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The Limits of Literary Language: Linguistic Skepticism and Literary Experiment in Postwar Germany and Austria

Abstract

This dissertation addresses the concurrent revival of experimental writing and linguistic skepticism in West Germany and Austria after 1945, concentrating on the work of Helmut HeiÃ?enbÃ?ttel, Konrad Bayer, Peter Handke, and Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. While the immediate postwar years gave rise to a germanophone literature that was largely intolerant of formal experimentation--due to widespread adherence to a neo-Sartrean model of *littÃ?rature engagÃ?e* and a restorationist return to classical form--certain writers began to oppose this aesthetic conservatism in the early fifties. Influenced by international avant-garde developments--from concrete poetry to the *nouveau roman*--they developed a new form of German writing that actively experimented with literary and linguistic form. Their work was often accompanied by a sophisticated theoretical critique of language, connecting back via Wittgenstein and Whorf to the turn-of-the-century *Sprachkrise* and the writings of Mauthner and Hofmannsthal. I aim to offer an analysis of this language-skeptical approach to writing, showing how it was employed to create a cultural space for avant-garde literature in the postwar period--presenting experimental writing as a legitimate intellectual endeavor with tangible social value, despite its running contrary to prevalent models of politically engaged or formally conservative writing. Against the common literary-historical view of the sixties as the decade of the "politicization of literature," I aim to show the existence of an alternate track of "linguistic aesthetics" propagated almost exclusively by writers of experimental literature, developing in the fifties and extending through the sixties and beyond. For these writers, a skeptical and analytical treatment of language became the necessary starting point for any progressive literature. I also aim to show how later writers like Handke and Brinkmann came to see this linguistic skepticism as an encumbering limitation of literary possibility. In their early-seventies work, which is often grouped with the movement of New Subjectivity, these writers adopt a pragmatic model of language as a flawed but functional tool for the communication of subjective experience, resulting in a writing that continues to explore the ambiguous link between word and world.

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THE LIMITS OF LITERARY LANGUAGE: LINGUISTIC SKEPTICISM AND
LITERARY EXPERIMENT IN POSTWAR GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Nathaniel Davis

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THE LIMITS OF LITERARY LANGUAGE: LINGUISTIC SKEPTICISM AND
LITERARY EXPERIMENT IN POSTWAR GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

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NATHANIEL DAVIS

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ABSTRACT

THE LIMITS OF LITERARY LANGUAGE: LINGUISTIC SKEPTICISM AND LITERARY EXPERIMENT IN POSTWAR GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Nathaniel Davis

Jean-Michel Rabaté

This dissertation addresses the concurrent revival of experimental writing and linguistic skepticism in West Germany and Austria after 1945, concentrating on the work of Helmut Heißenbüttel, Konrad Bayer, Peter Handke, and Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. While the immediate postwar years gave rise to a germanophone literature that was largely intolerant of formal experimentation—due to widespread adherence to a neo-Sartrean model of *littérature engagée* and a restorationist return to classical form—certain writers began to oppose this aesthetic conservatism in the early fifties. Influenced by international avant-garde developments—from concrete poetry to the *nouveau roman*—they developed a new form of German writing that actively experimented with literary and linguistic form. Their work was often accompanied by a sophisticated theoretical critique of language, connecting back via Wittgenstein and Whorf to the turn-of-the-century *Sprachkrise* and the writings of Mauthner and Hofmannsthal. I aim to offer an analysis of this language-skeptical approach to writing, showing how it was employed to create a cultural space for avant-garde literature in the postwar period—presenting experimental writing as a legitimate intellectual endeavor with tangible social value, despite its running contrary to prevalent models of politically engaged or formally conservative writing. Against the common literary-historical view of the sixties as the decade of the “politicization of literature,” I aim to show the existence of an alternate

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1. Introduction

...denn die Worte haben sich vor die Dinge gestellt. Das Hörensagen hat die Welt verschluckt. [...] Wenn wir den Mund aufmachen, reden immer zehntausend Tote mit.

Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Eine Monographie" (1895)

The real metaphysical problem today is the word. [...] The new artist of the word has recognised the autonomy of language.

Eugene Jolas, "The Revolution of Language and James Joyce" (1929)

die welt ist sirup aus der sprache unsrer väter.

Oswald Wiener, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa* (1969)

Exploration takes extra words.

Lyn Hejinian, "The Composition of the Cell" (1992)

A Century of Linguistic Crisis

In germanophone countries towards the end of the nineteenth century, amid trans-European political instability and social upheaval, there appeared a minor, but noticeable literary trend: writers began to question language's ability to adequately represent the world. It can't be said that this trend developed into a ground-shaking cultural revolution, since the majority of writers, not to mention journalists and politicians, continued to use language as they always had. However, this linguistic skepticism became a leitmotif that would reappear throughout

the history of literary modernism and postmodernism. From Hugo von Hofmannsthal, to James Joyce, to the *Wiener Gruppe*, to the Language poets: the evolution of twentieth-century writing, and especially writing of an experimental or avant-garde character, keeps returning to the idea that language can't be taken for granted.

The initial *Sprachkrise* grew from the intellectual atmosphere of epistemological uncertainty that developed in Germanic countries between the late 1800s and the First World War. A number of theoretical influences contributed to this skeptical zeitgeist, including Wilhelm von Humboldt's linguistic theory, Nietzsche's atheism and pessimism, Ernst Mach's phenomenalism, and Freudian psychoanalysis. For the writers associated with this crisis of language, Humboldt's proto-Whorfian model of linguistically determined cognition—"Der Mensch lebt mit den Gegenständen [. . .] ausschließlich so, wie die Sprache sie ihm zuführt."¹—merged with Mach's deconstruction of the self as a perceptual illusion—by which "das Ich ist unrettbar."²—to produce a picture of a fractured human subject, drowning in a sea of linguistic abstraction. Following from Nietzsche's view that humanity had committed "einen ungeheuren Irrthum in ihrem Glauben an die Sprache,"³ or from Fritz Mauthner's denunciation of society's "Wortaberglaube"⁴—by which "Wissen" is replaced

¹Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts". In *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 7, 1. Hälfte: Einleitung zum Kawiwerk. Paralipomena*. Edited by Albert Leitzmann. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968, p. 60. Alternately: "Die Sprache ist das bildende Organ des Gedanken. Die intellektuelle Tätigkeit, durchaus geistig, durchaus innerlich und gewissermaßen spurlos vorübergehend, wird durch den Laut der Rede äußerlich und wahrnehmbarer für die Sinne. Sie und die Sprache sind daher Eins und unzertrennlich voneinander. Sie ist aber auch in sich an die Notwendigkeit geknüpft, eine Verbindung mit dem Sprachlaute einzugehen; das Denken kann sonst nicht zur Deutlichkeit gelangen, die Vorstellung nicht zum Begriff werden. Die unzertrennliche Verbindung der Gedanken, der Stimmwerkzeuge und des Gehörs zur Sprache liegt unabänderlich in der ursprünglichen, nicht weiter zu erklärenden Einrichtung der menschlichen Natur." *ibid.*, p. 53.

²Ernst Mach, *Ernst Mach Studienausgabe, Band 1: Die Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen*. Berlin: XENOMOI, 2008, p. 30.

³Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I und II : kritische Studienausgabe*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988, p. 31.

⁴"Der Wortaberglaube der Gegenwart Mauthners besteht nun darin, dass man daran glaubt, dass abstrakte

by “Wortwissen”: “Wir haben nur Worte, wir wissen nichts.”⁵—language came to be seen as an impediment to direct experience of the world, and as a broken semiotic system, no longer fit for writing, speaking, or thinking: “[Die Sprache] habe abgewirtschaftet, sei verdorben, unbrauchbar für die Dichtung geworden und unbrauchbar für eine Erkenntnis des Menschen, der Wirklichkeit, der Wahrheit.”⁶ Literature appeared to be sabotaged from within, by the representational inconsistencies of its own raw material. The literary *Sprachkrise* developed from this supposition, adopting a skeptical attitude towards language as the starting point for new literary creation.

Mauthner was the central theoretician of this language crisis; his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (1902) lays out a rigorous philosophical program of linguistic skepticism. Mauthner was a novelist as well as a philosopher, and his analysis of linguistic dysfunction can be seen as a product of both the post-Hegelian philosophical skepticism of the time, as well as a literary tradition of *Sprachkritik*, which Mauthner traces back to Goethe,⁷ Shakespeare, and beyond. Following from the primary assumption, “daß die Wirklichkeit etwas sei und die Sprache etwas anderes,”⁸ Mauthner aimed to illustrate how language alienates the subject from the world. The *Beiträge* present language as an alien entity that determines thought, speech, and writing: “Was in uns denkt, das ist die Sprache; was in uns

Wörter wie ‘Sprache’, ‘Art’, ‘Säugetier’, ‘Hund’ und dergleichen Erscheinungen der Wirklichkeit bezeichnen. Tatsächlich meint Mauthner, dass die Bedeutung dieser Worte nur innerhalb der Sprache bestehe. In Wirklichkeit entspricht den Worten aber nichts, kein etwas.” Christopher Ebner, *Sprachskepsis und Sprachkrise : Fritz Mauthners Sprachphilosophie im Kontext der Moderne*. Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag, 2014, p. 71.

⁵Fritz Mauthner, *Erinnerungen I, Prager Jugendjahre*. Munich: Georg Müller, 1918, p. 230.

⁶Joachim Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik : Fritz Mauthners Leben und Werk*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1975, p. 3.

⁷Goethe is a constant reference for Mauthner, who sees his poetry as containing an innate *Sprachkritik*: “Das Sprachgenie Goethes sah, über seine poetische Lebensarbeit hinaus, mit erstaunlicher Schärfe auch die theoretischen Mängel der Sprache, und so darf ich ihn an dieser Stelle als Zeugen für meine Sprachkritik aufrufen.” Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache I: Zur Sprache und zur Psychologie*. Vienna and Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 1999, *Das philosophische Werk*, pp. 136-7.

⁸Ibid., p. 175.

dichtet, das ist die Sprache.”⁹ The words, syntax, and grammar of contemporary society are shown to be relics of ancient *Weltanschauungen* with little connection to the modern world; nevertheless, they are propagated by a society that uses them uncritically: “Die Sprache aus dem gemeinen Mitteilungstrieb ist schlechte Fabrikarbeit, zusammengestoppelt von Milliarden von Tagelöhnern.”¹⁰ For Mauthner, *Sprachkritik* represents the progressive reform of linguistic culture, aiming to alter the way human society uses language. Although Mauthner was largely forgotten as the century progressed, his *Beiträge* exerted a significant influence on the European intellectual climate in the years immediately following their publication. His theories influenced most of the *Sprachkrise* writers, as well as such disparate figures as the anarchist theorist Gustav Landauer,¹¹ Herman Hesse,¹² Walter Rathenau,¹³ Samuel Beckett (and via him, Joyce),¹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges,¹⁵ and Ludwig Wittgenstein.¹⁶

The literary manifestation of this linguistic skepticism centers around the early 1900s, and while similar ideas can already be found in some writings of the Naturalist movement—such as those of Arno Holz, going back to the 1880s¹⁷—most *Sprachkrise* writing is

⁹Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 26-7.

¹¹See: Gustav Landauer, *Skepsis und Mystik : Versuche im Anschluß an Mauthners Sprachkritik*. Münster and Wetzlar: Büchse der Pandora, 1978.

¹²See: Walter Eschenbacher, *Fritz Mauthner und die deutsche Literatur um 1900. Eine Untersuchung zur Sprachkrise der Jahrhundertwende*. Frankfurt am Main and Bern: Lang, 1977, *Europäische Hochschulschriften; Deutsche Literatur und Germanistik* 163, p. 132.

¹³See: Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁴See: Linda Ben-Zvi, “Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language”. *PMLA*, 95.2, 1980; see also: Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, pp. 14 ff.

¹⁵See: Silvia G. Dapía, *Die Rezeption der Sprachkritik Fritz Mauthners im Werk von Jorge Luis Borges*. Vienna and Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 1993, *Forum Ibero-Americanum* 8.

¹⁶Though Wittgenstein appears to reject Mauthner’s theories in the *Tractatus*—“All philosophy is a ‘critique of language’ (though not in Mauthner’s sense).” [TLP 4.0031]—Sluga has argued that Mauthner’s influence was deeper than this curt comment suggests, especially in Wittgenstein’s later work. See: Hans Sluga, “Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism”. In *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. See also: Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner’s Critique of Language*. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 298 ff.

¹⁷E.g., from “Die neue Wortkunst”: “Eine völlig exakte Reproduktion der Natur durch die Kunst ist ein Ding der absolutesten Unmöglichkeit, [. . .] weil das betreffende Reproduktionsmaterial, das uns Menschen

associated with post-Naturalist movements like Symbolism, Impressionism, and Expressionism. In works like Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief" (1902) the individual subject's alienation and cognitive haze is traced back to language's shortcomings: "[...] die abstrakten Worte, deren sich doch die Zunge naturgemäß bedienen muß, um irgendwelches Urtheil an den Tag zu geben, zerfielen mir im Munde wie modrige Pilze."¹⁸ The Lord Chandos letter is perhaps deservedly the most well-known and oft-cited example of the *Sprachkrise*; in her *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, Ingeborg Bachmann cites it as "das erste Dokument, in dem Selbstbezweiflung, Sprachverzweiflung und die Verzweiflung über die fremde Übermacht der Dinge, die nicht mehr zu fassen sind, in einem Thema angeschlagen sind [...]."¹⁹ Hofmannsthal's portrayal of fin-de-siècle "Wirklichkeitsverlust" as an effect of linguistic abstraction is echoed in numerous subsequent works of the period, such as Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910)—"Ist es möglich, daß man 'die Frauen' sagt, 'die Kinder', 'die Knaben' und nicht ahnt (bei aller Bildung nicht ahnt), daß diese Worte längst keine Mehrzahl mehr haben, sondern nur unzählige Einzahlen?"²⁰—as well as Gustav Sack's early Expressionist novel *Ein verbummelter Student* (written 1910-1913, published 1916), in which the spiritual angst of the Romantic subject is translated into sophisticated ruminations on the philosophy of language:

Ziehen wir nicht mit Worten und Formbildern die Welt in uns und suchen

nun einmal zur Verfügung steht, stets unzulänglich war, stets unzulänglich ist und stets unzulänglich bleiben wird." In: Arno Holz; Hans Waldemar Fischer, editor, *Das Werk, Band 10: Die neue Wortkunst*. Berlin: Dietz Nachfolger, 1925, p. 131. See also: Ingrid Strohschneider-Kohrs, "Sprache und Wirklichkeit bei Arno Holz". *Poetica*, 1, 1967; and Günter Saße, *Sprache und Kritik: Untersuchung zur Sprachkritik der Moderne*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977, *Palaestra* 267, pp. 48 ff.

¹⁸"Ein Brief", in: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden, Band VII: Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979, p. 465.

¹⁹Ingeborg Bachmann; Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche, editors, *Kritische Schriften*. Munich and Zürich: Piper, 2005, p. 259.

