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Abstract

Theatre, for Handke, has neither object nor subject. concepts, values, functional systems of signification, verifiable contents are non-existent in *Kaspar*. Words alone are of import; they alone create reality.

Words, therefore, and not subjective evaluations of them, are acceptable to Handke. Comparisons, associations, metaphors, or references prevent people from dealing directly with the object itself (the *signified*), inviting them to have recourse to a "system of differences," to use Derrida's expression, thus contrasting or modifying one with the other. Evaluation breeds buffers and hierarchies; it encourages people to rank or compute ideas, notions, or feelings, and therefore prolong illusionism. Reality is not approached forthrightly, but rather experienced through a system of signs—a cultural product.

This study aims at discovering Handke's innovative and challenging ideas concerning his manner of subverting conventional systems of relationships and comparisons. Words and figures of speech, as used in *Kaspar*, are mechanical devices endowed with concretion. Hard, unyielding, feelingless, these machine-like abstractions bludgeon into submission, cutting and dismantling well-worn responses to old ways of thinking and understanding. How the dramatist accomplishes his goals is analyzed.

Keywords

Peter Handke, object, subject, concepts, values, functional systems of signification, system, systems, verifiable contents, content, *Kaspar*, word, words, subjective evaluations, Comparisons, associations, metaphors, references, object, signified, signifier, system of differences, difference, differences, Derrida, contrasting, modifying, buffers, hierarchies, evaluation, rank, compute, ideas, idea, notion, notions, feeling, feelings, illusionism, signs, cultural product, experience, experienced, innovative, challenging ideas, manner, subverting, conventional, relationship, relationships, words, figures of speech, mechanical devices, concretion, dramatist, drama, play

Peter Handke's *Kaspar*: The Mechanics of Language—a Fractionating Schizophrenic Theatrical Event

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Peter Handke's play *Kaspar* (1968) is an example neither of Theatre of the Absurd nor Anti-Theatre. It does not follow traditional concepts of conventional drama, since it is neither representational nor descriptive. Absent as well are plot, characters, tension, coherence, connecting processes, and meanings of words as we understand them. A spectator, therefore, must not compare stage reality with the reality he or she knows. Events represent themselves—no more, no less.

Theatre, for Handke, has neither object or subject. Concepts, values, functional systems of signification, verifiable contents are non-existent in *Kaspar*. Words alone are of import; they alone create reality. The *signifying* (word) assumes a life outside of the *signified* (object). Handke writes: "The play *Kaspar* does not show how IT REALLY IS OR REALLY WAS with Kaspar Hauser. It shows what is POSSIBLE with someone. It shows how someone can be made to speak through speaking. The play could be called *Speech-Torture*.¹

Words, therefore, and not subjective evaluations of them, are acceptable to Handke. Comparisons, associations, metaphors, or referents, he suggests, prevent people from dealing directly with the object itself (the *signified*), inviting them to have recourse to a "system of differences," to use Derrida's expression, thus contrasting or modifying one with the other. Evaluation breeds buffers and hierarchies; it encourages people to rank or compute ideas, notions or feelings, and therefore prolong illusionism. Reality is not approached forthrightly, but rather experienced through a *system of signs*—a cultural product.²

Kaspar is innovative and challenging because it subverts the conventional system of relationships and comparisons. Words and figures of speech, as used in *Kaspar*, have become mechanical devices endowed with concretion. Hard, unyielding, without feeling,

they bludgeon into submission, cutting and dismantling well-worn responses to old ways of thinking and understanding. New dimensions emerge for the protagonist in Handke's drama, but they also undermine his security and create a climate of malaise. Feelings of oneness and cohesion are transformed into *fractionality*, triggering havoc in mind and psyche and ushering in a schizophrenic condition.

Handke—like the Cubists, who split objects and figures and reduced them to their basic geometric forms—“divides in two” or “shatters” or “dismantles” both language and protagonist in *Kaspar*. The breakdown of traditional verbal sequences, the severing of the conventional word-feeling dialectic, endows each morpheme with its own identity and independent value. Like the Cubists, Handke is an artist in control of his material: the chaos or disorder implicit in his play is willed and directly distilled from the expressions he chooses to use.

The fact that Handke looks upon the word as a *thing in and of itself* liberates it from a central consciousness but, by the same token, also invites it to develop its own potential. Its direction, then, is its own and not dependent upon something else. Because there is no supreme guiding principle, no dictatorial force, to show the words their way, a point of focus, in keeping with our logo-centered Western concepts, is lacking.

