote an entire essay, is a pre-requisite of his overcoming of pre-conceptions and beginning to truly experience the city around him: "As I sat motionless, something began to move back and forth in my head in a rhythm resembling that of my wanderings about New York that day" (*SL* 36).<sup>1</sup> The rhythm of the city, previously a strange, disori-

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<sup>1</sup>The importance of tiredness as a positive factor in Handke's poetic philosophy, that weakens the prejudice (understood as the tendency to classify and judge places according to a pre-existing categorization) which the subject feels when confronted with a new environment, is confirmed seventeen years later in the work *Versuch über die Müdigkeit* (1989; *Essay on Tiredness*, 1994).

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enting experience, here becomes internalized – something he no longer resists but accepts: “It was only then that I saw inside me the city that up until then I had almost overlooked” (SL 36). The phenomenon of tiredness is significant here as it leads to an appreciation of what he had previously overlooked: “A city, which during the day I had merely passed by, caught up with me” (SL 36). The overcoming of prejudice and the tendency to categorize means that the images of the city become internalized (SL 36-37).<sup>2</sup>

This reduction of inner resistance to allow a full perception of place and the accompanying inner transformation can be seen as the principal significance of the journey motif in Handke’s work. The process through which the subject suddenly frees himself from a predetermined categorization towards a free perception of the unfamiliar environment has been described as a “key, an open sesame experience of the unfamiliar environment” (Wefelmeyer 674). The New York restaurant experience can be seen as such a type of experience for the narrator and a key element of his inner development as a whole. At the end of the passage, as if to emphasize this development, the city has become “a landscape that was open as far as the eye could see” (SL 37).

The relationship between the city and nature is also important in this novel and Handke’s work generally. The removal of the threatening aspect of the city in the New York experience described above means that “the compressed, still-rumbling city became for me a gentle panorama of nature” (SL 37). The narrator comes from the country, but does not identify with it; in fact he sees it as oppressive, something to be escaped from (SL 40). In this sense the narrator of *Short Letter, Long Farewell* is the opposite of the hero of Keller’s *Green Henry*, the novel which he is reading on his journey and to whom he often compares himself. While Henry “found freedom in nature,” the narrator finds it “hard to imagine that nature could free anyone from anything” (SL 40). Whereas for Henry the

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<sup>2</sup> Bartmann argues that, for this reason, cities for Handke are “utopian, post-modern and timeless conceptualizations of space” (125).

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outside world, particularly nature, is a “place of release” (from inner alienation), for the narrator it is “an image of his own alienation” (Pakendorf 173). For these and other reasons it is a mistake to apply the model of inner development through the contemplation of nature in the literary models of Keller and Moritz to the narrator of *Short Letter* (Pakendorf 157). In fact it can be argued that the binary opposites of city and nature which have dominated modernist literature from the Enlightenment through Romanticism are deconstructed in Handke’s novel and work generally into a postmodern hybrid.

This modernist bipolarity of city and nature, in which everything lacking in the city is projected as a positive idyll onto nature, is rejected: “I detested stubble fields, fruit trees, and pastures, there was something repulsive about them” (SL 40). This repulsion has partly to do with the fact that, having been born into a rural environment, he has a non-idyllic view of it. The economic necessity of having had to go “about in rubber boots, chasing pissing cows in the rain” (SL 40) are sufficient to destroy any idealistic view of nature. This non-idealist view is even more strongly emphasized by the narrator of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* in his description of his mother’s life in an Austrian rural village. Equally important, the landscape of his childhood provided him with no fantasy, no freedom: “in my nature days I could never do as I pleased” (SL 41). The city, on the other hand, is a free and open environment “where there were more forbidden things to be done” (SL 40).

On the journey along Interstate 76 from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh the rural merges into the urban to a point where the two become indistinguishable. The industrialization of agriculture means that “every inch of the ground looked as if it had just been cultivated, there wasn’t a living soul in the fields, which were impersonating unspoiled nature” (SL 59). There is, in other words, no real nature here, only an illusion or simulacrum.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the urban

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<sup>3</sup> Renner points out that there is no “unmediated relationship to nature” and that “civilisation” (here the hybrid American landscape) can become a “second nature” (78).

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phenomena of roads and cars dominate the rural landscape to such an extent that they become a postmodern nature here: “the asphalt glittered peacefully; the cars drove slowly, no one did more than seventy” (*SL* 59). This deconstruction of the signifiers of the urban and the rural within the novel is part of a “postmodern aesthetic”: nature in modernist terms is a place where signifiers are already classified into a system (*SL* 104; Klinkowitz and Knowlton 47). Cities, and American cities in particular, are for Handke, on the other hand, “provisional,” there to be interpreted, but “with every signification self-apparent” (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 47).

The postmodern aspect of America can be seen in the fact that “signs are nothing but themselves” (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 46). This is reflected in the narrator’s journeys through the urban and rural landscapes of America, for instance that to Philadelphia by train (*SL* 41-42). Here the images of gloomy urban desolation in the suburbs with their garbage heaps, chimneys, and houses with boarded-up windows, are seen at a distance – to the narrator they do not signify any of the conditions of urban America – and are interpreted at the level of surface rather than depth.<sup>4</sup> There is, in one sense, nothing to be seen in the American landscape. At one point the narrator takes photographs from the car window but discovers that his photos are mostly indistinguishable from each other. When he arrives in Indianapolis he states: “I didn’t want to see the city. As though it had disappointed me in advance and I already had enough of it ...” (*SL* 77). In another, postmodern, sense, however, this emptiness and indistinguishability is full of meaning: the signs which the narrator sees on his journey serve to confirm themselves as part of the mythical fiction ‘America’ in which the narrator believes (Nägele, “Amerika” 114).

America in *Short Letter* can also be identified as a postmodern myth in the sense that it represents a challenge to linear, rational thinking and rational individualism (Meurer 65). This challenge to

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar account of the postmodern aspects of the American landscape from a European perspective see Baudrillard (*America* 69-70, 95-99, 104-5).



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rationalism can be seen in that the depiction of nature in the novel has archaic, totemic qualities (Meurer 66). The American landscape, in the words of the painter in St. Louis, “‘had meaning only if something historical had happened in it. A giant oak tree in itself wasn’t a picture: it became a picture only in association with something else, for instance, if the Mormons had camped under it on their way to the Great Salt Lake’” (SL 101; Meurer 67). In this sense the child Benedictine epitomizes the postmodern myth of America, for when she saw one of these pictures “‘she never thought of asking whether there was really such a scene ... because the copy had replaced the original forever’” (SL 99).<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand the function of America as symbol in the novel, Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope, the fusion of space and time in literary images can be employed, whereby time seems to be frozen and space takes on a kind of emotional coloring (Brüggemann 5-6). In *Short Letter* the chronotope America functions as an ahistorical utopia in which “‘the unconnectedness of tangible things is transcended, where people and nature, present, past and future stand in a perceptible unity to each other’” (Brüggemann 135). The significance of the experience of the landscape through the journey, in other words, is to awaken in the narrator the awareness of the possibility of the connectedness of his individual perceptions, together with images from film, popular culture and literature, in an overall utopian unity called ‘America.’