²⁰Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955, vol. 6, p. 728.

sie dann, wenn sie in unserem Besitz ist, dieser zu entkleiden und streifen die verschlammten Netze ab von dem köstlichen Meeresschatz? Und was haben wir dann: das nackte bloße blanke Ding, das aber dennoch in unseren Gedanken steckt – in uns – ? Denke ich nicht zuerst das Chaos, aus dem ich eine Wortwelt bilde, die ich sodann durch Abstreifen der Worte zum Ding an sich konstruiere?²¹

In various ways and to varying extents, the work of Christian Morgenstern, August Stramm, Carl Einstein, Arthur Schnitzler, Alfred Döblin, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, and even the young Thomas Mann²² also began to reflect this skeptical reassessment of language and linguistic function. Breaking from what came to be perceived as the linguistic naivety of the preceding centuries, writers elevated language to an “Angelpunkt der dichtungstheoretischen Diskussion,”²³ directing literary aesthetics through the prism of contemporary linguistic theories.

Beyond the immediate post-Naturalist movements, this situation also held true for some writers of the developing avant-garde. In a 1916 diary entry, Hugo Ball outlines the innate *Sprachkritik* of his *Lautgedichte* (poems consisting of non-representational nonsense words: “gadji beri bimba / glandridi lauli lonni cadori [. . .]”), describing the way they resist the journalistic perversion of language, and return to the sacred “alchemy” of the pure word:

Man verzichte mit dieser Art Klanggedichte in Bausch und Bogen auf die durch den Journalismus verdorbene und unmöglich gewordene Sprache. Man ziehe sich in die innerste Alchimie des Wortes zurück, man gebe auch das Wort noch preis, und bewahre so der Dichtung ihren letzten heiligsten Bezirk. Man verzichte darauf, aus zweiter Hand zu dichten: nämlich Worte zu übernehmen (von Sätzen ganz zu schweigen), die man nicht funkelnagelneu für den eigenen Gebrauch erfunden habe. Man wolle den poetischen Effekt nicht länger

²¹Gustav Sack; Walter Gödden and Steffen Stadthaus, editors, *Gesammelte Werke*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2011, p. 46.

²²See: Peter J. Burgard, “From ‘Enttäuschung’ to ‘Tristan’: The Devolution of a Language Crisis in Thomas Mann’s Early Work”. *German Quarterly*, 59.3, 1986, pp. 433 ff.

²³Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, p. 3.

durch Maßnahmen erzielen, die schließlich nichts weiter seien als reflektierte Eingebungen oder Arrangements verstohlen angebotener Geist-, nein Bildreichtigkeiten.²⁴

While Ball was familiar with Mauthner—having been introduced to his theories through Landauer²⁵—his thinking here responds more directly to F.T. Marinetti’s program of “parole in libertà” as detailed in the “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” from 1912,²⁶ which advocated for a more radical negation of language than that expressed by Mauthner.²⁷ As Kühn points out, Ball’s *Sprachskepsis* is less that of the epistemologist, and more that of the frustrated poet,²⁸ dissatisfied with “die öde, lahme, leere Sprache des Menschen der Gesellschaft.”²⁹ Instead of imitating the bellicose style of Marinetti’s manifesto, however, Ball justifies his work through sophisticated theoretical observations on language; while his *Lautgedichte* were more likely to be met with laughter and contempt than philosophical reflection, Ball presents them as aesthetic expressions of contemporary *Sprachkritik*, intellectualizing the aesthetic revolt they represent. While this intellectual side of the avant-garde is sometimes forgotten, some of Ball’s successors, such as Kurt Schwitters in the 1920s,³⁰

²⁴Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*. Zürich: Limmat, 1992, p. 106.

²⁵See: Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, pp. 44 ff.

²⁶See: Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Selected Poems and Related Prose*. Trans. by Elizabeth R. Napier and Barbara R. Studholme. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, pp. 77-80. For more on the “Technical Manifesto” and Marinetti’s language model, see: Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003, pp. 56 ff.

In another diary entry from July 1915, Ball mentions receiving a package from Marinetti including several *parole in libertà* works, which he enthusiastically praises: “Es sind die reinen Buchstabenplakate; man kann so ein Gedicht aufrollen wie eine Landkarte. Die Syntax ist aus den Fugen gegangen. Die Lettern sind zersprengt und nur notdürftig wieder gesammelt. Es gibt keine Sprache mehr, verkünden die literarischen Sterndeuter und Oberhirten [...]” Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, pp. 41-2. See also: *ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁷For more on the German reception of Marinetti (especially by Expressionist writers) see: Walter Muschg, *Von Trakl zu Brecht : Dichter des Expressionismus*. Munich: Piper, 1961, pp. 58 ff.

²⁸See: Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, pp. 44 ff.

²⁹Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, p. 113.

³⁰For example, in “Konsequente Dichtung” (1924): “Die abstrakte Dichtung löste, und das ist ein großes Verdienst, das Wort von seinen Assoziationen, und wertete Wort gegen Wort; speziell Begriff gegen Begriff, unter Berücksichtigung des Klanges. Das ist konsequenter als Wertung poetischer Gefühle, aber noch nicht konsequent genug. [...] Die konsequente Dichtung ist aus Buchstaben gebaut. Buchstaben haben

would use similar arguments to present their own experimental writing.

The subject of this study will not be the literary aesthetics of these prewar language skeptics, but will rather focus on the revival of these themes in West Germany and Austria after the Second World War, especially from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies. This postwar return of the language crisis, propagated almost exclusively by writers of experimental literature, resurrects the unresolved linguistic doubt lingering from the fin-de-siècle *Sprachkrise* in order to create a cultural space for writing of an avant-garde character. While formally experimental writing was beginning to flourish internationally in the early fifties—especially in France (the *nouveau roman*), Brazil (Noigandres), and the United States (the Beats, the Black Mountain School, the New York School, and the San Francisco Renaissance)—it remained marginalized in a germanophone literary culture centered around ideas of social and political engagement. As I aim to show, the revival of a literary focus on questions of language was necessary for the reintegration of experimental literature in the postwar German and Austrian literary scenes.

It is important to note that this postwar language crisis diverges in numerous decisive ways from its turn-of-the-century counterpart. The initial *Sprachkrise* is often linked with the apocalyptic aspects of fin-de-siècle culture, responding to the numerous political crises unsettling the old world order; e.g., the collapse of literary language for the monarchist Hofmannsthal can be connected to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy towards the end of the nineteenth century.³¹ Unlike the sense of impending disintegration and

keinen Begriff. Buchstaben haben an sich keinen Klang, sie geben nur Möglichkeiten zum Klanglichen [...]. Das konsequente Gedicht wertet Buchstaben und Buchstabengruppen gegeneinander." Kurt Schwitters, "Konsequente Dichtung". In *Das literarische Werk, Band 5. Manifeste und kritische Prosa*. Edited by Friedhelm Lach. Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981, p. 191

³¹See: Erich Straßner, *Deutsche Sprachkultur : Von der Barbarensprache zur Weltsprache*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995, pp. 314 ff.; and Ebner, *Sprachskepsis und Sprachkrise : Fritz Mauthners Sprachphilosophie*

instability that haunted the period around 1900, the post-1945 era was a time of restoration, developing into economic prosperity and democratic optimism in the fifties; the postwar return of linguistic skepticism develops not as a reflection of social instability and impending change, but rather as a reaction against the bourgeois stability and complacency of the *Wirtschaftswunder* societies in West Germany and Austria. It is a willful destabilizing of the symbolic order upon which German culture had been so quickly rebuilt.

It must also be clarified that the neo-*Sprachkrise* I will be addressing is separate from another crisis of language taking place in the immediate postwar years, involving the efforts to “denazify” the German language. The philologist Victor Klemperer’s *LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii* (1947) can be seen as a prime example of this initial effort to identify the ways in which language had been perverted by the ideology of the Third Reich, in order to repair German and return it to its pre-war functionality.³² This situation is recalled by Hans Werner Richter, the unofficial director of the *Gruppe 47*, in a speech from 1963:

Was wir 1945-1946 vorfanden war eine verdorbene Sprache. Wieso eine verdorbene Sprache? Sie war aus verschiedenen Gründen krank geworden. Einmal durch die Partei- und Propagandasprache des Dritten Reiches. Zweitens durch die Literatur und Sprache der ‘inneren Emigration’, wir nennen sie die Sklavensprache. Der Versuch dieser Schriftsteller und Publizisten zu schreiben und etwas gegen die Diktatur sagen, hatte zu einer merkwürdigen Sprache geführt, zu einer Überfeinerung und Verästelung, ja zu einer völlig pervertierten Sprache. [...] Das war die sprachliche Situation; auch hier kam die junge Generation in ein Vakuum hinein [...], was mußten sie tun und was konnten sie tun, um die Sprache wieder neu zu beleben. Ich sagte Ihnen vorhin, die meisten Wörter waren leere Hülsen geworden. Sie hatten ihre Begrifflichkeit, ihre Dinglichkeit,

im Kontext der Moderne, pp. 91 ff.

³²See: Victor Klemperer, *LTI - Lingua Tertii Imperii : Notizbuch eines Philologen*. 15th edition. Leipzig: Reclam, 1996.

Other linguistic studies with similar intentions were also published in the fifties; e.g.: Dolf Sternberger, Gerhard Storz and Wilhelm Emanuel Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*. Hamburg: Classen, 1957.

ihre Sinnlichkeit verloren.³³

While some of Richter's remarks on language resemble the *Sprachkritik* of Mauthner and Hofmannsthal—who might have elsewhere spoken of words as “leere Hülsen”—the underlying parameters of his critique are fundamentally different. For Richter, as for Klemperer, the problems of language are not innate, nor even necessarily connected to the historical development of the German language, but are instead a direct result of the corrupting influence of fascist ideology. Their linguistic analysis poses no serious questions about language's ultimate validity, and ultimately sanctions any use of language that escapes fascist influence. The initial postwar denazification of language is intricately connected to the project, promoted by Richter and many of his *Gruppe 47* colleagues, of establishing a literary *Stunde Null*, asserting a fundamental break between the Third Reich and post-Hitler German culture. As I will show below, the *Stunde Null* concept had the effect of impeding the development of formal experimentalism in Germany; the postwar revival of experimental literature needed to challenge its underlying assertions. As will be seen, there is little mention of linguistic denazification, nor of fascist influence, in the language-critical writings of germanophone avant-garde writers in the fifties and sixties. For these writers, the linguistic purification of the immediate postwar years had not led to a deeper questioning of language, and had indirectly served to authorize a return to the linguistic naivety of pre-*Sprachkrise* Naturalism. The latter postwar crisis of language, led almost exclusively by avant-garde writers, rejects the historical and political contingency of Richter and Klemperer's *Sprachkritik*, and returns to the absolute skepticism of Mauthner and

³³Hans Werner Richter, “Die Gruppe 47. Vortrag, gehalten auf Einladung der schwedisch-deutschen Gesellschaft, Stockholm im März 1963”. *Moderna Språk*, 58, 1964, p. 341. Quoted in: Straßner, *Deutsche Sprachkultur*, pp. 346-7.

Hofmannsthal in order to set a deeper, more radical “zero-point” for the establishment of new forms of writing.

Slow Homecoming: Avant-garde Writing at the Zero Hour

While the *Gruppe 47* had no official direction and no unified literary program, its influence nevertheless pushed postwar German literature in a specific direction. This was partly achieved by the aforementioned *Stunde Null* concept, which found its critical expression in essays written by some of the group’s central members. In a 1946 article published in *Der Ruf* (the literary journal that preceded the foundation of the *Gruppe 47*), Hans Werner Richter denied the possibility of contemporary German writers reconnecting with any pre-Nazi literary movements:

Vor dem rauchgeschwärzten Bild dieser abendländischen Ruinenlandschaft, in der der Mensch taumelnd und gelöst aus allen überkommenen Bindungen irrt, verblassen alle Wertmaßstäbe der Vergangenheit. Jede Anknüpfungsmöglichkeit nach hinten, jeder Versuch, dort wieder zu beginnen, wo 1933 eine ältere Generation ihre kontinuierliche Entwicklungslaufbahn verließ, um vor einem irrationalen Abenteuer zu kapitulieren, wirkt angesichts dieses Bildes wie eine Paradoxie.³⁴

Richter asserts a clear break from prewar German literature, and also denies the validity of emigrant literature as a vessel of continuity for national literary culture; young writers are set with the daunting task of mounting a complete reconstruction of German literature, starting from the zero-point of a nation in physical and mental ruin. The widespread notion of 1945 as a “Nullpunkt” has been shown to have supported a general cultural amnesia regarding the

³⁴Hans Werner Richter, “Warum schweigt die junge Generation?”. In *Der Ruf : Eine deutsche Nachkriegszeit*. Edited by Hans Schwab-Felisch. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1962, p. 32.

Nazi period, and offered Third Reich opportunists the chance to abrogate their guilt regarding their collaboration with Nazi powers.³⁵ Frank Trommler notes how the *Nullpunkt* concept undermined the project of an actual “new beginning” of German culture by providing a cover for Nazi collaborators, who had less honorable motives for cheering this “Bruch mit dem Geschehenen”: “Es ergab sich das Paradox, daß jeder, der sich ehrlich einem Neuanfang nach der Katastrophe verpflichtet fühlte, damit ungewollt jenen Zeitgenossen in die Hände spielte, die den Einschnitt 1945 zwar akzeptierten, aber nur, um mit derart neugewonnener Freiheit frühere Ziele wiederanzusteuern.”³⁶ Many of the most vocal proponents of a literary *Stunde Null*, such as Günter Eich,³⁷ Alfred Andersch,³⁸ and Wolfgang Weyrauch,³⁹ have been shown to have either not acknowledged or willfully concealed their unsavory activity in Germany during the Third Reich.⁴⁰ The claim to historical and geographical independence implied by the *Stunde Null* conceals the compromised conditions from which much postwar literature develops, and must be challenged via a historical recontextualization.⁴¹

³⁵See: Stephen Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour*. Rochester: Camden House, 2004, pp. 170 ff.; and Hans Dieter Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein : vom Dritten Reich bis zu den langen Fünfziger Jahren*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2009, pp. 385 ff.

³⁶Frank Trommler, “Der ‘Nullpunkt 1945’ und seine Verbindlichkeit für die Literaturgeschichte”. *Basis : Jahrbuch für deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur*, 1, 1970, p. 14.

³⁷See: Glenn R. Cuomo, *Career at the Cost of Compromise: Günter Eich’s Life and Work in the Years 1933-1945*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1989.

³⁸See: Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour*, pp. 230 ff.

³⁹See: Hans Dieter Schäfer, “Kultur als Simulation : das Dritte Reich und die Postmoderne”. In *Literatur in der Diktatur : Schreiben im Nationalsozialismus und DDR-Sozialismus*. Edited by Günther Rüter. Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997, pp. 231 ff.

⁴⁰Schäfer includes a list of German literary figures who promoted the *Stunde Null* concept while having been active within the literary culture of Nazi Germany: “Alfred Andersch, Emil Barth, Max Bense, Johannes Bobrowski, Wolfgang Borchert, Hans Georg Brenner, Jürgen Eggebrecht, Günter Eich, Max Frisch, Franz Fühmann, Gerd Gaiser, Rudolf Hagelstange, Gustav René Hocke, Hans Egon Holthausen, Peter Huchel, Marie Luise Kaschnitz, Erhart Kästner, Hans Peter Keller, Wolfgang Koeppen, Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, Ernst Kreuder, Karl Krolow, Horst Lange, Hermann Lenz, Hans Erich Nossack, Luise Rinser [-Schnell], Oda Schaefer, Heinrich Schirrmbeck, Ernst Schnabel, Wolfdietrich Schnurre, Günther Weisenborn, Wolfgang Weyrauch.” Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein*, p. 395.