The passage from *oneness*, or traditional use of language, to *dispersion*, freeing the word from former definitions, has significant psychological ramifications. Just as the once whole and coherent sentence has been broken down syntactically into disparate and frequently unrelated parts, so, too, has the personality. Once functioning under the aegis of an ego-complex, considered the “seat of an individual's experience of subjective identity,” the personality was related to its parts through a central consciousness. Such self-containedness becomes fractured in *Kaspar*.³ The word, considered as a thing in and of itself, gives up its once sacrosanct associational meaning to the other morphemes in the clause or sentence. Likewise, the authority of the supreme consciousness or transcendent order within the psyche is broken down. The formerly all-powerful ego-complex has yielded its powers to individual egos; as autonomous entities, they live out their existence as each sees fit. Such split-offs from the ego dynamic can only encourage psychological fractionalization and the ensuing schizophrenia.

The problem of language that holds Handke in thrall is melded into the very framework of the play: it becomes its *prima materia*. Influenced by the Viennese-born Ludwig Wittgenstein, who suggested that people's problems usually begin and end with language, Handke focuses on language as a system and as a mechanical power. Instrumental in creating order or arrangements, language as an automating force has the capacity to dominate, dictate, and more often than not, to destroy individuals and societies.⁴

Handke tells us that his character's name, *Kaspar*, is based on a historical figure, Kaspar Hauser, who arrived in Nuremberg in 1828 at the age of sixteen. At first, no one knew where he had come from or anything about him. In time, it was discovered that he had been raised in a closet, far from human contact. He spoke only one sentence: "I would like to become a rider as my father once was." Although incoherent to the outsider, his single sentence was evidently meaningful to him. Understandably, when transplanted, he feared everything and everyone with whom he came into contact.

What distinguishes Handke's *Kaspar*, writes Ronald Hayman in *Theatre and Anti-Theatre*, is the fact that the Austrian dramatist "is not attempting to dramatise the story told in Hauser's autobiography, but to analyse a comparable loss of linguistic innocence, and, as in Ionesco's early plays, the underlying assumption is that language can be an instrument of oppression and depersonalisation."⁵ Handke remarks that *Kaspar* "shows how someone can be led into speaking by speaking."

Indeed, Handke spoke about his new and innovative aesthetic, at Princeton University at a meeting of Group 47 in 1966. He derided postwar literature in Germany, castigating the writings of such pillars of literature as Günter Grass and Heinrich Böll for their standardization of language and their insistence upon pursuing illusionisms and representationalism—when these approaches to life were passé. If the link to reality becomes routine and "the words for the objects are taken for the objects themselves," one merely repeats through identification what has been said. Handke went on to remark: "People fail to recognize that literature is made with language and not with the things that are described with language," an insight that causes literature to lose its *raison d'être*.⁶

Handke, who despised mannerism and so-called representationalism, had taken Samuel Beckett's statement (referring to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) seriously: "His writing is not *about* something; *it is*

that something itself.”⁷ In addition, Wittgenstein’s notion that understanding a sentence necessitates the understanding of language, led Handke to banish conventional reactions and psychological probings from his writings. “Narratives and novels really have no story,” he remarked. “What is ‘story’ or ‘fiction’ is really always only the point of intersection between individual daily events.”⁸

Handke referred to his nonrepresentational and nonfigurative play, *Publikumsbeschimpfung (Insulting the Audience)*, as a *Sprechstück*, that is, a “speech-piece.” Its frequently contradictory-sounding sentences, unconnected clauses, catalogues, anaphoras, and seemingly irrational verbiage may stun and disorient those spectators who expect logically conceived situations and metaphorical approaches to stage happenings:

You will hear what you have usually seen.

You will hear what you have not usually seen here.

You will not see a play . . .

You will see a play without pictures.⁹

When and if spectators begin to shed their *a priori* attitudes and their structured and rational visions of life, they may be less perturbed and begin to grasp the phenomena of reality. In keeping with Wittgenstein’s logical positivism, as delineated in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Handke does away with metaphysical innuendoes, sanctioning only those things that can be proven via the physical senses.¹⁰ Language is limited, but as a force, used with dictatorial powers, it is also limiting; it can control thought and actions.

Theatrically speaking, Handke has also fostered a reappraisal or revision of the reality of stage happenings. Audiences no longer come to the theatre to be entertained or to be invited to share the life or “eavesdrop” on a family or an individual or to become engaged in a movement or group. Identification has been banished, along with characterizations and representations. In *Offending the Audience*, Handke writes:

You are sharing no experience. You are not sharing. You are not following suit. You are experiencing no intrigues here. You are experiencing nothing. You are not imagining anything. You don’t have to imagine anything. You need no prerequisites. You don’t need to know that this is a stage. You need no expectations. You need not lean back expectantly. You don’t need to know that this is only playing. We make up no stories. You are not following an

event. You are not playing along. You are being played with here. That is a wordplay.