The fact that many of the images of America presented in the novel stem from clichéd and stereotypical notions, such as the historical scenes depicted on the curtains in the hotel room in Providence (SL 18), the images produced by the painter in St Louis (SL 99-101), and the epiphanic experience of the Mississippi steamer (SL 102-3), has been interpreted by some critics as a sign of a deficiency of the novel: that the utopian myth presented consists of “‘highly

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<sup>5</sup>Baudrillard defines a “third order simulacrum,” characteristic of postmodernity, as a state where the sign “bears no relation to reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard, “Simulacra” 173).

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idealized (and thus to some degree falsified) representations of American history” (Elstun 145). This tendency towards cliché has been interpreted in two different ways. Firstly, it can be seen in terms of the therapeutic value of the images in the narrator’s inner development, in particular the process of overcoming alienation (Elstun 146). Secondly, it can be seen as a symptom of the uncritical, apolitical intentions of the author himself, leading to the creation of a “false atmosphere of kitsch,” especially in the final scene (Nägele, “Welt” 406; Nägele and Voris 54). Similarly, the kitsch-like nature of the America portrayed in the novel can be attributed to the author’s “overstating his case” in an attempt to distance himself from the dictates of an engaged European modernist literature, as in his critique of the *Gruppe 47* in Princeton (Fickert 40).

A further, more plausible view, however, is that the connection between literature, film and popular culture evident in *Short Letter* is part of a more general questioning of the notion of heroism and the possibilities of identification with heroic figures in the literature of the 1970s (Burdorf 233-34). The identification of the narrator with the heroes of popular culture such as those in John Ford’s films, is, in other words, a reaction against this loss. The risk of kitsch and artificiality in the deployment of images from popular culture is a risk which Handke is prepared to take to demonstrate that heroism, although not possible in the real world, is still possible, at least in fictional form, in the mythical world of American popular culture, through identification with the simplicity of the heroic film character (Burdorf 255).<sup>6</sup>

The key to this debate, perhaps, is the degree to which critics of Handke’s depiction of America are engaged in a misplaced criticism

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<sup>6</sup> In the interview with Hellmut Karasek, Handke addresses the criticism that, in pursuing these mythic images, he has ignored the present political reality of America, replying that his narrator strives not to use his perceptions of America as “pieces of circumstantial evidence” with which to construct a generalized condemnation of American society. Handke’s defence is a familiar indirect criticism of ‘engaged literature’ and its tendency, in his view, to use details merely to confirm a prior ideological conviction of the author (Karasek 89-90).

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of the novel's apparent lack of realism from the point of view of a modernist rather than a postmodernist aesthetic. A key area in this respect is the extensive use of intertextual references to film at two levels. Firstly, there are the numerous literal references to films, in particular the films of John Ford, such as *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939; *SL* 114-117). The narrator's fascination with sentimental Hollywood films such as this, which culminates in his pilgrimage to and conversation with the film's director, seems once again a reflection of "an obvious reversal of the agonised search for a reality beneath all the obfuscations of language which stands as the avowed goal of most 'serious' Austrian writing today" (Kersten 156). This belief that the superficial reality of the Hollywood film character is preferable to the search for a deep interior life seems to be borne out by the narrator's reactions to the characters in *Young Mr. Lincoln*: "The longer I watched, the more eager I became to meet only people like those in the picture; then I would never again have to pretend; like them I would be fully present in body and mind" (*SL* 114).

The surface presence of popular culture, such as in the Hollywood film character, is contrasted with the depth of the figures of European 'high' art, as in the conversation about the performance of Schiller's drama *Don Carlos* in St. Louis. For Claire, who seems to represent the voice which makes general statements about America and the American way of life (Nägele, "Amerika" 113), American historical figures, in contrast to those in Schiller's play, "haven't any biography, they're trademarks for what they did . . . , we're not interested in their lives" (*SL* 125). The dramaturge, in contrast, says of *Don Carlos*, "Schiller isn't portraying historical figures but himself; under their names, he acts out the adventures into which they themselves put so little charm and dignity" (*SL* 125). The figures of European drama, are, in other words, metaphorical – their surface presentation stands for something else at a deeper level. American characters (personified, for the narrator, by the Hollywood film character), on the other hand, have predominantly metonymic

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features: they refer simply to other signs at the surface level (Pakendorf 164).

The attraction of what, from a European modernist perspective, may seem to be the predictability and lack of depth of popular cultural genres such as the Hollywood film and detective fiction used in the novel seems to reside for Handke in the fact that within genres such as these the audience is aware of their fictionality: the fact that what they are seeing is a model and they thus know what to expect. Handke's preference for the genre film as opposed to the European art film seems to confirm this: "a film ... is already accepted as a model, in which every viewer accepts and indeed expects as a norm that everything depicted in the film is constructed" (Handke, "Elfenbeinturm" 84; Kersten 162).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more important for understanding the significance of popular culture in *Short Letter* is that it seems to fulfill a particular function for the narrator in that "he can confront feelings and circumstances, which in 'real life' he might dread, within the privileged, artificial world of the film viewer" (Kersten 155).

A second level of intertextual reference to film is Handke's tendency to use filmic techniques as a stylistic element. This is typified by Handke's tendency to privilege landscapes, moments and situations over past history of characters or development of story (Kersten 161). This can be traced not only in Handke's landscape depictions which are reminiscent of the cinematography of the road movies, but also in his illustration of epiphanic moments which have distinctive filmic qualities. The use of filmic qualities is a metafictional technique, by which one fictional technique, film, comments on another, the literary narrative, the former calling the latter into question (Kersten 156).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Kersten calls statements in which Handke seems to privilege commercial genre films above art films as a form of "inverted snobbery" in which he is attempting to distance himself from the pretensions of depth of some of his European contemporaries (156).

<sup>8</sup>Brüggemann also notes the influence of filmic elements in the novel, in particular in the development of the chronotope America. She sees the employment

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The importance of chronotopic moments of stasis in which time seems to stand still and space takes on a particular meaningfulness is epitomized in the so-called moments of epiphany within the text (*SL* 17-18, 26-27, 78-79, 102-103), which not only fulfill an important structural function but also mark important episodes in the narrator's inner development. The principal question about these episodes which has dominated much of the discussion of Handke's text is their literary ancestry as such.<sup>9</sup> More important for its interpretation, however, is the question of their phenomenological nature, and whether they have a progressive or retrogressive function within the narrative, in other words, whether they constitute an attempt by the narrator to escape from reality or in some way constitute a new reality.