⁴¹Trommler also addresses the averse effects of the “Nullpunkt” concept on Germanist scholarship, including an artificial isolation of postwar writing from twentieth-century literary history, a neglect of emigrant literature and literature of “Innere Emigration,” as well as an ignorance of East German literature; see: Trommler, “Der

Nevertheless, the cultural identity of postwar German literature was determined by this *Nullpunkt* concept; writers felt responsible for founding a new, moral literary culture, and many looked to the developments of existentialism in France and elsewhere for guidance.⁴² In his programmatic essay “Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung” (1947), Alfred Andersch acknowledges emigration as having partially preserved the German cultural spirit,⁴³ but still echoes Richter’s call for an essential caesura: “[. . .] die junge Generation [steht] vor einer Tabula rasa, vor der Notwendigkeit, in einem originalen Schöpfungsakt eine Erneuerung des deutschen geistigen Lebens zu vollbringen.”⁴⁴ Andersch notes the “instinctive” move towards a “pure realism” in the writing of Wolfgang Borchert, Wolfgang Weyrauch, and Günter Eich, and sees this as a promising approach; however, he finds the parallel tendency towards “Bewußtlosigkeit” worrying,⁴⁵ and sees Sartrean existentialism as a way to counteract this lack of personal engagement:

Es steht außer Frage, daß das existentielle Denken heute von bewegender Kraft ist. In seinem Appel an die persönliche Entscheidung weist es der menschlichen Freiheit den beherrschenden Platz ein, mehr noch, indem es Freiheit und Existenz identifiziert, die Viskosität eines entscheidungslosen Daseins gleichsetzt mit Unmenschlichkeit und Tod, übernimmt es die dialektische Rolle einer geistigen Bewegung, welche die Welt, um ein Wort von Marx zu gebrauchen, nicht

‘Nullpunkt 1945’ und seine Verbindlichkeit für die Literaturgeschichte”, pp. 15 ff.

⁴²For a survey of the postwar German reception of existentialism see: Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour*, pp. 227 ff.

⁴³“Wenn ein wirksamer illegaler Kampf im Innern nicht mehr möglich war, wenn eine Emanzipation von der Diktatur nur noch dadurch möglich wurde, daß man den Begriff der Kunst immer mehr abstrahierte, [. . .] dann war die Stunde der Emigration angebrochen. Es wird immer ein hohes Verdienst des deutschen Geistes bleiben, daß er sich gegen die Unterdrückung in einer Emigration zusammenfand, die in ihrer Breite sowohl wie in dem Rang der Namen, die ihr angehörten, sogar noch die Emigration des geistigen Russentums gegen den Zarismus übertrifft. Die Emigration war es, die das internationale Ansehen des deutschen Namens wenigstens teilweise retten konnte.” Alfred Andersch, “Deutsche Literatur in der Entscheidung”. In *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Bänden, Band 8. Essayistische Schriften I*. Edited by Dieter Lamping. Zürich: Diogenes, 2004, pp. 201-2.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 210

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 212-3.

nur interpretiert, sondern verändert.⁴⁶

While the humanistic intention behind this adoption of the model of *littérature engagée* may be legitimate, the resulting literary program was seen by some as a superficial attempt to adorn the dubious historical amnesia of the *Stunde Null* with an ethical reputation it didn't deserve: "Zwar propagierte man [in the *Gruppe 47*] jetzt nicht mehr den Rückzug von der Gesellschaft, doch das Engagement für eine kritisch-humanistische Literatur wirkte wie eine vom schlechten Gewissen diktierte rhetorische Nebelwand, hinter der sich die alte Verspaltenheit verbarg."⁴⁷

In adopting Sartrean existentialism as a foundational philosophy, Andersch also indirectly aligns German postwar literature against the developments of the international avant-garde. In France, the rise of the *nouveau roman* entailed an explicit rejection of certain Sartrean conceptions of literature—especially the separation of poetry and prose presented in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), by which poetry is grouped with the visual arts and music, while prose is designated as "l'empire des signes"⁴⁸: "La prose est utilitaire par essence [. . .]. Il y a prose quand [. . .] le mot passe à travers notre regard comme le verre au travers du soleil."⁴⁹ This division not only precludes poetry from attaining to any social or political significance, but also prohibits any sort of experimental prose writing that disrupts the clear representational function of language: "Puisque les mots sont transparents et que le regard les traverse, il serait absurde de glisser parmi eux des vitres dépolies."⁵⁰ In *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953), Roland Barthes criticizes this idea, claiming that Sartre establishes an

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 216.

⁴⁷Schäfer, *Das gespaltene Bewußtsein*, p. 399.

⁴⁸Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* Paris: Gallimard, 1948, p. 17.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 25-6.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 30.

artificial division between form and content, which actually work together to determine the message transmitted by writing; Barthes coins the term *écriture* to denote a semantic level of meaning separate from both language and style, which he then uses to transform Sartrean engagement into something that legitimizes the writer's concern with form and language.⁵¹ By doing so, Barthes creates a cultural space for the non-Sartrean experimental writing of the *nouveaux romanciers*, and Alain Robbe-Grillet would follow this correctives to Sartre in his essayistic writing throughout the fifties. In “Sur quelques notions périmées” (1957), he rejects any separation of form from content, and deflects the pejorative label of “formalist,” often directed at Robbe-Grillet and his colleagues, back towards the “romanciers trop soucieux de leur ‘contenu’, qui, pour mieux le faire entendre, s’éloignent volontairement de toute recherche d’écriture risquant de déplaire ou de surprendre: ceux qui, précisément, adoptent une forme – un moule – qui a fait ses preuves, mais qui a perdu toute force, toute vie.”⁵² Robbe-Grillet rejects the program of “moral literature” promoted by Sartre, and redefines writerly engagement as “la pleine conscience des problèmes actuels de son propre langage, la conviction de leur extrême importance, la volonté de les résoudre de l’intérieur.”⁵³

In Germany of the late forties and early fifties, literary-theoretical discourse featured little discussion of experimental formal innovation, focusing much more on questions of social engagement. In his 1949 program for *Kahlschlagliteratur*—a literature that would “clear-cut” the figurative linguistic and literary landscape of post-1945 Germany in order to begin from scratch—Wolfgang Iser describes a form of realist writing based in

⁵¹See: Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*. Paris: Seuil, 1953, pp. 15 ff.

⁵²Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963, pp. 52-3. Similar arguments can be found in the early essays of Nathalie Sarraute: Nathalie Sarraute, *L’ère du soupçon : essais sur le roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1956, pp. 166 ff.

⁵³Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 47.

observation, simply documenting “das, was it.” However, Weyrauch clarifies that this observation must also involve a deeper analysis: “Die Schriftsteller des Kahlschlags [...] fixieren die Wirklichkeit. Da sie es wegen der Wahrheit tun, fotografieren sie nicht. Sie röntgen. Ihre Genauigkeit ist chirurgisch. Ihre Niederschrift ist eine Antisepsis. [...] [Ihre] Geschichten verlassen schon die Deskription, ohne sie indes je zu verlieren, sie tragen sie mit sich fort, sie begeben sich bereits zur Analyse, sie beginnen die Auseinandersetzung des Geists.”⁵⁴ Weyrauch’s critical focus is on the writer’s subjective positioning vis-à-vis society, and include little discussion of questions of language or form.

Heinrich Böll presents a similar program in his “Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur” (1952), stating that writers need to be able to look, observe the historical moment, and finally “see through” appearances to the true state of things: “Wer Augen hat, zu sehen, für den werden die Dinge durchsichtig – und es müßte ihm möglich werden, sie zu durchschauen, und man kann versuchen, sie mittels der Sprache zu durchschauen, in sie hineinzusehen.”⁵⁵ Böll adopts Sartre’s uncomplicated model of language here, claiming that it is possible to use language to see into and through things; he also rejects any form of writing that does not directly represent reality, criticizing the “Blindekuh-Schriftsteller”⁵⁶ who writes introspectively, without retaining the visual connection to the world as an absolute reference: “[Er] sieht nach innen, er baut sich eine Welt zurecht.”⁵⁷ While the reader of Böll’s essay might see this as a reference to surrealist writers, or to writers like Gottfried Benn, Böll

⁵⁴Wolfgang Weyrauch, “Kahlschlag. Nachwort zu ‘Tausend Gramm’”. In *Mit dem Kopf durch die Wand. Geschichten, Gedichte, Essays und ein Hörspiel. 1929-1977*. Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1977, pp. 51-2.

⁵⁵Heinrich Böll, “Bekenntnis zur Trümmerliteratur”. In *Kölner Ausgabe, Band 6. 1952-1953*. Edited by Árpád Bernáth. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2007, pp. 61-2.

⁵⁶*Blindekuh* is the German term for blind man’s bluff.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 61.

names Hitler as the exemplary “Blinde Kuh” writer: “[. . .] seine Bilder waren schief, sein Stil war unerträglich – er hatte die Welt nicht mit dem Auge eines Menschen gesehen, sondern in der Verzerrung, die seine Inneres sich davon gebildet hatte.” In this tendentious essay, Böll essentially rejects all non-realist writing as introverted fantasy, dangerously distorting the true state of the world, as Hitler did in *Mein Kampf*. Brockmann points out the similarity of Böll’s attack on “aesthetic solipsism” to the critic Horst Lange’s 1947 attacks on the escapist literature of *Innere Emigration* during the Third Reich⁵⁸—and indeed, during the postwar years, experimental writing was sometimes subject to the same sort of suspicion that would otherwise be directed at a pastoral fantasy written during the Third Reich. The critical programs of prominent German literary figures like Andersch and Böll helped to establish a general intolerance towards forms of writing that, like the *nouveau roman* in France, contradicted the demands of Sartrean engagement.

This is not to say that this aesthetic conservatism reigned unchallenged: several isolated voices promoted a more progressive literary program, although they were largely relegated to the margins of literary society. Arno Schmidt was one of the earliest representatives of postwar experimental writing, and was also one of the few writers to criticize the prevailing reliance on outdated literary forms—comparable to the critical statements of Robbe-Grillet and Sarraute—in his “Berechnungen” essay (1953):

Unsere gebräuchlichen Prosaformen entstammen sämtlich spätestens dem 18. Jahrhundert; seitdem ist kein Versuch zur systematischen Weiterentwicklung unternommen worden (abgesehen von einigen zerfahrenen Ansätzen im Expressionismus). Man sehe zu, daß die sprachliche Beschreibung [. . .] unserer Welt [. . .] gleichen Schritt hält mit ihrer, zumal technisch-politischen Entwicklung; unsere Gefahr hier zur passiven formica sapiens zu werden ist größer, als die

⁵⁸See: Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour*, pp. 196 ff.

der Atombombe.⁵⁹

Diverging from the *Stunde Null* program of aesthetic clear-cutting, Schmidt calls instead for a continuation of the formal developments that took place during the first half of the century: instead of trying to start from zero—which Schmidt saw as resulting in a return to neo-classical form—writers should study literary history, and progress forwards from extant developments. In a subsequent essay Schmidt clarifies that he has no aversion to old literary forms, but believes that formal evolution is necessary to keep the literary link between language and world alive: “Es wäre für die Beschreibung und Durchleuchtung der Welt durch das Wort [...] ein verhängnisvoller Fehler, wollte man bei diesen ‘klassischen’ Bauweisen stehen bleiben !” He specifically mentions the necessity of developing innovative prose techniques that correspond to cognitive experience: “Besonders nötig [...] ist es, endlich einmal zu gewissen, immer wieder vorkommenden verschiedenen Bewußtseinsvorgängen oder Erlebnisweisen die genau entsprechenden Prosaformen zu entwickeln.”⁶⁰ In the late forties and early fifties Schmidt was largely isolated in his demands for the same kind of formal progression promoted by the *nouveaux romanciers* in France, and was also one of the few writers to connect their work back to the efforts of the prewar avant-garde.

The hectographed journal *Zwischen den Kriegen* (1952-1956) attests to another postwar deviation from the *Kahlschlag*-mainstream. Self-published by Werner Riegel and Peter Rühmkorf, the journal emulated Schmidt’s approach, attempting to revive the suspended threads of Expressionism and other avant-garde movements. In addition to new work by

⁵⁹Arno Schmidt, *Bargfelder Ausgabe. Werkgruppe III: Essays und Biografisches. Band 3*. Zürich: Haffmans, 1995, p. 101. Schmidt’s exaggerated comparison of the dangers of conventional narration to those of nuclear war can be taken as a counterpart to Böll’s linking of introspective writing to *Mein Kampf*.

⁶⁰From “Berechnungen I” (1954): *Ibid.*, p. 163-4.

Riegel, Rühmkorf, and their colleagues, as well as writings by forgotten Expressionist writers, *Zwischen den Kriegen* featured harsh satirical attacks on the “Spießliteraten” of the *Gruppe 47*,⁶¹ and manifestos promoting a new movement of avant-garde, apocalyptic neo-Expressionism called *Finismus*.⁶² Though the movement and the journal were both cut short by Riegel’s death in 1956 at the age of 31, they point towards an internal, if unheeded, protest against the ahistorical blandness of German postwar literary culture. In a satirical vignette from 1953, Riegel offers a surreal portrait of *Trümmerliteratur* as a deserted site of premature ruins:

In der Mitte des Jahrhunderts stehen wir vor dem gigantischen Torso, vor dem unvollendeten Kolosseum einer mit ungeheurer Vehemenz begonnen ‘neuen’ Dichtung, vor einem Trümmertrakt, mit dem niemand etwas anfangen kann, nicht einmal seine Urheber, sofern sie überlebten. Eine allgemeine Lethargie, Müdigkeit, Lustlosigkeit, Verächtlichkeit senkt ihren Staub auf das Amphitheater, die Düne deckt den Marmor zu, die Distel krönt den Sarkophag. Die Pyramiden werden ausgemessen, beklopft, beschrieben, man trägt sie mit Sternchen in den Poesiebaedeker ein. Am Rand der Wüste hockt ein Volk von Fellachen und verscheuert den nach großem Vorbild geschusterten Abklatsch. Einige junge Leute der Literatur, Anonyme, Nichtanerkannte, das ist wichtig zu bemerken, Schriftsteller von frag-würdigem Format, angeekelt von der Wiederkäuergewoge und vom Denkfascismus, mit allen Tricks der Epoche vertraut, brechen mit ihr, stellen sich gegen sie, entlarven sie, ziehen nach ihren Sicherungen, umreißen Aufgabe und Ziele erster Demonstrationen.⁶³

⁶¹“Es lohnt leider nicht, die Namen derer zu nennen, die sich da unten in Süddeutschland als Gruppe 47 etabliert haben, die über ihr schlechtes Leben stöhnen und sich gegenseitig Literaturpreise verleihen. Was heißt überhaupt verleihen! Jedenfalls ist es für uns ein Festessen, zu sehen wie die Spießliteraten der »Literatur« auf *die* Spießler schimpfen, die nicht so doof sind, mit Bücherschreiben Geld verdienen zu wollen, sondern lieber im Toto wetten.” Werner Riegel, “Proklamation des Hektographismus”. In Schütt, *Zwischen den Kriegen*, p. 340.