What is the theater's is not rendered unto the theater here. Here you don't receive your due. Your curiosity is not satisfied. No spark will leap across from us to you. You will not be electrified. These boards don't signify a world. They are part of the world. These boards exist for us to stand on. This world is no different from yours. You are no longer kibitzers. You are the subject matter. The focus is on you. You are in the crossfire of our words.¹¹

Because language is crucial in conveying thought, the people, groups, or institutions that control language dominate the ideations of individuals and societies. Disconnected words, repeated in various sequences within a sentence or clause, using a variety of figures of speech (repetition, anaphora, enumeration, metaphor, and metonymy, etc.) and a complex of sonorities, rhythms, and amplitudes, arouse, excite, and confuse the protagonist. Unable intellectually to assess such linguistic power-plays, the spectators experience their impact only through their senses, thereby increasing their already palpable feelings of disarray and malaise.

Handke seeks to provoke audiences, not in the Brechtian way, through the use of *Verfremdung* (distantiation) as in *Mann ist Mann* (1927); nor in the Artaudian manner, by means of shock, but rather by rejecting the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* and by atomizing and exploding traditional modern theatrical conventions. Once these are pared down to their essentials, a fragmented, fractional unrecognizable world emerges. Such radical change in approach not only exposes spectators to new ways of seeing and hearing, robbing them of value judgments and conventional responses to people and objects, but it also encourages them to become cognizant of the world of the theatre itself. Theatre, for Handke, and for the spectator seeking to follow him along his innovative path, becomes a linguistic adventure.

The linguistic and theatrical center of *Kaspar* has, of course, been dealt with in existing scholarship. For Nicholas Hern, *Kaspar*, the "newborn adult," takes on mythical stature: he becomes an "Everyman figure" whose development is witnessed during the course of the drama. The *play* is a paradigm of the "neutering of

language” and the effect of that neutering on Kaspar. Like a puppet, Handke’s protagonist is manipulated in a most sinister manner, finally stripped of his individuality. Like Echo, he can never begin a conversation, merely reiterate what has been said.¹²

Günther Sergooris suggests that in *Kaspar* language functions as a negation of pluralism, that it is a play about the negative possibilities of language development and its systematic adaptation to whatever point of view dominates. Speech, then, is not only omnipotent, but becomes a fetish with, perhaps, spiritual and sexual impact.¹³

Also commenting on the linguistic significance of Handke’s play is Astrid von Kotze, who suggests that the success of the *Einsager’s* directives is evidence of Kaspar’s lack of identity—even his non existence as a social being. Kotze finds analogies between Kaspar’s repetition of such statements as “I am, who I am,” and the statement made in the Old Testament. Kabbalistic overtones are also discernible in the previous statement, suggesting an analogy with the Sefiroth and the three highest emanations of Deity (Kether, “supreme crown”; Binah, “intelligence”; Hokhmah, “wisdom”). Because this triad is revelatory of the life-birth-development-death process, it is comparable to Kaspar’s experience in the play.¹⁴

Analogies between *Kaspar* and Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* are made by Rolf Günter Renner. By underscoring the formalistic aspect of Handke’s play, he emphasizes the problematics of language: “A table is really a table when the picture on the table corresponds to the table: It is not a real table when only the picture of the table corresponds to the table, but the picture (image) of the table and chair does not correspond to the table and chair.” Wittgenstein develops a similar line of reasoning when determining connections between sentences and reality.¹⁵

The teaching process in *Kaspar* also comes under scrutiny. This aspect of the play is not only interesting linguistically, but has political ramifications as well: language can be used to indoctrinate individuals as well as masses. Such a situation reached great heights during World War II and is still a powerful weapon. The patience a pedagogue shows when he teaches a student is evident in Handke’s play each time the *Einsager* attempt to communicate with and educate their student. “Language education,” Uwe Schultz points out, takes place in steps: each separate exercise follows the previous one in an ordered manner (see Handke’s note on “Kaspar’s phases”). The scene when Kaspar finally ties his shoelace correctly indicates,

Schultz believes, the restoration of order to both language and actions.¹⁶

Günter Heintz also remarks on the significance of the rudimentary stages of *Kaspar's* comprehension. Certainly, climbing the ladder of learning (as he did during the course of the play) was a difficult, confusing, and contradictory task. Was it rewarding? is the question. At the play's conclusion, we are faced with an utterly desolate and disconsolate being who has, as a result of the "educational" process, reached the depths of pain.¹⁷

The educational devices and doctrines used by the *Einsager* to teach *Kaspar* how to comport himself in society in an acceptable manner, are, for Handke and the new leftists manipulative and repressive. Spontaneity, imagination, the possibility of choice are all eliminated: rigid and disciplined thought processes become the only valid ways. Such an outcome is frightening.¹⁸