Some critics have emphasized the mystical element of epiphanic experiences that constitute only a momentary escape from reality. The momentary nature of this escape, it is argued, is compensated for by the fact that this feeling of mystical oneness with the world can be extended beyond the momentary in the projected utopia of the closing scene (Bartmann 135). Other critics similarly locate the importance of these moments in relation to the utopia of a timeless, ahistorical dream of America as chronotope, the motif of the "golden age" realized at the end of the novel (Brüggemann 136).<sup>10</sup>

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of filmic techniques as a means of "depicting the inner space of the text as a model for the external space, America ... an inwardly directed symbol of the attempt to make a perception of reality understandable as a narrative" (141).

<sup>9</sup> Durzak locates the literary ancestry of these epiphanic episodes clearly in the tradition of literary modernism, originating in Joyce (115).

<sup>10</sup>Phenomenologically, Heintz sees the nature of these experiences as moments of new spontaneity, ahistorical and utopian in character, in which existing systems of meaning are suspended. These constitute a mystical "virginal" state in which the subject is given something as if a gift (123). Heintz questions the interpretation of the epiphanies as purely moments of mystical escape from the world, since the subject himself reflects on them, rejecting his own desire to escape from the world inherent in them (126-7; see also Marschall 47).

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The first of these episodes, the dice-throwing which occurs in a bar in Providence, consists, in the narrator's words, of an experience of "a time other than the time in which I ordinarily lived and thought backward and forward" (*SL* 17). The dimension of time is fused in this state with an experience of place, "places different from any present place, in which everything must have a different meaning than in my present consciousness" (*SL* 17), thus clearly indicating the closeness of the experience to the definition of chronotope (Brüggemann 8). The nature of the first epiphany as a moment of sudden unity of inner feeling and outer perception (Frietsch 59) seems to be accompanied by a feeling of inadequacy on the part of the narrator as regards his present life: "There had to be something more than the life I had been living up until now!" (*SL* 18).

A second epiphanic episode, in which the narrator observes two girls in a phone booth in New York, seems to confirm the interpretation of the epiphanies as a sudden unity of feeling and perception. Watching the girls' movements, he feels a "paradisical state of lightness, a state in which one has the desire to see, and in which to see is to know" (*SL* 27). While the first two episodes took place in a state of isolation and alienation for the narrator, the third takes place on his journey through America with Claire, and can be understood as part of a process of inner development which has begun. The third epiphany accordingly seems to indicate less of a desire to escape the world than a symbolic desire for intersubjectivity. The rhythm of the tree swaying in the breeze outside seems to be internalized in the narrator himself, resulting in an increasing identification with the object, the result of which is that "I ...forgot myself." (*SL* 78). That this forgetting of the self here is more a state of receptivity to the world rather than escape, is indicated by the "sense of will-less well-being" that he feels. The overcoming of the tendency to categorize perception, the "feeling that I no longer offered resistance," results in the realization that "I was superfluous" (*SL* 79). Place, seemingly important on the early part of the journey through America, has now become less important: "It no longer mattered to me where I was..." (*SL* 79). Here place seems

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superfluous in that the feeling of well-being generated by the “will-less” perception of the object is theoretically possible in any place (thus pointing forward to the utopian quality of ‘any place’).

The third epiphany is immediately put in this developmental context by means of a conversation between the narrator and Claire regarding Keller’s *Green Henry*. Claire criticizes the narrator’s tendency towards detachment from the world and categorization of experiences as similar to that of the protagonist of *Green Henry*: “‘He let experience pass before his eyes and never got involved’” (SL 80). The narrator agrees with her: “‘When I see something and it enters into my experience, I think, Yes, this is it. This is the new experience I needed!’” (SL 81). The tendency to see experiences, in other words, as part of a pre-ordained process of development, as in the novel, is recognized by Claire as a pre-judgement or categorization which prevents the narrator from really being present in his current environment. The third epiphany is important in relation to the aims of Handke’s poetics: that the poetic observation of the world (we must remember that the narrator is a writer) can only occur through letting something happen without intention rather than through an act of will (Marschall 49).<sup>11</sup>

In the subsequent reflections on his epiphanies and their significance, the narrator rejects the temptation inherent in them to enter “another world that I only had to enter to be rid at last of my fear-ridden nature and its limitations,” as he now perceives this as an

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<sup>11</sup>This utopian idea of the intentionless objective perception of the external world is likened by Kleist to a “value-neutral positivistic view of the world” in which criticism is misplaced (99-100). Surely the equation of this tendency with positivism is itself misplaced. Although Handke’s poetics certainly attempts to get to ‘the objects themselves’ rather than our pre-conceived notions of them, this does not imply a dismissal of metaphysics, as positivism does. In fact, the epiphanic experiences arguably often constitute a metaphysical imbue-ment of everyday objects. The reluctance to judge implicit in this, which, according to Kleist, ultimately results in “indifference” where nothing matters (102), could rather be seen as more a case of letting the objects speak through a breaking down of the concepts which surround them and which prevent them from impacting on us in a poetic way.

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“empty world” (SL 84).<sup>12</sup> The desire to escape to a place where there would be no limitations is now replaced by the desire to fit experiences “into an order and mode of life that would do me justice and enable others to do me justice” (SL 84).

The role of the epiphanies in the novel in the protagonist’s inner development seems to be concerned with finding “an order and mode of life” which does not involve the extremes of fear-dominated alienation, on the one hand, which has dominated his life up to now, or the escape into a timeless, placeless world envisioned in the first epiphany, on the other. What we see here is evidence of “the art of living in the everyday” (Barth 55), in which the subject can maintain his autonomy without either withdrawing from the world or being totally determined by it. In Handke’s works of the early 1970s we see the beginning of a theme which dominates Handke’s later works, culminating in *The Weight of the World* (1977) and later in *Versuch über den geglückten Tag* (*Essay on the Successful Day*) in the late 1980s (Barth 55). The narrator’s awareness here is of the need to find “a form of life of one’s own” (Winkelmann 145), a form of autonomy between alienation and the emptiness of withdrawal from the world. In this interpretation, the epiphanies would, therefore, constitute an extreme case within the narrator’s process of inner development, an “ecstatic feeling of being outside oneself” (Winkelmann 139), which acts as a counterbalance to his self-obsession and forms part of his development towards the desired goal of harmony with the outside world.

By the time we come to the fourth epiphany, the Mississippi steamer episode, we seem to have moved to a different kind of experience. Firstly, the actual geographical place is specified in greater detail and seems more important here than in the earlier

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<sup>12</sup>Marschall (48) argues that the narrator’s criticism of his own desire to escape from the world is called into question by the novel’s conclusion which recalls many of the epiphanic qualities of the earlier scenes, including the desire to return to an “other time.” This motif also recurs in later works, such as *A Moment of True Feeling* and *The Weight of the World*, albeit under different names.