⁶²Riegel defined *Finismus* as a synthesis of disparate threads of German Expressionism and the French avant-garde: “Es handelt sich um den aktivistischen Tendenzexpressionismus deutscher und um den nihilistische-apokalyptischen Destruktionsformalismus französischer Provenienz. Es handelt sich um die Bemühung der Heinrich Mann, [Carl] Sternheim, [Ludwig] Rubiner, [Kurt] Hiller, [Walter] Hasenclever, [Ernst] Toller bis hin zu Brecht oder [Hermann] Kesten einerseits und um die aus prälogischen Schichten des Hirns steigende Verzweiflung der [Stefan] Heym, [Georg] Trakl, [Alfred] Lichtenstein, Kafka und Benn anderseits.” Werner Riegel, “Vorwort zum Finismus”. In Schütt, *Zwischen den Kriegen*, pp. 343-4.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 345.

It can be argued that Riegel's vision of the legacy of *Stunde Null* literature comes closer to the truth than the prognoses of Andersch and Weyrauch. Rather than a brave, new beginning that would blossom into a fertile cultural movement, the initial West German literary reconstruction resulted in a proliferation of stale realist writing: "Die Bestandsaufnahme, die Suche nach der 'neuen Sprache', der 'Auszug aus dem Elfenbeinturm', der 'Kahlschlag' versandeten in einem Neorealismus, der sie desavouierte."⁶⁴ Towards the end of the fifties, many heralded the arrival of a writer like Günter Grass, whose novels returned an element of fantasy and the grotesque, precisely because he broke from the post-*Kahlschlag* mold. Parallel to Grass's rise to fame, a separate and in some ways opposing literary tendency rejected the prevalent literary model in a different way, moving towards an experimental approach to writing based in a skeptical questioning of language.⁶⁵

The cultural situation in postwar Austria differed from its German counterpart in several significant ways. Due to its somewhat peripheral status within the Third Reich, Austria was able to downplay the largely enthusiastic acceptance of the 1938 *Anschluss* and present a

⁶⁴Heinrich Vormweg, "Das Neue in der Literatur der fünfziger Jahre — ein Überblick". In Drews, *Vom "Kahlschlag" zu "movens"*, p. 15.

⁶⁵While Grass represents an extension of the possibilities of the postwar novel, he should not be grouped with the tendency towards "experimental" innovation that I will be concentrating on. Manfred Durzak contrasts Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (1959) with Arno Schmidt's *KAFF auch Mare Crisium* (1960) to illustrate the two separate tendencies that moved away from a *Trümmerliteratur* aesthetic towards the end of the fifties: "Grass, der die Möglichkeiten des traditionellen Romans nochmals voll ausschöpft, indem er dem personalen Erzähler Oskar durch einen epischen Kunstgriff den panoramatischen Gesamtblick des allwissenden Erzählers zurückgewinnt; Schmidt, der in gewisser Weise den umgekehrten Weg geht, nämlich die Begrenztheit der Sicht und Erkenntnisperspektive des personalen Erzählers nicht durch märchenhafte Zusätze erweitert, sondern sich gleichsam mit einer erzählerischen Lupe auf dessen Bewußtsein konzentriert. [...] Mit dem Blick auf die Entwicklung des westdeutschen Romans in den sechziger Jahren läßt sich sagen, dass hier erzählmethodisch bei Grass und Schmidt eine exemplarische Alternative sichtbar wird: auf der einen Seite die traditionelle Linie des Romanerzählens, die dadurch gefährdet sein kann, mitunter ins Epigonale abzurutschen, und auf der andern Seite eine experimentelle und innovative Linie, die freilich auch die Grenze zum Abstrus-Hermetischen überschreiten kann." Manfred Durzak, "Die zweite Phase des westdeutschen Nachkriegsromans". In Barner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, p. 390.

revisionist image of itself as a victim of Hitler's imperial expansion. This view was initially supported by the Allied forces in the "Declaration on Austria" included in the 1943 Moscow Declaration, which presented Austria as "the first free country to fall a victim to Hitlerite aggression," and referred to the *Anschluss* as an annexation.⁶⁶ While this declaration was initially intended as propaganda, designed to transform the growing Austrian dissatisfaction with the German war effort into support for the Austrian resistance,⁶⁷ it may have also played a part in legitimizing postwar attempts to negate Austrian national guilt. Due to this ambiguity, the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in postwar Austria took on a distinctly different character from that in Germany.

Schmidt-Dengler notes that, after 1945, "die öffentliche Organisationsform der Autoren in Analogie zu den politischen Organisationen gesehen werden kann," and points to the widespread attempts to wipe out the traces of Nazi-period activity from the biographies of respected literary figures.⁶⁸ In contrast to Germany, there was little discussion of a *Stunde Null* in this restorationist literary establishment; instead, its leading figures called for a direct return to a pre-Hitler national spirit. In a letter printed in *Der Turm* from November 1945, Alexander Lernet-Holenia makes this clear: "In der Tat brauchen wir nur dort fortzusetzen, wo uns die Träume eines Irren unterbrochen haben, in der Tat brauchen wir nicht voraus-

⁶⁶See: Robert H. Keyserlingk, *Austria in World War II: An Anglo-American Dilemma*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988, p. 207.

⁶⁷See: *Ibid.*, pp. 138 ff. The declaration, composed in part by the Political Warfare Executive (a British propaganda unit), also included a vague threat: "Austria is reminded [...] that she has a responsibility which she cannot evade for participation in the war on the side of Hitlerite Germany, and that in the final settlement account will inevitably be taken of her own contribution to her liberation." *ibid.*, pp. 207-8. Keyserlingk compares this to similar propaganda efforts at the end of the First World War: "Like the British propagandists at the end of World War I, [the PWE] hoped to trade promises of freedom, national independence, and easier postwar treatments at the hands of the Allies, for Austrian cooperation in the war against the Nazis. If anyone hoped to awaken and inspire Austrian resistance, these main promises represented the bare minimum." *ibid.*, p. 139.

⁶⁸See: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien : Vorlesungen zur österreichischen Literatur 1945 bis 1990*. Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz, 1995, pp. 20 ff.

sondern nur zurückblicken [. . .], wir *sind*, im besten und wertvollsten Verstande, unsere Vergangenheit.”⁶⁹ This rearward orientation results in two separate programs of reception in the immediate postwar years: on the one hand, a nostalgic look back to the *kaiserlich und königlich* Austro-Hungarian culture and the “ewige Werte” of classicism, and on the other hand, a revival of the progressive literary tendencies suppressed by the Nazis.

An example of this latter tendency can be seen in the Viennese literary journal *PLAN*, which was edited by Otto Basil and published from 1945 to 1948. *PLAN* featured writing from representatives of surrealism, expressionism, anglophone modernism, and other avant-garde movements, as well as Austrian writing from the prewar period (Nestroy, Kraus, Trakl, and Kafka) and new work by a younger generation of Austrian writers (Paul Celan, Erich Fried, Friederike Mayröcker, and Ilse Aichinger).⁷⁰ The July 1946 issue of *PLAN* included a short essay by Aichinger—whose prose works from the late-forties represent some of earliest examples of formally experimental writing in postwar Austria—entitled “Aufruf zum Mißtrauen”, in which she protests against the self-confident moralizing that began to guide postwar cultural rebuilding, asserting the fundamental importance of self-mistrust: “Uns selbst müssen wir mißtrauen. Der Klarheit unserer Absichten, der Tiefe unserer Gedanken, der Güte unserer Taten! Unserer eigenen Wahrhaftigkeit müssen wir mißtrauen! Schwingt nicht schon wieder Lüge darin?”⁷¹ Aichinger’s essay opposes Austrian restorationist discourse with a demand for skeptical questioning of one’s personal moral compass, which disrupts the convenient Austrian offloading of national guilt onto Germany,

⁶⁹Quoted in: Klaus Amann, *PEN : Politik. Emigration. Nationalsozialismus : Ein österreichischer Schriftstellerclub*. Vienna and Cologne and Graz: Böhlau, 1984, p. 80.

⁷⁰See: Kurt Adel, *Aufbruch und Tradition : Einführung in die österreichische Literatur seit 1945*. Vienna: Braumüller, 1982, pp. 1-3; and Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, pp. 23 ff.

⁷¹Ilse Aichinger; Samuel Moser, editor, *Materialien zu Leben und Werk*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990, pp. 16-17.

and also calls into question the existentialist moral imperatives promoted by neo-Sartreans like Andersch. While *PLAN* proved an important influence for many postwar writers, its attempts to revive prewar modernism failed to break through to a wider public.⁷² *PLAN*'s discontinuation in 1948 (due to economic reasons) marks the end of a brief period of postwar optimism, during which “die Hoffnung auf eine Umorientierung, auf eine fundamentale Änderung noch möglich schien”⁷³; following the journal's demise, the progressive literary spirit it represented gave way to the restorationist tendencies of the cultural *Wiederaufbau*, which was also a “Wiederaufbau einer traditionalistischen Literatur”: “Das Konsensbedürfnis im österreichischen ‘Wiederaufbau’ äußerte sich auch in einer Literatur ohne Kanten; klassizistisch-realistische, eher idyllisierende Traditionen rissen nichts auf und schienen für die staatliche Repräsentation besser verwendbar.”⁷⁴ As in Germany, this literary conservatism would ultimately dominate the Austrian cultural establishment in the immediate postwar years and into the fifties.

In the mid-fifties, in both Austria and West Germany, isolated young writers working in experimental and avant-garde styles begin to find other like-minded writers and form autonomous groups, which operated mainly on the peripheries of literary culture, and were oriented explicitly against the aesthetic tendencies of the postwar restoration. Foremost among these groups in West Germany were the *Stuttgarter Gruppe* (including Helmut Heißenbüttel, Reinhard Döhl, Franz Mon, Max Bense, and Ludwig Harig) and the *Darmstädter Kreis* (including Daniel Spoerri, Dieter Roth, Claus Bremer, and Emmett Williams),

⁷²See: Klaus Zeyringer, *Österreichische Literatur 1945-1998 : Überblicke, Einschnitte, Wegmarken*. Innsbruck: Haymon, 1999, pp. 111 ff.

⁷³Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 26.

⁷⁴Zeyringer, *Österreichische Literatur 1945-1998*, p. 112.

while Austria had the *Wiener Gruppe* (H.C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener, and Friedrich Achleitner). The *Stuttgarter Gruppe* was influenced by the nascent international concrete poetry movement, but developed in a different direction largely due to the theoretical influence of Max Bense; the *Darmstädter Kreis* and *Wiener Gruppe* both developed out of direct contact with avant-garde art scenes.

The group dynamic of mutual support was important for these writers, as it compensated for the hostile reception they received from the literary mainstream, as Gerhard Rühm notes: “in einer zeit, in der alles nur irgend neue in der kunst wüst beschimpft und verhöhnt wurde, ging es ums schlichte überleben: man musste sich zusammenschliessen, ungeachtet mancher meinungsverschiedenheiten, wenn man nur in der richtung ‘nach vorn’ übereinstimmte.”⁷⁵ In his study of the *Wiener Gruppe*, Michael Backes remarks upon the fundamentally antagonistic position their work assumes in relation to the literary establishment,⁷⁶ which involves the way these texts call into question the linguistic, semantic, and formal conventions that constitute the stylistic template of mainstream literature. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of symbolic capital and *illusio*, Backes describes the hegemonic struggle underlying these literary experiments:

Aufgrund ihrer Außenseiterstellung in der österreichischen Nachkriegskultur gelang es ihr, die zeichenhafte Wirklichkeitskonstruktion in ihren scheinhaften Aspekten zu reflektieren und produktiv zu nutzen. Daß es dabei zu heftigen Konfrontationen mit Staat und Gesellschaft kam, lag nicht allein am restaurativen Klima der fünfziger Jahre. Im Kampf um “symbolisches Kapital” (Bourdieu) gerät die Avantgarde zwangsläufig in Konflikt mit der herrschenden Orthodoxie und ihren “Garantiemächten”. Indem sie die etablierten Werte und Symbolordnungen experimentell und arbiträr relativiert, entbirgt sie auch deren

⁷⁵Gerhard Rühm, “zur ‘wiener gruppe’ in den fünfziger jahren - mit bemerkungen zu einigen frühen gemeinschaftsarbeiten”. In Drews, *Vom “Kahlschlag” zu “movens”*, p. 63.

⁷⁶As an example of this antagonistic relation, see the discussion of the 1964 *Wort in der Zeit* debacle in chapter 3, below.

grundlegenden *illusio*-Charakter (Bourdieu).⁷⁷

In the postwar decades, germanophone literature remained entangled in the attempt to reestablish, restore, or construct anew a national cultural identity, which included a reestablishment of cardinal cultural values. The experimental writing of the *Wiener Gruppe* called into question the semantic conventions of literature, thereby casting doubt upon the symbolic order at the foundation of postwar national values. Following Backes's Bourdieu reference, we can consider the conventional use of language and literary form as a cultural field with *illusio* character:

Illusio is the fact of being caught up in and by a game, of believing the game is “worth the candle,” or, more simply, that playing is worth the effort. [...] Interest is to “be there,” to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognize the game and to recognize its stakes.⁷⁸

The linguistic skepticism at the base of postwar experimental writing can be seen a rejection of “interest” in the “*illusio*” of conventional literary language. By refusing to participate within the set rules (here, rules of grammar, syntax, and form), and by demonstrating a viable alternative method, experimental writing challenges the dominance of traditional literary techniques; in postwar Germany and Austria, this also entailed a challenge to the official discourse by which national identity and values were being reestablished.

Horst Thomé makes a similar argument regarding Max Bense's position in the literary culture of the fifties. Bense came from an academic and scientific background, and developed a theory of experimental literature based on his research in semiotics, mathematics, and

⁷⁷Michael Backes, *Experimentelle Semiotik in Literaturavantgarden : Über die Wiener Gruppe mit Bezug auf die Konkrete Poesie*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2001, p. 15.

⁷⁸Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Trans. by Randall Johnson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 76-7.

cybernetics. He considered aesthetics “ein experimentelles Unternehmen [und] ein ebenso materiales wie intelligibles Feld für Versuche,” and saw the writing that followed from his theories as a “Fixierung einer Reflexion, nicht einer Darstellung.”⁷⁹ As Thomé states, Bense’s conception of literature as a linguistic laboratory was at odds with the dominant literary programs of the postwar period:

Es fällt auf, daß die Nachkriegszeit die Aufgabe der Traditionsvergewisserung in besonderer Weise der Dichtung zugesprochen hat. [...] Die Dichtung jener Zeit soll, so die Erwartung, Sinn stiften, Antworten auf die “letzten großen Fragen”, Orientierungswissen geben, zumindest ahnen lassen, Trost spenden. [...] Benses Insistieren auf der sprachlichen Materialität der Dichtung widerspricht eben diesem Sinnstiftungspostulat. Der so verblüffenden, unterhaltsamen, witzigen Poetisierung der Grammatikalität von Sprache, die Benses experimentelle Texte auszeichnet, wächst, liest man sie nur im Horizont ihrer Entstehungszeit, gerade über die Verweigerung des Pseudotiefsinns ihr Sinn zu [...].⁸⁰

As in the case of the *Wiener Gruppe*, Bense’s experimental approaches to literature rejected the ethical imperatives attached to literature in the immediate postwar years. In order to counter the cultural resistance to experimental writing, these postwar avant-garde groups developed polemical aesthetic programs that legitimized their own experimental techniques, against the predominant literary models. Following the lead of theorists like Bense, these programs often centered around language, reviving a spirit of language skepticism that can be easily traced back to the *fin de siècle*. The reasons for this turn against language in the formation of an experimental literary program differ from writer to writer, as does the manner in which they use language in their writing. Each of the following four chapters of this dissertation aims to address these issues in the work of a single postwar writer,

⁷⁹Quoted in: Renate Matthaei, editor, *Grenzverschiebung : neue Tendenzen in der deutschen Literatur*. 2nd edition. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1972, p. 64.