Rainer Nägele and Renate Voris underscore the disorderly and chaotic nature of *Kaspar's* psyche. Only with extreme effort can he make his way out of the awkward situation in which he finds himself. In learning his robotlike lessons, *Kaspar* loses that completely open-minded and curious nature that had been his at the outset of the play—the very nature that had enabled him to open himself up to new experiences. Once he has learned his lessons and conformed to the new rules and regulations, that whole pristine world is closed to him. Handke's work is comparable to Brecht's *Mann ist Mann*, in that both plays focus on the total disfunctioning of a person.¹⁹

Günter Rühle explores the manner in which *Kaspar* exemplifies the disorientation of an adult who suddenly comes upon a world of strange objects, stumbles, and destroys some in the process before he even understands their significance. Handke's sense of the social and political force of language is such that in a few sentences he allows his formerly unthinking protagonist to reflect in a highly philosophical manner on questions of time and space which in turn become effective devices in making him aware of himself and the role he plays in the world.²⁰

What is particularly arresting for Peter Iden is the role of the *Einsager*. They are role models for *Kaspar*: it is they whom he uses to compare himself to, to define himself, and lastly to imitate. The acquisition of the world through the medium of words culminates in the creation of beautiful metaphors, of homey relationships between the protagonist and the objects surrounding him such as a chair, table,

sofa, the chalk he uses to draw around the object of his choice. Because Kaspar is capable of accomplishing this “feat” he feels at home in the world, believing as well that he has in effect asserted his will. Language has in Handke’s play filled what had been vacant, activated and intensified stage space, manipulated language with expertise, revealing how one becomes more and more bound to the world. Liberated from the poverty of non-verbalization which Kaspar had experienced when unable to recognize the connections between himself and the outer world of objects, he eventually understands what he is.²¹

Important as well are the comparisons made by Rainer Nägele. Handke, he suggests, is not the first writer whose “conscious state” is mirrored in the figure of Kaspar Hauser. Verlaine and Trakl were fascinated by him as well. Indeed, the behavior of this strange being—a phenomenon of sorts—symbolized society’s fear of everything that was different: a kind of xenophobia. Verlaine identified with Kaspar. He looked upon him as an outcast: society’s rejection of the artist as the virtual pariah. Trakl considered him strange, different from others. However, this very strangeness helped define him, endowed him with specific characteristics: a very special “untouchedness,” purity in Rousseau’s sense of the word.²²

The critical information we have surveyed must in no way detract from Handke, the playwright. Let us keep in mind, suggests Manfred Mixner, that *Kaspar* is not a scientific, sociological-pedagogical or psychological study, but rather uses a “model of linguistic mythos as a point of departure,” as his point of departure for his living drama. Kaspar, an abstraction as well as a living person, is used for experimental purposes: to test the functioning power of language. Insofar as Handke is concerned, “No concrete social or political mode is criticized in *Kaspar*: neither capitalistic nor socialistic society.” Handke’s play is anarchical, without thought of utopia or any kind of economic or political ideal in mind.²³

As the curtains part on *Kaspar*, audiences view a second and similar curtain upstage. Soon it becomes obvious that someone is trying to find the opening in the back curtain—and does so, after several futile attempts: “A hand is all one sees at first; the rest of the body follows.” Handke’s autistic character enters the stage space. He is terrified by the objects he sees about him (chair, table, closet, etc.) and by the disembodied voices (*Einsager*) speaking to him through public address systems, megaphones, radios telephones, televisions,

and other mechanical devices. The words spoken by these *Einsager* (a Handkian concoction implying “insayers,” and, by implication, “indoctrinators”) will bring *Kaspar*, who utters only one sentence at the outset of the drama, “to speech by speech.”

The drama revolves around *Kaspar*'s linguistic evolution: his mental growth and, therefore, his dependence on language. The prologue, consisting of “*Kaspar*'s Sixteen Phases,” enumerates the various steps he experiences during the developmental process: his use of one sentence at the outset, as opposed to other sentences, and the new dynamic such activity generates.

Handke's *Kaspar* is neither a protagonist nor an antagonist in the traditional sense. His personality is never defined nor does he exhibit normal mental apparatus. Undeveloped intellectually and emotionally, *Kaspar* is unconscious of the world around him. All we know about him is that he came from the country and knows only one sentence. That Handke's character is given a proper name—*Kaspar*—individualizes him a little, at least for the spectator, thereby salvaging him from total anonymity.