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episodes. But rather than an actual place, the epiphany is dominated by the idea of the place as presented in film and popular American culture, and thus its mythical quality. The narrator is aware of both aspects of this – on the one hand, the poetic qualities of the image, on the other, the prosaic reality, namely that this is simply a tourist trap, full of tourists “holding beer cans, Coca-Cola bottles, and bags of popcorn” (*SL* 102). The theatricality of the experience, “in which the things around me ceased to be unrelated, and people and landscape, the living and the dead, took their places in a single painful and theatrical revelation of history” (*SL* 102), overrides the awareness of its artificiality. What differentiates this epiphany from the others, in other words, is that the distinction between surface and depth, kitsch and the genuine, between myth and reality, has been deconstructed by the narrator’s cumulative experience of America, a mythical America by means of which “people, things, landscapes are put into a certain order, brought into unity” (Frietsch 77). While in the first two epiphanies the sought after “place beyond place” or “time beyond time” existed in an abstract realm, here the mythical corresponds with an actual place, albeit a place whose very artificiality might appear to be the incarnation of the desire to escape from reality.

The epiphanic experiences in the novel, then, are not just and not primarily mystical moments of escape, but part of the narrator’s realization that fantasy and reality are inescapably interrelated (Renner 84). The utopian qualities of this intermixing of reality and fantasy in the fourth epiphany are carried forward into the final scene of the novel, which can be described as a fifth epiphany.

The relationship between the narrator and the two principal female characters in the novel, his estranged wife Judith and the woman who forms a counterbalance to this relationship, Claire, is the central character relationship of the novel.<sup>13</sup> Psychoanalytic

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<sup>13</sup>This relationship has been analyzed in psychoanalytic terms by Fulde for whom the novel constitutes the narrator’s “narcissistic attempt to come to terms with being left” by his wife (154). Her pursuit of him, whilst on the one hand provoking serious psychological reactions on his part, is, on the other, like “a

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interpretations of the novel concentrate on the threat Judith's sexuality represents to the narrator's enclosed world, resulting in the focus in their relationship having being on external objects rather than feelings (Fulde 157). In a key passage the narrator remembers that Judith had "no sense of time," relationship to money, or sense of direction, while he himself is almost obsessed with time: "I went to the phone almost every hour to find out what time it was" (SL 12). This can be interpreted in terms of a male/female dichotomy, in which the "sense of order" of the man is upset by the "sensuous and bodily" nature of the female (Fulde 158). On this interpretation, the threat which Judith's reappearance in America represents for the narrator, when he had thought to have "escaped" her, is a fear of his own sexuality, as shown in experiences such as his dream in New York (SL 22) and his attempt to approach a girl in the street (SL 29-30).

If his failed relationship with Judith represents an unacknowledged admission of fear of his own sexuality, then the narrator's relationship with Claire represents the opposite pole to this, where the woman is "de-personalized, robbed of her subjectivity," and behaves "according to his needs" (Fulde 161, 163). Claire fulfills the narrator's sexual needs in that "she never talked about herself, and it never occurred to me that there could be anything to say to her" (SL 47), meaning that he is then able to feel comfortable in talking about himself. Claire also takes on a confessional function: because he does not feel threatened by her sexuality he can confess the inadequacies of his earlier life with Judith (SL 105-111), and she can take on a role in his inner development, in particular through her analysis of his tendency to live his life according to the scheme of a *Bildungsroman*, as seen in the conversation about *Green Henry* (120-121). Similarly, the couple with whom Claire and the narrator stay in St. Louis functions within this framework to confirm the

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game between two people who are angry with each other, but can't quite give each other up" (Fulde 155), partly perhaps due to the nature of the playful intertextual references to the detective novel referred to above, partly due to the strange nature of their previous relationship as recounted by the narrator.

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problems with his earlier relationship with Judith. Their obsession with objects organized into a perfectly functioning system contrasts with the freedom he finds in the uncommitted relationship with Claire (*SL* 97; Schlueter 101).<sup>14</sup>

The problem of the narrator's autonomy in relation to this process of development raises the fundamental question whether the novel should primarily be seen as a *Bildungsroman* in the line of the classical German model. This sometimes sterile debate, which has occupied critics of the novel at length, takes its origin in the clear intertextual references to Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, Keller's *Green Henry* and Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*, the first two of which fit into the classical genre.<sup>15</sup> It has tended to revolve around the attempt at fitting Handke's novel into a literary genre. The three constitutive elements traditionally ascribed to the *Bildungsroman* can be identified as the experience of nature, the motif of the theatre, and the "developmental conversation," in which the central character is involved in a conversation with a formative character who changes his view of the world (Elm 354). While some evidence of these three elements can be found in *Short Letter*, the form in which they occur differentiates the novel from the traditional genre. As previously noted, the experience of nature does not fulfill its traditional formative role (Elm 356), firstly because of the narrator's own rural background and his hatred of nature, and the fact that the

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<sup>14</sup>Fulde sees the polarity in the narrator's own sexuality and projections of the female in the two figures Judith and Claire as an illustration of a deeper problem in Handke's work in general and his use of language in particular. Notwithstanding the validity of her critique of Handke's language in this novel and his work as a whole, she rightly points to a problem which brings us to the heart of the process of inner development in the novel: that the protagonist's autonomy is seen in terms of a dilemma of complete inwardness on the one hand, and a total surrendering to the outside world (heteronomy) on the other. (The narrator's?) Sexuality constitutes a major aspect.

<sup>15</sup>The focus of this debate has been Handke's remark that what he had wanted to portray in the novel was "the fiction of a developmental novel ...that one could gradually develop in such a way [as portrayed in such novels]" (Karasek 88).

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binary opposition of nature and civilization, has been deconstructed in the postmodern American setting of the novel.

Theatre has a place in the novel in the performance and discussion of *Don Carlos*, but the theatrical experience here has a function opposite to that in the *Bildungsroman* – the narrator here wants to escape the role-playing of the stage, and prefers the metonymic surface of American film characters to the metaphoric depth of stage characters (Elm 362). The novel does contain a “developmental conversation,” in the form of the conversation with John Ford at the end of the novel, but although Ford does take the role of the “wise old man” giving advice as in the traditional model (Elm 367), there is no direct didacticism, nor apparent Enlightenment ideal of harmonization.<sup>16</sup>

More important than debating whether the novel fits a specific literary genre, however, seems the question whether the protagonist progresses toward Handke’s ideal state of autonomy and what this state is. As the narrator’s reading of the literary models of the *Bildungsroman* demonstrates, development “as portrayed in these models” is not possible for him. What is still possible, however, is development abstracted from its concrete literary representation (which is presumably what Handke meant in his comment). The narrator’s reading of the novels is something which he is less and less able to apply directly to his life, but his very freeing himself from this tendency seems to open himself to possibilities of development in relation to the world which he inhabits.<sup>17</sup> The narrator’s

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<sup>16</sup>The lack of concreteness of a utopian ideal propagated by John Ford at the end of the novel leads Elm to categorize it more as a “socially-conscious contemporary novel” than a *Bildungsroman* (372).