⁸⁰Horst Thomé, “Max Bense und die Literaten der fünfziger Jahre”. In *Zum Gedenken an Max Bense : Reden und Texte an seinem 90. Geburtstag*. Stuttgart: Universität Stuttgart, 2000, pp. 21-2.

illustrating the internal divergences within this larger trend.

While the individual linguistic models may differ, most share a single fundamental strategy: by focusing on the innate abstraction and representational limitations of language, they cut the legs out from beneath the moralistic, engaged, realist literary models that were dominating the German and Austrian literary markets during the fifties and sixties. In this shared approach, the postwar neo-avant-garde also signifies a neo-*Sprachkrise*, wherein unresolved doubts about language lingering from the early twentieth century are revived in order to legitimize a formally progressive approach to writing. And while many of the linguistic issues remain the same as those that preoccupied Hofmannsthal and Mauthner, this neo-*Sprachkrise* also integrates more recent linguistic theories: most importantly the language philosophy of Wittgenstein—who, surprisingly, wasn't published in Germany until 1960,⁸¹ and was therefore only known to a select group, for whom he became a kind of cult figure⁸²—but also Whorf's principle of linguistic relativity and Alfred Korzybski's theories of general semantics. These added influences increased the intellectual sophistication of this neo-*Sprachkrise*, which shed some of the neo-romantic pathos of writers like Rilke and Sack.

Just as the *Sprachkrise* takes on a different character in its postwar revival, this postwar neo-avant-garde also adopts a fundamentally different character to that of its prewar prede-

⁸¹The *Tractatus* was published in Germany in 1921, but only in an academic journal, and was not widely available until Suhrkamp published the first volume of Wittgenstein's *Schriften*, containing the *Tractatus* and the *Untersuchungen* (the latter of which had not been published in Germany before), in 1960; see "Bibliography and Reference System" in: Alois Pichler and Simo Säätelä, editors, *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*. Heusenstamm: ontos, 2006, pp. 431-9.

⁸²Wittgenstein's reception by writers and poets, especially those of American modernism and the Language poets, has engendered a tradition of language-critical avant-garde writing that bears much in common with the work of the writers addressed in this study; see: Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

cessor. Backes shows how the *Wiener Gruppe*'s appropriation of the prewar avant-garde entails an evolution, forming an autonomous character that establishes a basis for the development of a post-avant-garde aesthetic; in Backes's model, the *Wiener Gruppe* illustrates the continuity of the neo-avant-garde with postmodernism:

Die Wiener haben die durch den Ständestaat und die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft verschütteten historischen Avantgarden für sich nach und nach wiederentdeckt, haben sich ihrer Verfahren bemächtigt und schließlich Anschluß an die internationale Kunstentwicklung gewonnen. Indem die Wiener Nachkriegsavantgarde die Verfahren der historischen Avantgarden seit dem Ästhetizismus und Dadaismus rekapitulierte, verarbeitete, summierte und 'totalisierte', erhält deren Entwicklung den Charakter einer abschließenden Summe und eines letzte Konsequenzen ausformulierenden Resümees. Die Radikalität der Wiener Nachkriegsavantgarde wurzelt in dieser literatur- und kunsthistorischen Situation. In dem Maße, in dem sich die Wiener Avantgarde die Verfahren der historischen Avantgarden aneignete, nahm sie selbst historistische Züge einer sich auf die historischen Avantgarden reflexiv beziehenden Postavantgarde an und bereitete einer postmodernen Situation der Beliebigkeit den Weg.⁸³

The historical model Backes uses here can also be applied to postwar avant-garde writers in Germany. It is important to recognize that the continuation of the prewar avant-garde in the postwar period—which was impeded in Germany by the *Stunde Null* concept, and in Austria by the revival of neo-classical literary forms—does not preclude the development, maturation, and alteration of the “historical” avant-garde aesthetic. As Backes and Thomé both show, experimental literature involves a hegemonic struggle with the cultural establishment; since the cultural establishment of the 1910s and 1920s is obviously different from that of the 1950s—just as it differs between Germany, Austria, France, and beyond—it follows that the hegemonic struggle must also be different, resulting in literary work that makes different claims, confronts different resistances, and transgresses different limits. The work of the

⁸³Backes, *Experimentelle Semiotik in Literaturavantgarden*, pp. 12-3.

Wiener Gruppe, like that of the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*, should be seen not as a repetition, but as a revival and ensuing evolution, moving ineluctably towards an aesthetic orientation that can be designated as postmodern.

The contemporary poet Ulf Stolterfoht echoes this view in a recent essay, where he claims to have learned from Heißenbüttel's critical essays that the avant-garde begins

nicht mit Marinetti und Majakowski, mit Ball und Schwitters [...], sondern spätestens mit [Johann] Fischart und [Quirinus] Kuhlmann,⁸⁴ und dass sie nicht mit der Konkreten Poesie endet – vielmehr verhalte es sich so [...], dass wir es hier mit einem unabgeschlossenen, unabschließbaren Prozess zu tun haben, und dass es kein Zurück gibt hinter die Erreichungen der Avantgarde, was in gleichem Maße für ihre Verächter wie für ihre Apologeten gilt.⁸⁵

For this study, I will be adopting this model of the avant-garde as an unbounded continuum of literary innovation. I reject outright Peter Bürger's characterization of the neo-avant-garde as stale repetition and, ultimately, a renunciation of the advances made by the historical avant-garde⁸⁶; my study replaces his Hegelian abstractions with individual analyses of the writers' personal aesthetic projects—a “microaesthetic” approach opposing Bürger's “macroaesthetic” theory.⁸⁷ I also intend to avoid any definition of “the avant-garde” as

⁸⁴Writers from the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively.

⁸⁵Ulf Stolterfoht, “Noch einmal: Über Avantgarde und experimentelle Lyrik”. *BELLA triste*, 17, 2007, p. 190.

⁸⁶“Die Neo-avantgarde institutionalisiert die Avantgarde als Kunst und negiert damit die genuin avangardistischen Intention.” [Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, p. 80.] Bürger's critique of the neo-avant-garde rests on his own reading of the “historical avant-garde” as involved in the *Aufhebung* of art in life. This neo-Hegelian mononarrative already misrepresents the multivalent aesthetic function of the original avant-garde, and is a wholly unsuitable basis for a rejection of neo-avant-garde movements.

⁸⁷In a recent article addressing criticisms of his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger is particularly brazen in confirming that his theory operates independent to history, willfully effacing historical difference in pursuit of conceptual elegance: “Even rhetorical questions can be answered in detail; what cannot be answered is the charge, usually raised only by the theory-phobic, that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* forces the differences and contradictions within the avant-garde movements into unifying categories—in short that the author has not written a history of the avant-garde. [...] There are, of course, differences between futurism, Dada, surrealism and constructivism, for example in their orientation toward technology. A history of the avant-garde

a unified movement, or even as a valid unitary aesthetic description.⁸⁸ In looking at the different ways individual writers orient themselves with regard to language and linguistic theory, I am not trying to explain “the avant-garde” or even “the neo-avant-garde”—I am rather attempting to illustrate a particular trend occurring within a limited time period involving writers of literature that can be described as experimental. My project may not have the epoch-defining scope of Bürger’s study, but I am content that it will at least be a bit more accurate.

Grenzverschiebung: Linguistic Thinking in the 1960s

This dissertation will look at the theme of language in the literary and critical writings of Helmut Heißenbüttel, Konrad Bayer, Peter Handke, and Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. My selection includes two Germans (Heißenbüttel and Brinkmann) and two Austrians (Bayer

movements would have to represent these differences, which can be demonstrated by tracing the intellectual altercations between the various groupings. Theory pursues other goals; thus *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tries to make visible the historical epoch in which the development of art in bourgeois society can be recognized. To this end, it needs to undertake generalizations that are set at a much higher level of abstraction than the generalizations of historians.” [Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde”. *New Literary History*, 41.4, 2010, p. 703.] I fail to see the utility of a theory that sets itself against history, and would prefer a theoretical approach that aligns itself *with* history in the pursuit not only of coherence, but also of precision.

For more on the applicability (and inapplicability) of theories of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde, see: Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994, pp. 4 ff.

⁸⁸In an article from the same journal issue as the Bürger article quoted in the previous note, Bob Perelman declares “avant-garde” an outdated term, comparing it to the obsolete scientific concept of phlogiston—a hypothesized ‘heat molecule’ which was found to be nonexistent: “According to seventeenth-century proto-chemical theory, phlogiston was the heat-bearing substance: when a log burned, phlogiston was released into the atmosphere. But now, of course, phlogiston exists only as a verbal curio from a discarded scientific regime. In modern and contemporary poetry, phenomena akin to heat occur in exciting work that do not occur in more routinized forms of writing, but must the concept of ‘avant-garde’ continue to be the essential index to what is taking place?” [Bob Perelman, “My Avant-Garde Card”. *New Literary History*, 41.4, 2010, p. 878.] With Perelman I promote the phasing-out of “avant-garde” as a label, and advocate a turn towards an analysis of the formal techniques that produce “avant-garde effects”; in this study I will favor the use of “experimental” rather than “avant-garde,” which is certainly not an unproblematic term, but is clearer in its demarcation of a specific creative approach, implying an openness to formal innovation.

and Handke), as well as two representatives of a “first wave” of postwar experimental writing (Heißenbüttel and Bayer, who both began writing in the early fifties) and two representatives of a “second wave” (Handke and Brinkmann, who both began writing in the early sixties). This allows me to address the differences between West Germany and Austria, and also to illustrate a specific development that takes place between these two generations of experimental writers. A further motivation for my selection is the fact that, excepting Handke, these writers, along with the movement they represent, are largely neglected by literary scholarship—especially by anglophone Germanists.⁸⁹ I hope to offer potential readers an introduction to these overlooked writers, and to encourage a deeper scholarly engagement with experimental literature of the postwar period.

Above all, I simply want to document the existence of this belated *Sprachkrise*, which often goes missing in literary histories due to a primary focus on the political issues of the time. Against a view of the sixties as the decade of “Politisierung,” culminating in the “death of literature” in 1968, I aim to describe an alternate history of the writers that rejected the prevalent political orientation in favor of an engagement with issues of language and form.

In the foreword to *Grenzverschiebung*, an anthology of innovative writing from the late sixties, Renate Matthaei describes how the *Politisierung* of literature can be traced back to

⁸⁹The extent to which these authors have been neglected can be demonstrated by a cursory search of the MLA’s international bibliographical database, hosted by EBSCO. Restricting search results to mentions in peer-reviewed items from 1945 to 2015, we find that Celan (with 349 results), Grass (309), Christa Wolf (255), and W.G. Sebald (244) are the most written-about postwar germanophone authors. While Handke fares well (214), the situation is much more grim for Brinkmann (21), Bayer (6), and Heißenbüttel (4, the most recent of which is from 1992). The situation is also fairly depressing for other postwar avant-garde writers: Arno Schmidt (44), Ernst Jandl (25), Eugen Gomringer (5), Oswald Wiener (1). While these findings may partly point towards specific Germanist trends (such as the recent Sebald bubble, and a *Wendezeit* Wolf bubble), I think that the low figures for a writer like Schmidt, who is considered by many (including myself) to be a genius on par with Joyce, are symptomatic of a general Germanist hesitance to engage with postwar experimental writing. [Figures from *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost, accessed February 27, 2015.]

the engaged literary positions of the postwar period. The engagement promoted by Andersch and others encumbered literature with a “gesellschaftliche Abhängigkeit”: “Entnazifizierung, Entmilitarisierung und Entideologisierung waren nicht nur die proklamierten Stichworte der damaligen Regierungsautorität, sondern auch die der Literaten”⁹⁰; throughout the fifties, literature remained “fixiert an das gesellschaftliche Trauma der Vergangenheit, dessen Behandlung zur Pflichtübung geworden war – vom Publikum erwartet, von der Kritik gelobt.”⁹¹ This situation prevented literary culture, which was “political only in the sense of being firmly anti-fascist,”⁹² from adopting actual political positions that would be critical of the postwar German government. The increasing political radicalization of the sixties—spurred on by the 1962 *Spiegel-Affäre*,⁹³ mounting discontent with the CDU and Adenauer, the Vietnam War, the 1966 *Große Koalition*, and the growing student movement—drove a younger generation to see itself as at odds with literature, precisely due to the interdependence between literature and official cultural discourse: “Revolutionäre Praxis verhörte die Literatur, und Literatur sah sich plötzlich mit dem, was sie selber immer anzugreifen schien: mit der Gesellschaft identifiziert.”⁹⁴ Leading figures of the post-1945 literary establishment were criticized for their attitude of “resignation,”⁹⁵ and younger writers like Martin Walser and Hans Magnus Enzensberger began to voice attacks on the institution of authorship in West Germany.⁹⁶ The demand that literature become “politicized” was intended to reinstate

⁹⁰Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, p. 14.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 15.

⁹²R. Hinton Thomas and Keith Bullivant, *Literature in Upheaval: West German Writers and the Challenge of the 1960s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974, p. 31.

⁹³This incident involved an illegal government raid of the offices of *Der Spiegel*, orchestrated by a CDU minister, following an article that criticized West German military organization. See: Timothy Scott Brown, *West Germany and the Global Sixties: The Anti-Authoritarian Revolt, 1962–1978*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 124 ff.; and Thomas and Bullivant, *Literature in Upheaval*, pp. 34 ff.

⁹⁴Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, p. 15.

⁹⁵See: Thomas and Bullivant, *Literature in Upheaval*, pp. 32 ff.

⁹⁶See: “Skizze zu einem Vorwurf”, in: Martin Walser; Helmuth Kiesel, editor, *Werke in zwölf Bänden*,

the oppositional identity of literary culture, setting it against the steady advance of capitalist consumer society; young radicals fostered an antagonism between literature and mass media—particularly the Axel Springer publications⁹⁷—and protest movements began to target established literary institutions, such as the 1967 meeting of the *Gruppe 47* and the 1968 Frankfurt Book Fair.⁹⁸ The indeterminate humanism and existentialism of the original post-1945 call for literary engagement was exchanged for an explicitly political orientation.