Psychologically, we may say that *Kaspar*'s ego (center of consciousness) cannot be distinguished as something apart from its surroundings. Ego and non-ego (or self, the total psyche), then, are one and the same, as are inner and outer worlds. Existence is lived on the basis of a single totality. Like an infant or child, *Kaspar* exists in an original state of wholeness: an ouroboric condition. The word is borrowed from the Gnostics and identified with the circular image of the tail-eating serpent; the ouroboric state implies self-containment or primary identity with the Self. Such a state exists prior to the birth of consciousness.

That *Kaspar*'s psyche is primitive and his perceptual process deviant is obvious. He seems unable to discriminate among objects and since he utters only one sentence, his speech may be labeled idiosyncratic. Medically speaking, *Kaspar*'s behavior has been identified as *autistic*. His symptoms are withdrawal from the objects onstage, then a kind of conflictual avoidance of them, followed by shifting responses: aggressive and angry approaches, succeeded by unresponsive and apathetic attitudes.

That there is something of the clown, buffoon, and puppet in *Kaspar*'s awkward fumbings and sometimes rigid gestures and fixed facial expressions is also apparent. As *Kaspar* ambulates about the stage space bumping into one object after another, he elicits laughter

as well as pity from the audience. Handke's description of his protagonist supports the clown/Kaspar analogy:

His makeup is theatrical. For example, he has on a round, wide-brimmed hat with a band; a light-colored shirt with a closed collar; a colorful jacket with many (roughly seven) metal buttons; wide pants; clumsy shoes; on one shoe, for instance, the very long laces have become untied. He looks droll. The colors of his outfit clash with the colors on stage. Only at the second or third glance should the audience realize that his face is a mask; it is a pale color; it is life-like; it may have been fashioned to fit the face of the actor. It expresses astonishment and confusion. (63)

The clown, one of the most complex of creatures, is an archetypal figure: universal and eternal, and endowed with the extraordinary power of making people laugh. While indulging in bizarre antics of "pure play," the clown, drawing guffaws, is viewed as a joyful and ebullient creature. Beneath the mask, however, is a diametrically opposed being: a sorrowful, pained, and victimized individual. Frequently a failure, the butt of ridicule and floggings, the clown wears his fear and hurt within while donning a smile without. Conveying neither dignity nor reverence nor authority, he may, as in *King Lear*, also utter truths under the guise of nonsense.

Like the clown's, Kaspar's entrance from behind the curtain upstage is awkward; his awkwardness increases as he fumbles with his hat—antics reminiscent of Arlecchino in the *commedia dell'arte*, or a comic performing a music hall routine. Handke's stage directions read as follows:

He begins to move. One hand still holds the hat. His way of moving is highly mechanical and artificial. However, he does not move like a puppet. His peculiar way of moving results from his constantly changing from one way of moving to another. For example, he takes the first step with one leg straight out, the other following timorously and "shaking." He might take the next step in the same manner but reverse the order. With the next step, he throws one leg high in the air and drags the other leg heavily behind him. . . . (64)

Kaspar's stiff gestures do not conform to the spectators' perceptions of a human being. Yet *they are real*. Having lived his whole life in an isolated and darkened room in the country, Kaspar has not been properly trained to walk upright, as "normal" people do. His arms, legs, and torso are adapted to move about and function in the environment to which he has been conditioned. He is *different* from others and, understandably, when confronting a new habitat and a new disposition of objects, he stumbles and is terrified. That the audience guffaws over such "stupidity" is comprehensible as well, since anything out of the ordinary is looked upon as abnormal. Isn't comedy at times an expression of cruelty?

That Kaspar, like so many clowns, wears a mask reinforces the dichotomy between outer and inner worlds and the impenetrability of spheres. As manifestations of archetypes, masks represent unmodifiable and immutable nature. Since Kaspar wears such a suprapersonal and unchangeable disguise, audiences believe him to be unaffected by the world of contingencies, unadaptable and unmodifiable in his comportment. No emotional connection appears to exist between him and the exterior world. On the other hand, Kaspar's mask may also be looked upon as a protective device, the weakly structured inner being safely hidden behind an unchangeable expression, thereby pointing up a sense of mystery, ambiguity, and excitement.

Handke further tells his audiences that Kaspar resembles Frankenstein's monster, a creature fabricated from human parts that runs amok, destroying itself and its creator, and King Kong, the giant gorilla, brought from his natural habitat to the city, where he, too, kills people. Now we understand the horrors, both physical and emotional, accompanying the displacement of people or the creation of beings who do not conform to the norm. Yet, such creatures are and have been popular from time immemorial—whetting the imagination, titillating the senses, and generating ripples of laughter.

There is, then, something automated or machinelike in Kaspar—namely, his speech and behavioral patterns. If we recall that Handke had suggested that his play could be called "Speech-Torture," the introduction of a mechanical instrument at the very outset of the theatrical event seems in keeping with the programmed, standardized, and computerlike approach to his character's word-play.