<sup>17</sup>Heintz rightly points to the parallels here with *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, where the narrator’s mother, on being recommended books by her son as part of his role in her “character formation,” finds she cannot apply what she has learned from them directly in her life (118). The mother’s failure, at least as attributed to her by the narrator-son, mirrors the narrator’s attempt in *Short Letter* to live purely according to a literary model. Nägele speaks in this respect of a “misunderstanding” of the *Bildungsroman* by the narrator, which is “con-

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reading of the *Bildungsroman*, then, is a dialectical process: the recognition of the need for a fictional model of development, only to realize the necessity of distancing himself from the model presented (Nägele and Voris 54). The importance of the *Bildungsroman* lies not at the level of content, but at a metafictional level: it constitutes a possible narrative to which the novel makes intertextual reference to show the necessity of the construction of such a narrative in the narrator's own life (Pakendorf 170). This acceptance of the necessity of finding a way of narrating one's life is only realized at the end when John Ford asks Judith (who, significantly, takes over the narrative role in this scene, thus making the story which has been related just as much their story as his): "Is that all true ... None of it's made up?," and she replies: "No, ..., it all happened" (SL 167).<sup>18</sup>

The nature of the final scene itself has called forth various interpretations from the critics. The figure of John Ford is highly stylized and aptly described as a "dying Messiah" to whom the relationship of the narrator and Judith is that of disciples (Burdorf 255). The pedagogical role of Ford consists of opposing the European concept of the egotistical self with the American concept of "we". America, as represented here, then, is the realization of the intersubjective utopia envisaged by the narrator in the Mississippi steamer epiphany, "the experience of a unity of people, nature, present, past and future" (Brüggemann 135). This is amplified by the description of the landscape of Bel Air, Los Angeles, which, Ford says, gives him "a feeling of eternity," in which he forgets "that there's such a thing as history" (SL 162). The landscape description has clear epiphanic or chronotopic elements which place it in the line of development of the previous epiphanic moments in the novel.

Once again, although this landscape might appear to be an idyllic idealization of pure nature at the expense of civilization,

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sistent with his character," namely that he sees self-development as only taking place at the risk of loss of self (Nägele, "Welt" 404).

<sup>18</sup>Durzak (108) interprets Judith's reply as indicating the "moral truth of the depiction" implicit in the narrative and thus equivalent in function to the narrator's claims in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* of authenticity in the act of writing.

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Ford is aware of the artificiality of the landscape. When Judith points out that the oranges trees which Ford has just described as if an idyll of nature are in fact planted, he replies that “[w]hen the sun shines through and plays in the leaves, I forget that” (SL 162). The utopian landscape depicted, in other words, as the myth of America in general, might be a fiction, a utopia without any definite content (Elm 371-72), but it is one which is aware of its own fictionality and artificiality.<sup>19</sup> This is further emphasized by the fact that Ford talks about his own stories, his films, as if they were true: “Nothing is made up, ... It all really happened” (SL 165). What counts, and this could be a motto for the novel in general, is that the story is told and that its narrator testifies to its possibility, whether unrealistic utopia or not.

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If America in *Short Letter, Long Farewell* represents for Handke a utopia, a place where possibilities of the future are opened up for the individual, then the setting for *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, the Austrian rural environment of Carinthia, from which Handke himself originates, could almost be said to be its equivalent dystopia. This is a place where no such possibilities of individuality and freedom exist, where the environment as depicted determines the life chances of the individual to such an extent that there is seemingly no possibility of escape. Where physical escape is not possible, as it was in the case of the narrator of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* and also its author, escape by suicide, as in the case of his mother, seems the only alternative.

If ‘Austria’ as dystopia is a dominant theme in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* it is also, although in the background, an important theme of *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, in the sense that there the narrator’s Austrian background serves a geographical correlate for the “poverty of experience and isolation” of his childhood (Gabriel

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<sup>19</sup> This fact makes the criticism of Handke by Fickert, that the utopia presented is artificial because it is “an esoteric rather than a practical experience” (40) surely invalid, as it would certainly not be part of Handke’s view of the task of literature to present such a practical utopia.

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61).<sup>20</sup> The geographical and mental distance of the narrator of *Short Letter, Long Farewell* from his homeland makes it in one sense easier for him to deal with its negative effects (Gabriel 63). In *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* the narrator has to confront his past and the constellation of problems which surround this in a much more direct way through the death of his mother.<sup>21</sup>

In *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* the narrator's unresolved mental conflict regarding his homeland is reflected in his depiction of his mother's life, which is characterized by a "deterministic pathos" (Mecklenburg 110). The narrator's negative feelings towards his homeland, in other words, are projected onto his mother in the sense that she is allowed no possibility of autonomy given the overwhelming determining influence of the place of her birth. Handke's portrayal of these determining circumstances in his account of her life, it has been argued, is thus characterized by "abstractness" and a failure to question underlying social and historical realities dialectically (Mecklenburg 119-20). Although the basis of this critique might seem to be that Handke has not in fact written the social realist novel he seems to have set out to write given his choice of subject matter (and that although it *appears* that the narrator wishes to examine his own background through that of

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<sup>20</sup> I place 'Austria' in inverted commas here to indicate that Handke, in common with a succession of postwar Austrian writers such as Thomas Bernhard and Gerhard Roth is in this work seeking a dialogue not just with Austria as a geographical location but with its history and the inability of present-day Austria to come to terms with it, although Handke here deals with this in a much less polemical and overtly political fashion than the latter two writers.

<sup>21</sup> This constellation of problems surrounding the narrator's rural Austrian childhood and the biography of his mother is placed by Mecklenburg in the context of the wider literary phenomenon of "province" or "regionalism" (105), in other words the tendency of postwar writers from the provinces of Austria to have ambivalent feelings towards their "homeland." Handke, as with other writers to whom this phenomenon refers, has, in his work as a whole, Mecklenburg argues, feelings which oscillate between abuse and insult on the one hand and an idealized affirmation on the other (106, 108).

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his mother he has not in fact done so), it does point to the importance of the relationship between individual autonomy, social circumstances and place in the novel.

The determinism of place is introduced in the first sentence of the mother's life story: "Well then, it began with my mother being born more than fifty years ago in the same village where she died" (*SBD* 6). Although she has for intermittent periods lived away from the village, the circumstances into which she was born have accompanied her and ultimately brought her back to the same place in which she will die. Handke's explanation of this determinism given three pages later appears to place the reasons for this primarily in her position as a woman: "For a woman to be born into such surroundings was in itself deadly. But perhaps there was one comfort: no need to worry about the future... No possibilities, it was all settled in advance" (*SBD* 9-10). It appears, therefore, that Handke is attributing the reasons for the determinism as lying in the social role of the woman, an assumption backed up by his almost sociological examination of the role of women in rural Austrian society which follows.<sup>22</sup> That the pre-determined nature of the woman's role in this society is apparently the main element of this determinism is further emphasized by the children's' game which Handke quotes "based on the stations in a woman's life: Tired/Exhausted/Sick/Dying/Dead" (*SBD* 10).