In 1968, an essay by Enzensberger was understood as proclaiming the “Tod der Literatur”⁹⁹ due to the lack of any effective social role for the writer in capitalist society: “Eine revolutionäre Literatur existiert nicht [. . .]. Für literarische Kunstwerke läßt sich eine wesentliche gesellschaftliche Funktion in unserer Lage nicht angeben.”¹⁰⁰ However, not everyone was willing to heed this proclamation and abandon literature for direct political engagement. As Matthaei points out, those who chose to persist with literature generally followed one of two opposed paths: on the one hand, there were writers like Peter Weiss, Günter Wallraff, Yak Karsunke, Reinhard Lettau, and F. C. Delius, who worked to develop new methods for literature to be politically effective—with the movements of *Dokumentar-literatur* and *Arbeiterdichtung* as the major threads of this tendency; on the other hand, there were writers like Heißenbüttel, Peter Bichsel, and Jürgen Becker, who represented a “von der Intention her völlig entgegengesetzt[e] literarisch[e] Tendenz der 60er Jahre: [die] neu[e]

Band 11: Ansichten, Einsichten. Aufsätze zur Zeitgeschichte. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997, pp. 21-4; and “Die literarische Regierungspartei”, in: Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962, pp. 171-8.

⁹⁷See: Thomas and Bullivant, *Literature in Upheaval*, p. 39.

⁹⁸See: *Ibid.*, p. 36, pp. 44-5.

⁹⁹This was somewhat of a misinterpretation of Enzensberger’s essay, but it nevertheless stuck as a cultural buzz-phrase. See: Barner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, pp. 361 ff.

¹⁰⁰Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Gemeinplätze, die Neueste Literatur betreffend”. In *Kursbuch 15.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968, p. 195.

Aufmerksamkeit für den Zitatcharakter der Sprache.”¹⁰¹ Both paths function as “Antworten auf den Zweifel an der Verbindlichkeit von Literatur”¹⁰²; the latter tendency, which involves a general skepticism regarding language and literary convention, is especially symptomatic of the “Unsicherheit einer Literatur, die ihr Selbstbewußtsein als Opponent der Gesellschaft verloren hat.”¹⁰³ This second path—which should be seen as a deviation away from politicization, and a move towards an analytical approach to language and form, resulting in an experimental approach to writing—persisted throughout the sixties and into the seventies as a viable alternative to the political trajectory; however, it is seldom acknowledged in literary histories, which often seem to privilege Enzensberger’s revolutionary rhetoric. I hope to somewhat counterbalance this neglect with my own study.

I will be reading Heißenbüttel and Bayer as representatives of a “first wave” of post-war linguistic aesthetics, in which linguistic skepticism forms the theoretical basis for an approach to writing as an experimental field of syntactic play. This writing often features sabotaged uses of language and literary technique, in order to expose the various inconsistencies that underlie traditional literature and conventional uses of language. Heißenbüttel regards grammar and syntax as hermetic systems of meaning that present a distorted picture of reality. This leads him to declare that literature, being made out of words, should concern itself with words alone, isolated from their representational link to the world¹⁰⁴; he labels his writings *Sprachdemonstrationen*, whose purpose is to expose the compromised nature of linguistic representation. Bayer is more focused on the cognitive experience of language, which he sees as an inadequate medium between the subject and the world: “[Bayer] weist

¹⁰¹Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, pp. 19-22.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰⁴See: Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*. Olten and Freiburg: Walter, 1966, pp. 219 ff.

auf die Kluft zwischen dem Gedanken und der Möglichkeit hin, denselben adäquat zu mitteilen.”¹⁰⁵ His writing reflects a deep epistemological doubt, portraying language as a barrier to direct knowledge of the world. Both Heißenbüttel and Bayer represent a kind of Copernican Revolution of literary language, by which the innate aporia of language are exposed and accentuated in order to justify a break from traditional writing techniques.

While this same orientation can be seen in the aesthetics of later writers like Handke and Brinkmann, there is an important shift in linguistic thinking that takes place towards the end of the sixties. The initial stance of absolute linguistic skepticism is gradually relaxed; while not renouncing linguistic doubt, these later writers attempt to reestablish language’s representative relation to the world. In a move bearing some similarity to the shift from the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* to the late Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, these writers relinquish the idea of a utopian language, and begin to pragmatically accept ordinary language for the compromised communicative function it serves, despite its internal contradictions. This results in a mode of writing based in unconventional approaches to description, narration, and the conveyance of subjective experience. While the early writings of both Handke and Brinkmann exhibits a tendency towards *Sprachnegation*—with Handke describing his work in 1966 as “Eine Niedermachung von Sprache, ein Angriff auf [...] die Sprache selber.”¹⁰⁶—they both loosen their initial skepticism towards the end of the sixties: Handke gives up his *Sprachspiel* experiments for long-form narrative prose works, while Brinkmann develops a direct mode of descriptive writing influenced by American poetry. In this later phase, however, the specter of language remains present for both writers as a

¹⁰⁵Dagmar Winkler, *Die neo-kybernetische Literatur*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996, *Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur* 125, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶Taken from an interview following the 1966 opening of *Selbstbeziehung* and *Weissagung* in Oberhausen: Günther Büch, *Selbstbeziehung ; Weissagung. Diskussion*. Film recording, October 22, 1966.

source of self-questioning, guiding their attempts to transcend linguistic limitation through writing.

The later work of Handke and Brinkmann is often grouped with the movement of *Neue Subjektivität*. This label, coined in 1975 by Marcel Reich-Ranicki—who had previously panned the work of both Handke and Brinkmann, and had also been involved in heated interactions with both writers in the late sixties¹⁰⁷—lacks a clear definition, having developed out of the “Subjektivismusstreit,” which debated the literary value of the various forms of subjective, personal, emotional, and descriptive writing that appeared in the early seventies. Much of the critical reception of this writing was unfavorable, as implied by the more pejorative alternate terms, *Neue Sensibilität* and *Neue Innerlichkeit*.¹⁰⁸ New Subjective writers were seen as enacting a “Rückkehr des Ichs,” and were criticized for producing a literature based in introspection and solipsism—a return of Böll’s *Blindekuh-Schriftsteller*. While this writing is usually presented as a reaction to the political disappointment and disillusionment following 1968, I aim to offer a different account. The aforementioned critical

¹⁰⁷Handke attacked Reich-Ranicki in the 1968 essay “Marcel Reich-Ranicki und die Natürlichkeit” following a series of dismissive reviews; see: Peter Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972, pp. 203-7. Brinkmann’s altercation with Reich-Ranicki also occurred in 1968; see below, ch. 5; see also: Karl-Eckhard Carius, editor, *Brinkmann : Schnitte im Atemschutz*. Munich: edition text + kritik, 2008, p. 35.

¹⁰⁸Gerhard Lampe offers a collection of all the different terms and conceptual markers used to describe this trend during the “Subjektivismusstreit”; the list shows the lack of a coherent critical understanding as well as the extent to which the critical reception was unfavorable: “Leitwährung ist der ‘Subjektivismus’, gezahlt wird in unterschiedlicher Münze: (alte und neue) ‘Innerlichkeit’, ‘subjektivistische Welterfahrung’, ‘Stilisierung des Ich’, ‘Narzißmus’, ‘Exhibitionismus’, ‘Abdeckerei des privaten Ego’, ‘extremer Solipsismus’. Der Kurs wird von der ‘Tendenzwende’ beeinflusst und ‘Opportunismus’, ‘Rückzug ins Private’ und ‘Individualismus’ in ihrem Gefolge. Pure Subjektivität ist kaum noch zu haben—allenfalls findet man einen ‘radikalen Subjektivismus’, wenn nicht ‘fanatischen Subjektivismus’, für die man sich jedoch nicht selten ‘Irrationalismus’ und ‘neue Mystik’ einhandelt.” [Lampe includes references for each term—from Roman Ritter, Helmut Mader, Michael Schneider, Reinhard Lettau, Jochen Kelter, Ewald Dede, Gustav Ernst, Uwe Timm, and Martin Roda Becher] Gerhard Lampe, *Ohne Subjektivität : Interpretationen zur Lyrik Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns vor dem Hintergrund der Studentebewegung*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983, *Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* 34, pp. 7-8.

model follows from the perspective of the sixties as the decade of *Politisierung*—however, Handke and Brinkmann were never interested in politically engaged writing, and belonged to the non-political, language-centric tendency of the sixties. In analyzing the so-called New Subjective works of these two writers, I aim to offer a different picture of New Subjectivity, showing how, in the case of Handke and Brinkmann, this new mode of writing develops out of an experimental attempt to progress beyond linguistic skepticism without retreating to conventional realism, and also entails a critique of German intellectual culture.

2. Helmut Heißenbüttel: “das Sagbare sagen”

Helmut Heißenbüttel was one of the earliest prominent advocates of experimental literature in postwar Germany, and was also one of the few avant-garde writers to be accepted by the *Gruppe 47*. Although he would become one of the group’s loyal members, his acceptance within their ranks was a special case: instead of enthusiastic support, he was received with a kind of nonplussed curiosity.¹⁰⁹ Though his first few readings received either perplexed or negative responses, Heißenbüttel continued to be invited back, possibly because of Hans Werner Richter’s personal admiration for him. Although readings at group meetings were normally accompanied by a public critique by the other group members, Heißenbüttel was sometimes made to forego this convention. Many of the group’s critical stalwarts found Heißenbüttel’s texts intriguing, but professed ignorance as to their meaning or purpose, and thus had little or nothing to say about them. His texts were somewhat patronizingly received by the group as verbal curio, rather than as works of literature deserving of measured critical attention. Nevertheless, Heißenbüttel would return to the group’s meetings numerous times,

¹⁰⁹A good description of Heißenbüttel’s role in the group is given in: Heinz Ludwig Arnold, *Die Gruppe 47*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2004, pp. 84 ff.

and would often test new work as a measure of the reception he could expect from the general literary public.

Peter Bichsel saw Heißenbüttel as serving an “Alibi-Funktion”¹¹⁰ for the group: his inclusion was intended to compensate for the general lack of formally adventurous, experimental or avant-garde writing in the group’s accepted canon throughout the fifties and early sixties. Richter presents the case differently, however, describing how the group’s varied reactions to Heißenbüttel’s texts inaugurated an aesthetic divide that would persist until the group’s demise in the late sixties: between the aesthetes, on the one hand—the formalists, the artists—and on the other hand, the storytellers—the so-called realists.¹¹¹ Yet despite this alleged split in the group’s aesthetic orientation, none of the writing by adherents of the former group—among which Richter counted writers like Uwe Johnson, Peter Weiss, and Bichsel—ever approached the levels of experimentalism that are reached in Heißenbüttel’s work. And importantly, none of these other writers ever followed Heißenbüttel in his central aesthetic program: his view that literature was required to demonstrate the various ways in which it is determined by systems of language. Heißenbüttel’s isolated position within the *Gruppe 47*—accorded respect while remaining an outsider—would go on to determine the tenor of his later career. Though he would achieve considerable literary prestige, delivering the *Frankfurter Poetik-Vorlesungen* in 1963 and obtaining the Georg Büchner prize in 1969, he would never achieve widespread renown, and he remains an obscure figure today.¹¹²

¹¹⁰Ibid., p. 86.

¹¹¹See: Ibid., p. 87.

¹¹²In the past two decades, critical work on Heißenbüttel has been scarce. However, the publication of two volumes from 2011 devoted to his work, as well as a traveling exhibition in 2013, may point to a rise in scholarly interest in his work; see: Thomas Combrink, *Sammler und Erfinder: Zu Leben und Werk Helmut Heißenbüttels*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011; Hans-Edwin Friedrich and Sven Hanuschek, editors, “*Reden über die Schwierigkeiten der Rede*”: *Das Werk Helmut Heißenbüttels*. Munich: edition text + kritik, 2011; and Johanna Bohley and Lutz Dittrich, editors, *Helmut Heißenbüttel: Literatur für alle. Begleitheft zur Ausstellung*

Heißenbüttel belonged to the same generation as Böll, Höllerer, and Celan, having taken part in the German war effort—during which he lost his left arm fighting in Russia—and studied literature, architecture, and art history in the postwar years. He read Pound, Pirandello, and Evelyn Waugh, discovered Gertrude Stein in 1954, but was also in contact with Wolfgang Weyrauch¹¹³; he retained an active interest in art and music, naming the paintings of Picasso and Klee among his “Lieblingslektüre.”¹¹⁴ His first poetry collection was published in 1954, and in 1955 he met Max Bense (who introduced him to the writings of Wittgenstein) and began his association with the *Stuttgarter Gruppe*.¹¹⁵

Heißenbüttel’s prominence in the sixties was arguably due more to his theoretical positions about literature than from his literary writing itself. In 1961, Heißenbüttel published a short programmatic text entitled “Voraussetzungen”,¹¹⁶ which outlines the theoretical assumptions from which his writing proceeds. The first of the text’s seven sections contains the most basic formulation of his view of literature’s linguistic obligations:

Es scheint heute etwas in Vergessenheit geraten zu sein, daß Literatur nicht aus Vorstellungen, Bildern, Empfindungen, Meinungen, Thesen, Streitobjekten, “geistigen Gebrauchsgegenständen” usw. besteht, sondern aus Sprache, daß sie es mit nichts anderem als mit Sprache zu tun hat. Und wenn es nicht in Vergessenheit geraten ist, so scheint es doch nicht deutlich zu sein, was das bedeutet. Was bedeutet es?¹¹⁷

The formulation, ‘Literatur besteht aus Sprache, und hat mit anderem nichts zu tun,’ or simply
in den Literaturhäusern Berlin und Stuttgart sowie in der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, 2012/13.
Dresden: Saxoprint, 2012.

¹¹³See: Helmut Heißenbüttel, “‘Meine’ oder ‘die’ fünfziger Jahre”. In Drews, *Vom “Kahlschlag” zu “movens”*, pp. 57 ff.

¹¹⁴See “STENOGRAMM”, in: Bohley and Dittrich, *Helmut Heißenbüttel: Literatur für alle*, p. 5.

¹¹⁵See: Döhl, “Der Kreis um Max Bense”.

¹¹⁶The piece was originally written for a collection of poetic and theoretical texts, edited by Hans Bender, entitled *Mein Gedicht ist mein Messer*. It was later published in Heißenbüttel’s essay collection *Über Literatur* in 1966. See: Hans Bender, editor, *Mein Gedicht ist mein Messer : Lyriker zu ihren Gedichten*. Munich: List, 1969.

¹¹⁷Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 219.

that literature ‘hat es mit Sprache zu tun,’ became a motto for Heißenbüttel that he would often repeat in interviews¹¹⁸; it would likewise become a kind of dogmatic dictum accepted by many readers and critics during the sixties.¹¹⁹ Vietta notes that Heißenbüttel’s statement is likely a paraphrase of Mallarmé,¹²⁰ whom Valéry reports as having made the following remark in conversation with Degas: “Ce n’est point avec des idées, mon cher Degas, que l’on faire des vers. C’est avec des mots.”¹²¹ By borrowing from Mallarmé, Heißenbüttel aligns himself with the tradition of the historical avant-garde; yet he simultaneously updates Mallarmé’s aestheticism, rendering it applicable to the postwar intellectual environment in West Germany, invoking with his list of “geistigen Gebrauchsgegenständen” the endless debates regarding the ethical imperatives of German literature in the early postwar years. For Heißenbüttel, these debates fail to recognize that literature is a primarily linguistic object. The stance Heißenbüttel takes here in opposition to the literary establishment can be compared with similar developments in France during the fifties: namely, the reaction of a younger generation of experimental writers against what they saw as an outdated set of criteria for literary value. Barthes’ foregrounding of the formal concerns that Sartre failed to include in his model of a *littérature engagée* can be seen as characteristic of this general trend. If the unadventurous, moralizing *Kahlschlag*-realism of the fifties reflects the demands made by Sartre upon postwar writers, then Heißenbüttel’s push for an experimental

¹¹⁸See, for example: Urs Widmer, *Zweifel an der Sprache. Porträt Helmut Heißenbüttel*. Hessischer Rundfunk, Film recording, December 5, 1967.