The apparatus in question—a type of “magic eye,” designed to “formalize this torture”—is built above the ramp. Blinking during the performance, it measures “the degree of vehemence with which the PROTAGONIST is addressed.” (59).

Equally measured and consistent is the dialogue, divided between Kaspar and the *Einsager*. In book form, the former is printed on the left side of the page and the latter on the right. The *Einsagers'* disembodied voices, speaking through loudspeakers, public address mechanisms, megaphones, telephones, televisions, and automatic answering devices, are trying to indoctrinate Kaspar and to persuade him to follow their system and thereby to “bring Kaspar to speech by speech.” They are subverting outworn theatrical conventions by emphasizing language rather than mime, detachment instead of subjectivity, significations instead of reference to some relational reality.

Nor are the theatrical accessories and props onstage illusionist. There is the aforementioned backdrop (a curtain of the same fabric and dimensions as the front curtain) from which Kaspar emerges so maladroitly. There are also chairs, a broom, a cushion, a table, a sofa, a shovel, a wastepaper basket, and a closet, which, though unrelated to each other, are disposed in a normal position onstage.

Kaspar, the clown, the unadapted and autistic being who stumbles and falls, blusters about knocking over pieces of furniture, kicking the closet door open, spiraling back and forth, as he repeats his one sentence—“I want to be a person like somebody else was once”—lives in his own closeted world. His single sentence, like a litany, takes on different amplitudes, sonorities, modulations, and rhythms, conveying a variety of emotional reactions to each of the events experienced (66). A remarkable vehicle for an actor!

The ultramechanical voices of three or more *Einsager* break out from all sides of the stage; the loudspeakers emphasize their engineered, toneless, and impersonal words:

Already you have a sentence with which you can make yourself noticeable. With this sentence you can make yourself noticeable in the dark, so no one will think you are an animal. You have a sentence with which you can tell yourself everything that you can't tell others. You can explain to yourself how it goes with you. You have a sentence with which you can already contradict the same sentence. (67)

The world—outside of *Kaspar*'s one sentence—is threatening. For someone who can neither direct nor adapt his thinking, he lives in an overwhelmingly subjective and distorted domain. He continues to walk about the stage, touching various objects here and there, discovering gaps between the cushions on the sofa. He throws these soft objects on the floor any which way. Because he is autistic, the repetition of his single sentence may be considered in part an apotropaic mechanism: a means of insuring his safety.

Kaspar's inability to relate to the world around him—to reality—and his dissociation from everything he sees and confronts, emphasize his deep-seated alienation from the world of contingencies. Since the objects onstage are unknown and incomprehensible, they suffuse him with feelings of panic. That he creeps, falls, tumbles about amid these disparate concretions again points to the fact that he lives nearly exclusively in an archaic world. *Kaspar* is in touch only with nature and the instinctual sphere—a kind of *prima materia*. If this primal stuff can eventually be assimilated—at least in part—by the conscious mind, it will summon a reactivation and reorganization of unconscious and conscious contents, leading possibly to psychological and intellectual evolution. If no integration of new contents pouring in from the unconscious takes place, *Kaspar* will continue living at the same stage of development.²⁴

Once the *Einsager* begin their Speech-Torture, a dialectical process is generated between *Kaspar* and his single sentence (an expression of his emotional world?) and the *Einsager*, whose goal it is to indoctrinate him. Teaching *Kaspar* to speak conventionally, to think traditionally, and to behave morally in keeping with societal codes makes their efforts purposeful. The instructional method of the *Einsager* is that of drill/propaganda: machine-like accuracy and measured precision.

Subtle teachers, the *Einsager* take the initiative. They label each object, thereby identifying it with the word, then inform *Kaspar* of its function. By means of word-forces and word-manipulation, they teach him all the stereotypes and platitudes that make society society and culture culture. Such is the method they use to manipulate and dominate their student.

Their key word is *order*. As indoctrinators of social views they use language as a disciplinary force, to inculcate order in *Kaspar*, to condition him to follow their rules, be they grammatical constructions or otherwise. As their toneless mechanical voices drone on and

on like plain-chant they “exorcise every disorder” from Kaspar (69). While the voices from loudspeakers and microphones accentuate or diminish in pitch and amplitude, also alternating their rhythmic beats, Kaspar’s nerves and psyche are affected. Indeed, he reacts intensely and angrily to their continuous, rigid, and unflinching verbal assaults.

Another mechanical method is used to implement these educational techniques: lighting. Amid the multiple utterances of the robotlike *Einsager*, the stage is intermittently blacked out, only to be lit brilliantly minutes later. Such intense contrasts serve to further the *Einsagers’* sense of order and discipline. They divide the play into scenes and the lessons to be learned into stages or steps. A running account of Kaspar’s progress in reaching a norm and of his relapses into his autistic world is given through the loudspeakers.