This apparent new-found realism in the novel has led some commentators to see Handke's project as almost a form of historical/social documentation of the role of women, which seems to fit ill with the writer's previous avowed dislike for 'engaged' writing (Handke 'Elfenbeinturm' 35-50). This prompted one critic to say that in writing *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* Handke had "come to his senses" (Heintz 59). The realism adopted in the novel,

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<sup>22</sup> Wigmore, for instance, argues: "Although Handke's account of his mother's life cannot be regarded as a direct product of the women's movement, it was nevertheless largely in tune with the attitudes which developed out of the newfound interest in women's lives and women's history then emerging in feminist circles in western Europe" (9).



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however, is of a different nature from Lukácsian realism. Although he uses the requisites of everyday life to portray the circumstances of the mother's life, Handke describes these using a strategy of "linguistic defamiliarization" (Miles 377) (for example by the capitalization of adjectives) which, while giving us access to the mother's mind and the stereotypes which determine it in a 'realistic' mode, at the same time show the narrator's distance from these ways of thinking, resulting in a "systematic dis-illusionment" of the reader (Miles 377).

Although social milieu, specifically that of the role of women, does play a major part in Handke's depiction of his mother's life, it is not the only or the major part of the depiction of the determinism of life chances. The principal element is what we could call a 'meta-physics of place.' In addition to the social circumstances, it seems in Handke's depiction that place itself and the form of life which is possible in it has an equally if not more important part in this determinism. This is evident in Handke's depiction, for instance, of the passage of time in the village, which

... was marked by church festivals, slaps in the face for secret visits to the dance hall, fits of envy directed against her brothers, and the pleasure of singing in the choir. Everything else that happened in the world was a mystery; no newspapers were read except the Sunday bulletin of the diocese, and then only the serial (*SBD* 10-11).

In other words, the place, its rhythms, lack of activity and isolation (what Mecklenburg calls "provincialism"), means that desires and feelings have to adapt to it. Handke emphasizes this by his description of how, in this environment, one's inner character becomes a 'mirror' of the outside world:

Rain-sun; outside-inside: feminine feelings were very much dependent on the weather, because "outside" was seldom

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allowed to mean anything but the yard and “inside” was invariably the house, without a room of one’s own. ...

No possibility of comparison with a different way of life: richer? less hemmed in? (*SBD* 11)

We see clearly here the same determinism of place which characterized the memories of the Austrian childhood of the narrator of *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, a dystopia in which ‘nature’ has no idyllic qualities, forcing the subject to adapt to it. The full force of this determinism is implicit in the German title of *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, *Wunschloses Unglück*: the environment forces the individual to suppress desires and wishes in order to fit in.

That these reflections on place are clearly colored by the consciousness of a narrative voice which itself has escaped this environment is evident despite the apparent analytic nature of the description of his mother’s life. The point of view of the ‘outsider’ is one which the mother is also potentially able to adopt, at least temporarily, as she moves from the rural environment to the town or city, once to a provincial city and later to postwar Berlin. The city brings with it the possibility of autonomy, of life as an individual: “In the city my mother had thought she had found a way of life that more or less suited her, that at least made her feel good” (*SBD* 20). Beginning to think as an autonomous individual in the city, however, is something which cannot be taken with her when she returns to the rural environment: “In this rural, Catholic environment, any suggestion that a woman might have a life of her own was an impertinence: disapproving looks, until shame, at first acted out in fun, became real and frightened away the most elementary feelings” (*SBD* 20).

Life in Berlin, although affected by the difficulties of life in the aftermath of the war, still gives her the freedom to find an identity denied in her home environment. Her rural background, however, sets her apart from other city dwellers. Her desire to find an identity in the city leads her, instead of becoming a true autonomous individual, “to become, not a different person, but a TYPE: to

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change ...from a country bumpkin to a city person... In thus becoming a type, she felt freed from her own history..." (*SBD* 25-6). Although she, in the narrator's view, may have been deceiving herself regarding the freedom she had in Berlin, when she returns to her native environment, she nevertheless brings with her certain characteristics of the city-dweller: "She no longer took any nonsense from anyone. In the old days her only reaction had been a bit of back talk; now she laughed" (*SBD* 32). Her period in the city on the one hand gives her something which sets her apart from the others in the village; on the other, the new-found autonomy makes it doubly difficult for her to obey the dictates of conformity which she was able to accept more readily before her period away.

Handke's depiction of the possibility of development in his mother's life is an important aspect of his desire to maintain, in the face of all the pessimistic realism of his deterministic portrayal of her circumstances, the possibility of autonomy. Firstly, Handke does not wish to write in the genre of a 'Mutterroman,' in which the individual life of the mother is seemingly totally determined by external circumstances, and which, as the narrator describes it in one of the passages of self-reflection in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, becomes a "literary ritual in which an individual life ceases to be anything more than a pretext" (*SBD* 28).<sup>23</sup>

The key factor in the way Handke portrays his mother's life vis-à-vis autonomy and individuality seems to be the question, subject to extensive reflections within the text, of *how* to portray the life of

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<sup>23</sup> Wieshahn attempts to classify the novel into this very category, comparing Handke's novel unfavourably with other novels in this genre, on the basis that for Handke, "self-realization (of his mother – RH insertion) is difficult, if not impossible to reconcile with serving others" (41). Handke's attachment to a model of individual autonomy which cannot be reconciled with a role-based relationship to others, in other words, means that the only assertion of individuality possible is through suicide, which is seen positively by Handke (Wieshahn, 49). Wieshahn attributes this aspect of the mother/son relationship to "bias in gender socialization" (48). Handke, in other words, as her son, cannot see that his mother's life, despite its restrictions, might have been worth living because of her role as a mother and through her relationships with others.

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an individual. The mother, despite her life being almost totally determined by external circumstances, is still an individual, not just, as Handke puts it in his criticism of Karin Struck's *Die Mutter*, "a person cheated out of their life by their being allotted a role" (Handke quoted by Bohn 147). A work of literature which just aimed to show that external circumstances determined by social role were solely responsible for the tragedy would just be a confirmation of what the reader already knew and therefore would be, in Handke's view, "without poetry" (Handke quoted by Bohn 147). What differentiates *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* from a 'Mutterroman,' in other words, is that, despite the determinism, the author wants to depict her as an individual whose life is a potential poetic subject, and thus maintain the autonomy of the work of literature. However, in order to justify the use (the choice of word is important here) of the biography and death of his own mother as an *aesthetic* subject in this way, the narrator must reflect on the *ethical* validity of his own writing, and these reflections form an integral part of the novel.