¹¹⁹As Matthaei points out, the ambiguity of Heißenbüttel’s original statement was rarely addressed: “Daß Literatur, laut Heißenbüttel, es ‘mit Sprache zu tun habe’, wurde unter Literatoren [sic] und Kritikern zum ebenso geflügelten wie dogmatischen Wort. Was dabei im einzelnen unter ‘Sprache’ zu verstehen sei, blieb gewöhnlich undefiniert.” Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, p. 23.

¹²⁰See: Silvio Vietta, *Sprache und Sprachreflexion in der modernen Lyrik*. Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1970, *Literatur und Reflexion* 3, p. 11.

¹²¹See: *Théorie poétique et esthétique* (1939) in: Paul Valéry; Jean Hytier, editor, *Œuvres I*. Paris: Pléiade, 1957, p. 1324.

literature can be paired with Barthes' advocacy of the "objective literature" of the *nouveau roman*. Yet whereas Barthes focuses on issues of literary form, Heißenbüttel is more specific, situating the problem entirely in language, decrying what he sees as a widespread, debilitating blindness to the literary limitations of linguistic form.

Heißenbüttel's literary practice always takes as its starting point the goal of exposing how language determines an individual's thought and actions. Ernst Nef speaks of his work as an "aufklärerisches Unterfangen,"¹²² aiming to expose every individual subject as a "Bündel [von] Redegewohnheiten"¹²³: "Wenn Heißenbüttel von der Sprache redet, und das hat er eigentlich in seinem ganzen Werk getan, geht es ihm um die armselige Befangenheit des Menschen in ihr."¹²⁴ The *Befangenheit* of people in language corresponds to the *Befangenheit* of literature in language; for Heißenbüttel, literature is capable of exposing readers to their own *Befangenheit* through a program of linguistic experimentation. It is important to note here that Heißenbüttel's theoretical position does not comprise an outright rejection of the demands of *littérature engagée*—which, as we will see later, younger writers like Handke and Brinkmann were willing to do—but rather a reassessment of the function of engagement in light of certain ideas about language: he retains the general conviction that, "für unsere Epoche," literature fulfills—must fulfill—the role of a "Mittel der radikalen Aufklärung."¹²⁵ This didactic and programmatic streak in Heißenbüttel's writing—which injects an intellectual conscience into the anarchic formal experimentation of the historical avant-garde—may explain why he was able to maintain a collegial coexistence with the

¹²²Ernst Nef, "Immer dorthin, wohin man nicht kommt", in: Christina Weiss, editor, *Schrift écriture geschrieben gelesen: für Helmut Heißenbüttel zum siebzigsten Geburtstag*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1991, p. 60.

¹²³Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 202.

¹²⁴Weiss, *Schrift écriture geschrieben gelesen*, pp. 59-60.

¹²⁵Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 237.

writers of the *Gruppe 47*, despite the vast differences between his writing and the kind of work promoted by someone like Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Heißenbüttel wanted to redefine the terms of literary engagement, asserting a new understanding of linguistic function as a necessary precondition to any discussion of political or historical meaning. For Heißenbüttel, a literary practice that does not explicitly engage with issues of language can only repeat the formulations of inherited linguistic models, sacrificing its own cultural autonomy. Through this theoretical framing of his writing, Heißenbüttel creates a synthesis of the formalism of the historical avant-garde with the neo-Sartrean moralism of fifties' realism: by situating language at the center of literary engagement, Heißenbüttel justifies experimental writing as a sound ethical endeavor, rather than merely a frivolous aestheticism.

This approach is echoed in the writings of Max Bense and his colleagues of the so-called *Stuttgarter Schule*, among whose ranks Heißenbüttel is usually counted. In a short text from 1964, written by Bense in collaboration with Reinhard Döhl, "Zur Lage"—later characterized by Döhl as a manifesto for the *Stuttgarter Schule*¹²⁶—an attempt is made to identify the shifting parameters of writerly engagement for modern literature. Bense and Döhl see the mysticism of the traditional authorial role being replaced by a new rationalism, which implies a different set of social obligations for the author:

Zwar bleibt auch dieser Autor, als intellektuelles Individuum einer Zivilisation und ihrer Gesellschaft, eben dieser Gesellschaft verpflichtet: aber an Stelle der ethischen Verpflichtung tritt die ästhetische Moral, an Stelle des Kategorischen Imperativs zählt die ästhetische Auseinandersetzung (mit der Sprache des Unmenschen etwa), an Stelle der mitgeteilten Fabel gilt das ästhetische Spiel: In einem solchen Sinne sprechen wir auch von Poesie heute als einer ästhetischen Negation gesellschaftlicher Zustände, zivilisatorischer Mängel.¹²⁷

¹²⁶See: Döhl, "Der Kreis um Max Bense".

¹²⁷Max Bense and Reinhard Döhl, "Zur Lage". In *konkrete poesie. deutschsprachige autoren*. Edited by Eugen Gomringer. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1972, p. 165.

Like Heißenbüttel, Bense and Döhl preserve the idea of literature's social obligations of; however, they redefine engagement as something concerned with form, rather than content—be it political, ethical, or metaphysical. What defines the new avant-garde here, and what separates it from traditional literature, is an aestheticization of the ethical demands made upon literature. This rationalistic, engaged formalism—presented as a “Spiel,” but lacking in frivolity—can be easily distinguished from the antagonistic, anarchic, and sometimes even nihilistic turn towards aestheticism and formalism constituting the foundations of prewar avant-garde writing.

As the only properly experimental writer to be counted as a central member of the *Gruppe 47*, Heißenbüttel was characterized as playing a “Mittlerrolle” between the experimentalists and the traditionalists¹²⁸; however, he would often downplay the links between his own work and that of other groups of experimental writers, perhaps in an attempt to conserve his individualist position, separate from either extreme of the literary spectrum. Despite the formal resemblance of his work to concrete poetry, and despite his personal association with some of the major German-language concrete poets—Eugen Gomringer and Max Bense, among others—Heißenbüttel explicitly denied that he should be grouped with this movement, preferring instead to claim a separate, individual space for his own work. In his introduction to Gomringer's collection *worte sind schatten* (1969), Heißenbüttel praises Gomringer's work, acknowledging the strong influence on his own work, but ultimately declaring his own project's independence: “Ich selber, obwohl immer wieder dazugerechnet [as a concrete poet], [. . .] habe mich nie damit identisch gefühlt und passe auch im strengen Sinne, so

¹²⁸See: Heißenbüttel and Rotermund, “Wahrscheinlich ist es in den Wind geredet. Gespräch mit Hermann Rotermund am 2. März 1984 in Borsfleth”.

meine ich, nicht dahinein. Was mich daran interessiert, wirkt sich anders aus.”¹²⁹ This statement can be seen as merely a tactical attempt to avoid being stylistically pigeonholed: after all, Heißenbüttel’s description of the goal of Gomringer’s concrete poetry—“der Versuch, den Zwängen, die von außen kommen oder die einlaufen, zu entgehen, freien Raum zu schaffen ins noch Unartikulierte hinein,”¹³⁰ by way of a “konsequente dichtung” that avoids “abstrahierte beschreibungen”¹³¹—bears a striking resemblance to the program described in his own theoretical writings. Despite this apparently common goal, however, the formal techniques employed by each writer differ greatly. The visual element of the poem—the way in which a poem’s format, typesetting, or position of the page can alter the meaning of the poem’s language—is almost always of central importance to works of concrete poetry; for Heißenbüttel, the visual character of his printed texts rarely bear any importance whatsoever. Where the concrete poets focus on the neglected visual element of literature to approach the “Unartikulierte,” and in doing so tend towards a deconstruction of words in their writing, Heißenbüttel is almost monomaniacally concerned with syntax and grammar, and the ways in which linguistic form organizes experience. Furthermore, while the concrete poets can be characterized as writing from an aestheticist viewpoint—aiming to expand the possibilities of poetic expression—Heißenbüttel is less concerned with beauty, and more committed to a didactic project of exposing language’s influence on society. While, as detailed above, Heißenbüttel situates his linguistic preoccupation within the framework

¹²⁹In: Eugen Gomringer, *worte sind schatten : die konstellationen 1951-1968*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1969, p. 17.

Gerhard Rühm would make similar statements regarding his own non-allegiance, as well as that of his *Wiener Gruppe* colleagues, with the school of concrete poetry. See below: (ch. 3).

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹³¹See: Thomas Kopfermann, editor, *Theoretischen Positionen zur konkreten Poesie : Texte und Bibliographie*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1974, pp. 126 ff.

of literary engagement, the concrete poets—never accepted by the *Gruppe 47*, forming their own literary aesthetic as outsiders—resemble closer an anti-engagement, ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ aestheticism closer to that of the historical avant-garde.

In order to accurately assess Heißenbüttel’s writing, one must take into account its position with relation to a number of contemporaneous aesthetic developments. While developing partly as a continuation of the experimentalism and lack of formal constraint of prewar avant-garde writers, it resisted the anarchic sensibility of this tradition, as well as the aestheticism that was embraced by the concrete poets and other neo-avant-garde writers. Heißenbüttel instead fused avant-garde writing with an almost scientific program of linguistic *Aufklärung* that develops as a defensive reaction to the literary debates concerning postwar German literature, which were mostly led by writers of distinctly non-experimental literature. What becomes central to Heißenbüttel’s program is a theoretical discourse concerning language, which allows him to justify his revival of experimental literary technique with respect to the predominant postwar literary discourse. Heißenbüttel was one of several authors to use the issue of language to reframe a revival of avant-garde writing. In what follows, I will attempt to identify the various ways in which Heißenbüttel addressed the theme of language in both his literary and critical writings.

Textbücher 1 – 6 (1960-1967)

The first six volumes of the *Textbuch* series represent an experimental literary laboratory through which Heißenbüttel would work out his theories of language. Matthaei describes the first of these, *Textbuch 1* (1960), as the first methodical literary treatment of “das veränderte

Verhältnis zur Sprache”¹³² emerging at the beginning of the sixties. In a blurb on the back of the book’s first edition, Beda Allemann echoes this view: “Zweifellos bringen Heißenbüttels Gebilde gewisse ganz elementare Linien in dem Kraftfeld, das wir Sprache nennen, zur Darstellung.” A second excerpt, from a review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, is more specific in its assessment:

Im entgegengesetzten Sinne, als es die Expressionisten taten, experimentiert Heißenbüttel mit der Sprache. Er erlaubt sich keine Ausbrüche. Es geht ihm nicht um subjektiven Ausdruck unter willkürlicher ‘Benutzung’ der Sprache, sondern um Reduzierung der emotionellen Aufladungen, durch welche die Worte deformiert und mißbraucht werden. [. . .]. Andererseits weigert sich Heißenbüttel, [. . .] [die] Auflösung der Syntax in Silben- und Buchstabenspiele mitzumachen, so daß man ihn [. . .] durchaus als einen Konservativen unter den Avantgardisten bezeichnen kann.¹³³

It is interesting that this critical framing of *Textbuch 1*—although probably chosen by the publisher, not by Heißenbüttel himself—attempts to draw a clear division between Heißenbüttel’s work and both the historical and contemporary literary avant-gardes. This is certainly in line with Heißenbüttel’s view of his own work as undertaking an altogether new and individual literary experiment. The observation as to Heissenbüttel’s conservatism—presented here, perhaps, in order to convince the unadventurous reader of the intellectual value of the texts—will return later, when we discuss criticisms of Heißenbüttel’s theories by other members of the avant-garde.

The publication of the first six *Textbücher*, paired with a steady stream of critical writings—which were collected and published in 1966 as *Über Literatur*—would lead directly to Heißenbüttel’s being awarded Germany’s most prestigious literary award, the

¹³²Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, p. 22.

¹³³Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 1*. Olten and Freiburg: Walter, 1960.

Büchner Prize, in 1969.¹³⁴ Though Heißenbüttel would continue the *Textbuch* series much later, in the eighties, the first six volumes—which were published together, with slight modifications, as *Das Textbuch* in 1970, and were also collected in a “Gesamtausgabe” in 1980—best represent Heißenbüttel’s original vision of the *Textbuch*, as well as offering the clearest example of his literary theory in action. Heißenbüttel’s stock has fallen so low lately that it is easy to forget how prominent these works were during the sixties. The Büchner Prize, whether deserved or not, testifies to the immediate influence of Heißenbüttel’s writings: in looking at the *Textbücher* it is useful to keep in mind the question of why these difficult works were initially so well-regarded, and why they have become as forgotten as they are today.

In focusing exclusively in the first six *Textbücher*, I am not only limiting my study to an analysis of Heißenbüttel’s early work; I am also excluding his most well-known work: the experimental novel *D’Alemberts Ende*, published in 1970. In this work, which Keith Bullivant refers to as both “an ironisation of the traditional novel form and its conventions” as well as “a stylistic reflection on the validity of the continued uncritical use of established literary genres,”¹³⁵ Heißenbüttel criticizes not only the novelistic form, but also the polemical language of the sixties, inserting quotes from philosophers, theorists, and politicians into his characters’ dialogues. While the issues at stake are consistent with those of the *Textbücher*, I would argue that the deconstructive literary program of *D’Alemberts Ende* is more limited,

¹³⁴The prize jury’s vote was unanimous, despite the qualms of certain jurors as to whether Heißenbüttel’s work bore direct kinship to that of Büchner. Although the award ceremony was interrupted by an organized protest undertaken by members of the student movement, the protesters’ objections were aimed primarily at the institutional apparatus of the prize itself, not at Heißenbüttel or his work. See: Judith S. Ulmer, *Geschichte des Georg-Büchner-Preises: Soziologie eines Rituals*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006, pp. 229-30.

¹³⁵Keith Bullivant, *Realism Today: Aspects of the Contemporary West German Novel*. Leamington Spa: Oswald Wolff, 1987, p. 76.

more geared towards the production of a coherent, readable work. In the *Textbücher*, Heißenbüttel gives himself carte blanche to execute an array of formal experiments, inspired by different suppositions and arriving at different conclusions. While *D'Alemberts Ende* may represent a more thorough engagement with certain specific aesthetic issues, the *Textbücher* offer us a more complete version of the literary implementations of Heißenbüttel's theories of language.