As the *Einsager* pursue their course, their lessons take on a more abstract temper. Kaspar is taught to divide time into past, present, and future. Understanding linear time, they remark, will help him build up his memory and thereby reconstruct his life. That he had formerly lived his entire existence enclosed in a blackened room with no exposure to the outside world, and that his single possession consisted of one sentence, met all of his needs at that time. Now, they inform him, his situation has changed: he has become cognizant of the outside world and consequently of himself and of relationships. Such an expanded approach to life brings into being a complex of opposites, including abstraction and concretion.

Words are no longer simple devices expressing pain or joy. They have grown in dimension, density, shape, and form. Some may be used as pacifiers, others like fetishes or hierophanies, or instruments of torture, putting Kaspar through one ordeal after another, or as suggestive devices, cajoling him to follow the ways of the *Einsager*. If Kaspar reacts fearfully to the introduction of new words, the *Einsager* tell him how morphemes can protect him: “You can still crawl off behind the sentence: hide: contest it. The sentence can still mean anything.”

The learning process consists of hurdles. Each step forward inflicts pain and malaise upon the student. Sometimes expressing wonderment, at other moments dismay, Kaspar discovers that the world is opening up. He begins pronouncing single words incommodiously, then in serial listings with varied rhythmical and tonal patterns—as if he were throwing or kicking concrete objects about.

With greater dexterity and aplomb, he finds himself adding one clause at a time to what he already knows, thereby creating a network of verbalisms.

The *Einsager* are irate. What has happened to their order? They pursue their indoctrinating process. In time, they note that *Kaspar*'s sentences have become "normal"; he can "compare" and "describe" and thereby "clarify" everything he perceives and senses. Everything seems to fall into its rightful and ordered place.

Not only are *Kaspar*'s sentences rational and related, but, for the first time, he is also able to coordinate his hands and feet with dexterity. As he bends down to tie his shoelace, thereby illustrating his newfound skill, a spotlight follows his hands and fingers, emphasizing the network of movements needed to intertwine and cross the laces.

No longer estranged from the world of contingencies, *Kaspar* fits into the *Einsager* order. He has grown accustomed to their world of images and signs. But, as suggested before, a growing awareness of the great void triggers feelings of anxiety which had, at least during his growing period, vanished. Along with the loss of *his* sentence, *Kaspar* now realizes that his individuality and his values have disappeared. Whereas his sentence had formerly provided him with a secure and meaningful whole and uniformity, as had the *Einsager* mechanized methodology that replaced it, *Kaspar* now finds himself *outside* of it all. No longer contained in either of the two enclosed systems, he feels himself opening up on a vast new world, without guidelines, without mechanical devices to point to the right path. No longer does he feel linked, related to the world at large.

Suddenly, a second *Kaspar*, identical in all ways to the protagonist, enters the stage. As he begins sweeping the floor, his gestures and motions meticulously marked out by a spotlight, a third and fourth *Kaspar*, similar to the original, begin moving across the stage. Because the fourth *Kaspar* walks on crutches, the third one slows down to his pace. Two additional *Kaspars* then walk toward and away from each other, after which they step aside. The entire photological scene, like a choreographed dance, is composed of sequences of rhythmical movements interspersed with an alternately blackened and brilliantly lit stage, emphasizing the drama inherent in forms themselves.

Who are these *Kaspars*? Like free-floating signs with no connecting principle, they keep colliding with each other, their movements accompanied by bumping and grinding noises.

Psychologically, the multiple Kaspars may be viewed as projections of a formerly whole and self-contained Kaspar. Just as his single sentence had been experienced as a unit, each word fitting into the composite grammatical construct or syntactical system, so had his psyche been apprehended as an entity—not alienated from either outer or inner worlds.

In time, when Kaspar suddenly understands that words are not one person's possession, but must be shared with others, he feels displaced and dislodged. Insecurity and uneasiness take precedence. Aware that the *Einsager* have incarcerated him in *their system* and that he has become a product of their educational system, of society, of the collective—a robot and machine-like entity—he is overcome by a profound sense of isolation and alienation.

Kaspar's elaboration of his obsession and epistemology is fascinating. He explains in elliptical phrases the grief and aching torment he experienced when opened up to the fearful and conflictual outer world. Reminded in some ways of Lucky's speech in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, audiences feel the pain he *knew* when coming into the world of being.

I came into the world
not by the clock
but because
the pain
while falling
helped me drive
a wedge
between me
and the objects
and finally extirpate
my babbling:
thus the hurt finally drove
the confusion out of me. (124)

Kaspar talks on; but he is unable to bring the autonomous egos (the other Kaspars) under the control of one central consciousness. Disconnected, split, fragmented, the autonomous powers are incapable of reintegrating into a psychic whole. Like a splintered mirror, Kaspar does not know who he is; nor does he recognize the

other *Kaspars* as grotesque and objectionable mirror images of himself.