A further controversial element of Handke's portrayal of his mother's life is that she is depicted as experiencing a period of freedom and self-realization in the very period in Austria's history when individual freedom was being suppressed, the Nazi period or 'Anschluß.' Handke appears, therefore, to be saying, some critics have argued, that, as far as women were concerned, fascism contained emancipatory elements in that it freed women such as Maria Handke from the confines of the life they had lived before (Schindler 41). The question is whether, in portraying his mother's new found freedom as corresponding to this period, Handke is not just putting forward a coincidence but a "causal relationship" between the two (Schindler 45). Handke portrays his mother as someone who "went along with (fascism – RH insertion) opportunistically" (Schindler 48) rather than someone who understood anything about the political significance of the events.

What may appear on the surface to be a favorable portrayal of aspects of fascism in the novel could, when viewed in terms of the

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novel's strategy of "systematic disillusionment," in fact be read as a condemnation of the conditioning of people in pre-fascist rural Austria which made people like Maria Handke susceptible to its 'attractions.' The fact that, due to her background, she has no conception of herself as an individual before fascism means that we could interpret the sentence: "That period helped my mother to come out of her shell and become independent" (*SBD* 15) first and foremost not as claiming that fascism had positive aspects, but that, given the poverty of her existence until then, even this period, at least at the level of her individual story, constituted a certain period of independence in comparison to what went before and what will come after.

This leads us to the question of the depiction of the relationship between the individual and history in general in the novel. As said above, Handke does not wish to portray an individual life such as his mother's in such a way that "an individual life ceases to be anything more than a pretext." The relationship between history and individual story, in other words, is one in which the individual life (or lack of it, as in the case of Handke's mother) is paramount, and the latter cannot just be deduced from the movements of history. *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* shows "a strong aversion against the conception of the individual as a historically determined entity" (Schmidt-Dengler 260). Despite the apparent determinism of historical circumstances, in other words, there is always some element of potential autonomy which emerges from this, "individual history against general history" (Schmidt-Dengler, 262), which does not mean denial of the latter. Handke's intention in the novel in this respect has been termed a "post-ideological aesthetics," the desire, not to analyze and explain in terms of ideological categories (as, in Handke's critique, an 'engaged' literature might attempt to do), but to write "from the point of view of a silent and excluded minority" (Konzett 44). The lack of a language in which self expression can take place is countered by the attempt to tell this as a yet unexpressed narrative: "Handke's subjectivist account should not be understood as an escapist withdrawal from society's pressing needs

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but as a partial and necessary attempt to personalize societal suffering so as to make it real" (Konzett 47).

The period of fascism and the depiction of the mother either as a passive "fellow traveler" or active participant illustrates a more general theme within the novel, that of the antithesis of conformity and rebellion which determines the structure of the mother's life (Stoffel 43, 51). This antithesis ultimately results in the possible interpretation of the mother's suicide as either an act of conformity or a final expression of her individuality, or both. A key passage in this respect is that describing the preparations for her suicide (*SBD* 61-63). The description of her preparations for suicide could be seen as "voyeuristic" in the sense that Handke spares no details from the reader (Paver 469). The methodical nature of her preparations, writing letters to husband and son, her journey to the town to get the supply of sleeping pills, putting on clothing to ensure that her suicide does not cause unnecessary 'mess,' could be interpreted as "an act of cruelty," "an act of compassion and love," or "an act of protest" (Paver 469). The degree of authenticity in representing the body of the mother in this scene and the following one in which the son is present at the deathwatch before her funeral (*SBD* 64-65) could be seen as exposing her to the "gaze of his readership" (Paver 468), once again posing the ethical question of the justification of Handke's aestheticization of his mother.

The central narratological problem of the novel can thus be seen as the reconciliation of the individual (the dignity of the mother) and the general (depicting this in a way in which the readership will find interesting) (Bohn 144). This conflict is reflected in the apparent desire, expressed by the narrator from the outset, for authenticity: to relate the truth regarding his mother's life, notwithstanding the pain this might cause her son in relating it. This desire for truth is expressed in a continual debate about the ethics of writing itself and the adequacy of language to express this truth.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The general narratological problem raised here, that of truth telling in ethical narratives, that is narratives seemingly motivated by a strong confessional

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The “crisis of language” in this novel as evident in these reflections differs in nature from that in Handke’s earlier work in that linguistic skepticism is not employed here as a formal quality of innovation, but as part of the drive for authenticity (Göttsche 279-280). The narrator’s reflections on the legitimacy of his language are directed towards the reader – to convince him/her of the authenticity of the narrator’s search for truth.

Another possible line of interpretation of the narrative position, one which seems to be backed up by the nature of these reflections themselves, is their *therapeutic* function, that of the narrator’s dealing with his own grief and speechlessness on hearing the news of his mother’s suicide (*SBD* 3) (Sergooris 66). The opening reflections of the narrator seem to back up this interpretation in that they show him writing in the face of overwhelming grief. On the one hand he has doubts about the communicability of these experiences: “I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable; only then can the horror seem meaningful and real” (*SBD* 4). On the other, he has a seemingly ‘heroic’ will to detach himself from this grief and narrate the events: “Now that I’ve begun to write, these states seem to have dwindled and passed because I try to describe them as accurately as possible” (*SBD* 5). The use of the word “accurately” (‘genau’ in the original German) here is significant in describing this ‘heroic’ attempt of the narrator, because at the end of the novel, using the same word, he apparently admits that this attempt has failed, deferring the delivery of the truth which his ethical narrative promised at the beginning: “Someday I shall write about all this in greater detail” (*SBD* 70).<sup>25</sup> The opening self-justification of writing

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desire to tell an ethical truth, has been the subject of theoretical reflection by theorists in the deconstructive tradition. See Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 1982, and J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*, 1989.

<sup>25</sup> The translator renders the German word “genau,” – “Genauerer” in this context – as “in greater detail,” whereas, if we translate the first occurrence of “genau” as “accurate” in the sense of the narrative having the aim of reaching

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(and what, as argued above, is ultimately an 'aestheticization' of his mother's life) contains, then, all the elements of an ethical struggle to deliver the truth.

This 'heroic' stance taken by the narrator seems to indicate that there is here no distance between authorial self and narrator: it sounds as if the author himself is speaking directly, a premise which seems to have mostly been accepted in the secondary literature (Kreyenberg and Lipjes-Türr 125).<sup>26</sup> This tendency to take the narrator's words as representative of the author's own attempt to deal with his feelings, a purely 'therapeutic' interpretation turns the novel into a psychological case study of the son and his own inability to come to terms with the difficulties in his relationship with her, rather than a case study of the mother.<sup>27</sup> It is possible, in contrast to such 'therapeutic' interpretations, to see the narrator's 'heroism,' the will to truth and objectivity of the son so emotionally affected by the death of his mother, rather than an indication of an identity between author and narrator, as a demonstration of "an immense distance" between them (Mauser 88).

This distance relates to the narrator's professed intention to describe his mother's life with the necessary 'objectivity,' meaning that he must be modest in the sense that he can write about her, not

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an ethical truth, then rendering the second instance of "genau" in the final sentence as "more accurately" would convey with more force that the narrator has failed to meet his own ethical intentions. Bohn seems to concur in this line of interpretation of the "exactness" or "accuracy" which the text seeks (162).

<sup>26</sup> The notable exception to this is Mauser, who points out that if we accept this simple equivalence, "the first person narrator is understood as a figure who acts as a representative of the author in recalling a mother-son relationship burdened by problems" (88).

<sup>27</sup> Love's interpretation in particular is one which foregrounds the question of the narrator's identification or lack of it with his mother. Love sees the scene in which the narrator sees his mother lying on the bed looking at him, "as if I were her BROKEN HEART" (*SBD* 52), as "a moment of exception" to the general rule that his attempt to identify with her ultimately fails (143). Rey, on the other hand, sees the identification of the mother with the son implicit in this scene as evidence that he is "the only person who understands her" (294).



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because he identifies emotionally with her plight, but simply because “I think I know more about her than any outside investigator who might, with the help of a religious, psychological, or sociological guide to the interpretation of dreams, arrive at a facile explanation of this interesting case of suicide” (SBD 5). The irony of the distancing here sets the scene for the tone of the depiction which follows – a continual movement between the emotional identification necessary to understand her as a human being and the autonomy deemed necessary to fulfill the demands of objectivity as a writer. This fluctuation is reflected throughout the novel in the use of “man” (literally “one” in English – usually rendered in translation by impersonal or passive constructions) and “she” (Rey 299). On the one hand the impersonal “man” is used by the narrator to depict the norms and rituals of the provincial rural society from the distance of an “outsider” (Rey 299), such as in the following passage:

Christmas: necessities were packaged as presents. We surprised each other with such necessities as underwear, stockings and handkerchiefs, and the beneficiary said he had WISHED for just that! (SBD 36)

The latter part of the story, in which the mother’s increasing awareness of herself as an individual is accompanied by despair that those around her, with the exception of her son, do not understand this, is accompanied by a move from the impersonal “man” to the personal “sie” in the narrator’s descriptions of her.

There is also a third level of distancing and identification expressed in the text, which refers to a “common ground” not based on “social norm,” but on “something common to all human beings” (Rey 300), as expressed in the narrator’s reflections on the pain of the mother’s death at the beginning of the novel. When others express their sympathy at his grief, he says, “I would turn away or cut the sympathizer short, because I need the feeling that what I am going through is incomprehensible and incommunicable” (SBD 4).

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By substituting the impersonal “one” in a literal translation of the German here we get a full understanding of the distancing involved in the use of the impersonal. The use of “man” implies that anyone, faced with the incomprehensibility and incommunicability of his/her own grief, would view others’ sympathy as inadequate. On the other hand, as everyone would, in their own case, feel that same incommunicable grief, that grief becomes paradoxically communicable. The narrator must thus assert his autonomy and distance from other human beings (including the reader) in order, at the end of the novel, to re-connect with them.

We have, then, a seeming contradiction in relation to language at the very heart of the novel: the experience which the narrator wants to communicate is defined from the outset as incommunicable; language, the only vehicle by which this feeling can be communicated, is defined as inadequate to the task. This paradox expresses itself at the end of the novel, where the narrator has to admit failure<sup>28</sup>:

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<sup>28</sup> Critics have interpreted this apparent ‘failure’ of the project of writing defined at the beginning of the novel in various ways. Some have emphasized the ending of the novel in relation to the role of linguistic crisis in Handke’s earlier works. Sergooris sees the ending as representing a “literary overcoming of the speechlessness which (in his previous works) had led to a passive sterility” (77). For Rey, the failure of the act of writing is a confirmation that the process of narration is an “endless process” which must go beyond the end of the novel (293). Nägele and Voris, similarly, see the failure of the therapeutic narrative as positive in the sense that the attempt to overcome fear must go on (60). Love, on the other hand, basing her interpretation on the premise that the primary function of the narrative is its therapeutic dimension, argues that its failure means that “the classical claim of art (to express truth) is called into question” (145). Varsava sees the narrator’s admission of failure at the end though his self-admission of being a “liar” nevertheless to have “achieved something more than dissimulation through his admission” (121), thus confirming the importance of the confessional aspect of the narrative, a confession of failure having more impact than would a claim to have fulfilled his aim.

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It is not true that writing has helped me. ... Writing has not, as I first supposed, been a remembering of a concluded period in my life, but a constant pretense at remembering, in the form of sentences that only lay claim to detachment. (*SBD* 66)

The realization that the “process of postponement” of the truth which the end of the novel represents is not just a failed or postponed therapeutic “work of mourning,” but a realization that writing itself necessarily represents a process of deferral: that the inability to capture the truth is in fact the basis of writing as such (Renner 86), opens up the possibility of the development of an interpretation of the novel from a deconstructionist perspective, in which the nature of the act of writing and its relationship to the truth is foregrounded. The nature of writing, according to Derrida, is ‘différance’:

The sign is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and (is) moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to re-appropriate. (Derrida ‘Différance’ 61)

Writing, in other words, by its nature cannot fully capture the presence of the phenomenon being described, where this is conceived as full presence or the logos, it can only differ from and defer this presence (both meanings present in Derrida’s French term). The inability of writing to capture presence, however, seen by the tradition which Derrida describes as “logocentric” as a reason to condemn writing, is, from Derrida’s point of view, not negative but positive – it is the very reason for writing itself.<sup>29</sup>

In *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, we can argue that what the narrator is trying to capture in writing is the “presence” of his mother, a presence which, as said earlier, is defined from the outset as incommunicable in language. It is a hopeless task, moving from

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<sup>29</sup> See Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1986).

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the narrator's "speechlessness" after the news of her death (*SBD* 3), through his admission that "At best, I am able to capture my mother's story for brief moments in dreams...the moments...in which extreme need to communicate coincides with extreme speechlessness" (31), to his final admission of failure (66). Although, in his own words, writing has "failed" to capture the presence of his mother, his realization at the end of the novel is that this is a failure which is in the nature of writing itself: it differs from and defers the presence that it is trying to appropriate. Writing must nevertheless continue, the attempt to capture this presence has been deferred, but will continue: "Someday I shall write about this in greater detail" (*SBD* 70).

The failure of the act of writing in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, when thus viewed from a deconstructionist or post-structuralist perspective, confirms that for Handke, in writing, "the important point is not what is written *about* but what is produced by the *act* of writing" (Klinkowitz and Knowlton 55). It is not as a failed attempt to describe reality but part of an (implicitly incomplete) act of writing that the book should be seen.

Both *Short Letter, Long Farewell* and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* share the pre-occupation with the relationship between the individual, place and autonomy which forms an important characteristic of Handke's later work. Place has a key role in the development of autonomy and the inner development of the protagonist of both novels, either in the form of a dystopia to be escaped from, or a utopia which incorporates all the perceived freedom lacking in the former. The ultimate importance of place within Handke's poetics, however, lies in the process by which, through overcoming the tendency to prejudge and categorize perception, alienation can be overcome and the self opened up to the poetic possibilities implicit in the everyday world.

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