As *Kaspar* falls further and further apart an infinite play of significations comes into being: fractionality and dispersion take over, memory is obliterated, linear time schemes undiscerned:

What was it
that
I said
just now?
If only I knew
what it is
that I said
just now!
If I only knew
what I said
just now!
What is that
that I said
just now?
What
was I
actually
saying
just now?
What was it
that was
being said
just now? (131)

Kaspar's sequences become less and less comprehensible, more and more repetitive and manic, with slight and frequently unintelligible variations. With a sudden and last return to lucidity, we hear him say painfully: "I no longer understand anything literally. I cannot wait until I wake up, whereas earlier I could not wait to fall asleep. I have been made to speak. I have been converted to reality" (138).

The stage is darkened, then brightened. *Kaspar* pursues his speech amid the din of the screeching autonomous *Kaspars* and

dictatorial *Einsager*: "If only. If only. . . ." Whereupon schizophrenia obliterates all sense/nonsense and we hear Kaspar utter "Goats and monkeys" five times, as the curtain jolts closed. The protagonist topples and then falls behind the curtain.

*

Handke's successful and brilliant dramatization of the construction/deconstruction syndrome in both the linguistic and psychological spheres makes his play unique in theatre. His emphasis on the mechanics of thought via individual and sequenced words, together with loudspeakers, microphones, lights, and sounds, and other technical devices, add to the innovative nature of his play.

Kaspar dramatizes the dislocation and disruption of the very foundations of the Westerner's *logocentric* view. Emancipation from the *whole* leads to the reign of specificities, the divestment of traditional categories, systems, and ideologies. Handke's *Kaspar* alienates spectators from their comfortable and relatively secure existences. Their illusionary domains, their comfortable condition of relative stasis, must give way to new spatialities—to the excoriating and terrifying reign of the fragmented and irrational.

Theatre is not *mimesis* for Handke. It is not an imitation of life, but life itself, to be experienced on its own terms, not by passive spectators—voyeurs—but rather by autonomous and independent people, believing in the reality of the stage happenings and in the existence of a *deus absconditus*, or hidden deity, existing in all of its explosive and dynamic parts!

NOTES

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3. Klinkowitz and Knowlton, p. 4.
4. Klinkowitz and Knowlton, p. 19. See Nicholas Hern, *Peter Handke*. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1972), p. 12.
5. Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre*. New York: Oxford University Press,

- 1979, p. 104. See Norbert Honsza, "Peter Handke as a Dramatist." *Universitas*, 1973, 15 (3).
6. Klinkowitz and Knowlton, p. 9.
 7. Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce." *Transition*, June, 1929, p. 14.
 8. June Schlueter, *Plays and Novels of Peter Handke*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), pp. 172–73.
 9. Hayman, p. 96.
 10. Hern, p. 71.
 11. *Kaspar*, p. 9.
 12. Hern, p. 59.
 13. Günther Sergooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*. (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1979), pp. 101, 117.
 14. Astrid von Kotze, "Zur Struktur von Peter Handkes *Kaspar*." In: Manfred Jurgensen, Hrsg. *Handke. Ansätze—Analysen—Anmerkungen*. (Bern: Francke, 1979), pp. 70, 75.
 15. Rolf Günter Renner, *Peter Handke*. (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1985), pp. 47–48.
 16. Uwe Schultz, *Peter Handke*. Friedrich Velber, p. 51–53.
 17. Günter Heintz, *Peter Handke*. (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1971), pp. 62, 78, 82.
 18. Christa Dixon, "Peter Handkes *Kaspar*: Ein Modellfall. In: *The German Quarterly*. 46, No. 1. (January, 1973), 34, 37.
 19. Rainer Nägele/Renate Voris, *Peter Handke*. (München: Beck, 1978), pp. 82–83.
 20. Günther Rühle, "Der Jasager und die Einsager." In: *Über Peter Handke*. Edited by Michael Scharang. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), pp. 132–33.
 21. *Ibid.*, Peter Iden, "Triumph und Pleite der Wörter," pp. 136–137.
 22. Rainer Nägele, "Unbehagen in der Sprache zu Peter Handkes *Kaspar*. Reinhold Grimm und Jost Hermand, ed. *Basis: Jahrbuch für deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur*. 6 (1976) p. 78.
 23. Manfred Mixner, *Peter Handke*. (Kronberg: Athenäum, 1977), pp. 58, 73.
 24. C. G. Jung, *Complete Works* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), V, 408, 442.