While the works collected in the *Textbücher* bear many similar traits, and often share subject matter, there is no overarching aesthetic identity that unites the various pieces. Thematic tendencies can be identified within the work, but no single theme can be identified with the work as a whole. Silvio Vietta identifies one major division along which the individual pieces can be divided: on the one hand, those pieces that represent a "lyrisch-experimentell" orientation (the texts of books 1, 4, 6, and book 3, excluding the "Verallgemeinerungen" and "Evergreens" sections), and on the other hand, those that possess an "Erzählcharakter" (books 2, 5, and the "Verallgemeinerungen" and "Evergreens" sections from book 3).¹³⁶ This division is helpful for organizing readings of the texts, but does not acknowledge the variety of theoretical concerns at stake in the different pieces of each category. Instead of reading the texts as pieces of a coherent whole, I will narrow my analytical scope, concentrating on either small groupings of texts or individual texts by themselves, and attempting to identify the theoretical concerns guiding Heißenbüttel's writing in each particular case. In looking at these works, I will be focusing especially on their treatment of the issues regarding language, grammar, and syntax that are addressed by Heißenbüttel in his critical writings. My selection of pieces—which is not intended to represent every linguistic theme of the *Textbücher*, but

¹³⁶Vietta, *Sprache und Sprachreflexion in der modernen Lyrik*, pp. 133-134.

rather to offer an overview of a few important points—reflects this thematic preoccupation.

Textbuch 1 collects poems and text collages completed between 1953 and 1960.¹³⁷ The first three of these, written between 1953 and 1954, broach the question of “das Sagbare,” which remains a constant theme throughout Heißenbüttel’s career. The first poem,¹³⁸ “einfache Sätze”, hints at a reduction of language to its most basic elements of representation. The poem begins with the simple report, “während ich stehe fällt der Schatten hin”, before indulging in two poetic reappraisals of the situation: “Morgensonne entwirft die erste Zeichnung / Blühh ist ein tödliches Geschäft”.¹³⁹ The reader is tempted to see this progression as an abandonment of the simple reportage of the first sentence (which makes no inference about causality) and a move towards the murky realms of personification and metaphor. Yet Heißenbüttel does not confirm this view: the three sentences are listed under the heading, “einfache Sätze”. The poem finishes with two similarly contrasting declarations: “ich habe mich einverstanden erklärt / ich lebe”.¹⁴⁰ The first declares an agreement to enter into a certain power relation, while the second approaches the simplicity of the Cartesian *cogito*. The ambiguous title leaves the reader to question whether the poem consists of a list of ‘simple sentences’ (or ‘simple phrases/clauses/propositions’) or whether it is a poem *about* simple sentences. The more drastic conclusion that *all* of these

¹³⁷Heißenbüttel claims to have begun writing the *Textbücher* precisely at the moment he began working in an office, perhaps pointing to an influence of bureaucratic language on his textual constructions. See: Widmer, *Zweifel an der Sprache. Porträt Helmut Heißenbüttel*.

¹³⁸I am somewhat stubbornly referring to these pieces as poems, rather than “demonstrations” or “texts”, since they look and read like poems, and derive their aesthetic character from their relation to the conventions of poetic form. Heißenbüttel wanted to procure special treatment for his writings by refusing to apply traditional categorizations to his writings. I personally think that these writings neither merit nor require their own personalized categories, and that they are best read as part of the avant-garde traditions of poetry, experimental prose, and prose-poetry.

¹³⁹Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 1*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

sentences are in fact simple sentences—that any grammatical use of language is a simple sentence, since it conforms to the internal rules of linguistic structure, regardless of whether it accurately corresponds to an external reality—is there to be drawn.

The second poem, “das Sagbare sagen”, deals more directly with the issue of what can be said, but maintains the ambiguous position of the previous poem:

das Sagbare sagen
das Erfahrbare erfahren
das Entscheidbare entscheiden
das Erreichbare erreichen
das Wiederholbare wiederholen
das Beendbare beenden

das nicht Sagbare
das nicht Erfahrbare
das nicht Entscheidbare
das nicht Erreichbare
das nicht Wiederholbare
das nicht Beendbare

das nicht Beendbare nicht beenden¹⁴¹

An important aspect of Heißenbüttel’s writing method comes to the fore here: his manner of letting grammar guide his writing. The first stanza consists of commands or statements (the syntax leaves this unclear) based on tautological form: “das Sagbare” is what can be said, therefore the prospect of saying this is a reasonable proposal. The second stanza then considers the remainder of the first: what can be done with the rest—with the unsayable,

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 6.

the unreachable? The absence of a verb illustrates the isolation of these things: they can be named, but that is all. Although the poem's title and first line could possibly be making a reference to the famous final axiom of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—"Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen"¹⁴²—it is unclear whether or not this is the case: according to Heißenbüttel's own account, he first read Wittgenstein after hearing about him from Max Bense, whom he met in 1955, a year after the composition of "das Sagbare sagen"¹⁴³; however, the text-collage "Pamphlete", also from *Textbuch 1*, and also written in 1954, contains a cited quotation from the *Tractatus*.¹⁴⁴ Regardless of whether the thematic similarity is coincidental or not, it is important to remember that Heißenbüttel's *Sprachkritik* developed from a wealth of intellectual sources, and can in no way be presented as fundamentally Wittgensteinian. However, Heißenbüttel's linguistic project can be productively compared with Wittgenstein's: whereas the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* hopes to reduce language down to the realm of what can be said—voiding the claims of metaphysics and returning to a language based on formal logic—Heißenbüttel refuses to arrive at the same positivist conclusion: for Heißenbüttel, language exists as a hermetic system, wherein grammar, and not logic, sets the rules for what can be said. What is important for Heißenbüttel is not the abuses of language: his goal is not to destroy the "Luftgebäude" of metaphysical language, as Wittgenstein describes it in the *Philosophical Investigations*¹⁴⁵; instead, Heißenbüttel wants to show how the internal structure of language determines what one can say, setting a limit on the raw empirical material of experience

¹⁴²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Kegan Paul, 1922, 7.

¹⁴³See: Heißenbüttel, Vom "Kahlschlag" zu "movens", p. 58.

¹⁴⁴"Alle Sätze sind gleichwertig." See: Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 1*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein; G.E.M. Anscombe, editor, *Philosophical Investigations*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, sec. 118, p. 48.

that can find expression in language: his project is less positivistic, less reformist, and more concerned with exposing the limits of language and the cultural effects thereof.

The third of these early poems, “Lehrgedicht über Geschichte 1954” underlines this aspect, while also broaching the matter of political content. The poem consists mainly of a list of references to historical figures, rattled off in a manner somewhat reminiscent of Ezra Pound. Napoleon, the sculptor Giovanni Pisano, Nietzsche, Tocqueville, Hitler, Webern, and Piero della Francesca are all mentioned, setting a dynamic between political and artistic men. The classical form of the *Lehrgedicht* is shown here as a paratactic list of events, corresponding to particular categories and divisions: “Epochen Zeiteinteilungen Dynastien / ausgestorbene Städte ausgestorbene Völker Völker auf dem Marsch Marschkolonnen und Napoleon an der Beresina”.¹⁴⁶ Yet the list of references, quotations, and fantasies concerning these men ends with the single word, “Rekapitulierbares.” Heißenbüttel thus condenses all historical events that could be reported in a *Lehrgedicht* to a single category: that of the ‘recapitulatable.’ There follows a line break, and then this ending:

Rekapitulierbares dies ist mein Thema
Rekapitulierbares dies ist mein Thema
Rekapitulierbares dies ist mein Thema

nicht Rekapitulierbares¹⁴⁷

Heißenbüttel observes that the poet has no choice but to take as his theme only what is able to be recapitulated: the events that can be summed up using language. This could be a reference made to Pound—whom Heißenbüttel acknowledges as an important influence

¹⁴⁶Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 1*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

around this period¹⁴⁸—and his statement that “DICHTEN = CONDENSARE.”¹⁴⁹ Pound’s conception of poetry as a condensation of history into highly charged language is détourned by Heißenbüttel into the language-critical observation that only what is condensable can be condensed, and that what is condensable is determined by the structure of language: what language allows of history to be put into words. Pound’s noble condenser of facts into poetry is downgraded in Heißenbüttel’s account to a robotic parroter of language’s preset formulae. It becomes clear here that “das Sagbare sagen” is not a statement of purpose, but rather a resigned concession: the poet can only say what language allows to be said, which leaves a remainder, “das nicht Sagbare” and the “nicht Rekapitulierbares,” which the poet is unable to address. In Heißenbüttel’s critical statement mentioned above, “Voraussetzungen”, he describes the limit approached by experimental literature as “die Grenze zu dem, was noch nicht sagbar ist.”¹⁵⁰ This makes it clear that his writing is not ultimately focused on the “Sagbare”, but rather on the “nicht Sagbare”: instead of contenting himself with saying the sayable, Heißenbüttel claimed to direct his experimental program towards the goal of developing new ways to say what had previously remained unsayable—new methods of treating the epistemological category of “nicht Rekapitulierbares.”

While the middle sections of *Textbuch 1*—the “Kombinationen” and “Topographien”, both of which had already been published as separate editions by Walter Verlag in the late fifties—turn more towards the development of a montage technique of composition, the volume’s final pieces return to the metagrammatical theme. The first stanza of the “Einfache grammatische Meditationen” bears the subtitle “[Tautologismen]”, and begins

¹⁴⁸See: Heißenbüttel, Vom “Kahlschlag” zu “movens”, p. 58.

¹⁴⁹Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 2010, p. 97.

¹⁵⁰Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 223.

accordingly: “der Schatten den ich werfe ist der Schatten den ich werfe / die Lage in die ich gekommen bin ist die Lage in die ich gekommen bin”.¹⁵¹ By poeticizing the tautology, Heißenbüttel accomplishes the impressive feat of using poetry to make an indisputably true statement. Perhaps as an ironic commentary on the contemporary debates about realism—as to whether or not literature could pretend to represent reality accurately—Heißenbüttel removes literature from its referential relation to reality, without relinquishing its claim to truth: truth exists in the grammar of language (as it does in symbolic logic), not in the world. Continuing onwards from this solid epistemological base, Heißenbüttel strays into less definite territory, making propositions and observations, before returning to the security of his initial tautological formulation (in the penultimate sentence of the following selection):

die Lage in die ich gekommen bin ist ja und nein
Situation meine Situation meine spezielle Situation
Gruppen von Gruppen bewegen sich über leere Flächen
Gruppen von Gruppen bewegen sich über reine Farben
Gruppen von Gruppen bewegen sich über den Schatten den ich werfe
der Schatten den ich werfe ist der Schatten den ich werfe
Gruppen von Gruppen bewegen sich über den Schatten den ich werfe und
verschwinden¹⁵²

Logical syntax transmutes from tautological to observational statements—from analytical truth to synthetic proposition—in a quickly abandoned attempt to overcome solipsism, and to acknowledge the vaguely menacing presence of “Gruppen von Gruppen” passing over the observer’s shadow. As if unable to fully process the existence of these unidentified groups—which could just as likely be a reference to Nazi marches as to postwar literary

¹⁵¹Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 1*, p. 35.

¹⁵²Ibid.

cliques like the *Gruppe 47*—the observer returns to the security of his solipsistic tautology, whereupon the groups disappear. The poem brings to mind Wittgenstein’s remark from the *Tractatus* that a tautology says nothing,¹⁵³ while simultaneously raising the question of whether observational statements about one’s surroundings say much more. The ambiguity the poem leaves behind, like that of “einfache Sätze”, seems to echo another passage from the *Tractatus* (quoted by Heißenbüttel in “Pamphlete”, also from *Textbuch 1*): “Alle Sätze sind gleichwertig.”¹⁵⁴ Wittgenstein’s own clarification of this statement sheds an elucidatory light on Heißenbüttel’s poem: “Der Sinn der Welt muss außerhalb ihrer liegen. In der Welt ist alles, wie es ist, und geschieht alles, wie es geschieht; es gibt *in* ihr keinen Wert—und wenn es ihn gäbe, so hätte er keinen Wert.”¹⁵⁵ Heißenbüttel’s poem follows from a similar premise: the truth of its initial proposition, a tautology, is self-reflexive: though it refers to something in the world (a shadow), its meaning lies outside of the world, enclosed in the hermetic system of language. Throughout the first *Textbuch*, Heißenbüttel presents this understanding—that language constructs truth, whether analytic or synthetic, by way of its own symbolic system, whether that of logic or rhetoric—as the key element missing from the debates about realism and literary engagement. Considered in the context of Heißenbüttel’s early experiences with the literary establishment, the reflections of these linguistic-theoretical ideas in his work must be understood as a direct critique of the literary debates of the fifties by an outsider attempting to escape the somewhat patronizing niche in which he found himself.

¹⁵³Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.142.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 6.4.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 6.41.

From the poetic *Sprachdemonstrationen* of the first *Textbuch*, Heißenbüttel switches gears in *Textbuch 2*, presenting a selection of short prose pieces. On the first page, two mottos introduce the work: the first from Edmund Husserl, a phenomenological definition of the relation of part and whole, asserting that, though the parts of a whole remain disconnected, “das Ganze [ist mehr] als die Summe der Teile.” The second, from René Wellek, serves as a prosaic restatement of Husserl’s philosophical illustration: “A work of literature is, first of all, an organised, purposeful sequence of words.”¹⁵⁶ These mottos serve as a hermeneutic for understanding the dense blocks of text that follow: where the poems of *Textbuch 1* were concerned with the demonstration of the various epistemological modes of single statements—isolated fragments lined up together in stanza form—*Textbuch 2* deals more with the creation of meaning through successive statements, understood as parts of a coherent whole. Yet despite this change in formal perspective, Heißenbüttel’s critical objective remains the same, presenting textual experiments that unveil the linguistic structures underlying human understanding, human interactions, and the developments of social, cultural, and political discourses.

“Bei Gelegenheit eines Gesprächs mit Doktrinären” offers one of his most explicitly political pieces, dividing the discourse of political debate into metagrammatical fragments. The implied skepticism of “doctrinaire” political discourse reflects the critical conservatism of the fifties, when critiques of fascist discourse were often extrapolated to apply to discourses of all radical political ideologies, especially those coming from the east.¹⁵⁷ Heißenbüttel continues to utilize the technique of repetition and modulation so noticeable in the first

¹⁵⁶Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 2*. Olten and Freiburg: Walter, 1961, p. 5.

¹⁵⁷This was by no means an exclusively West German phenomenon, and was often connected with Cold War propaganda, as can be seen with the widespread boycott of Bertolt Brecht’s plays in Vienna between 1953 and 1963. (See below: ch. 3).

Textbuch:

Ich rede. Ich habe Meinung keine Meinung mehrere Meinung viele Meinung. Dinge von denen ich meiner Meinung nach etwas verstehe. Dinge von denen ich meiner Meinung nach nichts verstehe. Dinge mit denen ich mich beschäftigt habe und Dinge mit denen ich mich nicht beschäftigt habe. Von denen ich etwas gehört von denen ich nichts gehört von denen ich etwas gelesen oder gesehen oder nicht habe usw.¹⁵⁸

Through this technique, Heißenbüttel translates political speech into a collage of generic formulae. The paratactic alignment of the various possibilities (“Meinung keine Meinung mehrere Meinung...”, “Von denen ich etwas gehört von denen ich nichts gehört von denen ich etwas gelesen...”) appears to be a purely stylistic choice on the part of Heißenbüttel, perhaps showing the deep-seated influence of Gertrude Stein’s work. The tension between style and concept is a constant in Heißenbüttel’s work: in most of his writing there is a point where it becomes unclear whether the anti-grammatical writing is illustrating an explicit metalinguistic concept, or whether it is merely a stylistic effect, achieving an impression of Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*. Regardless of this ambiguity, “Bei Gelegenheit eines Gesprächs mit Doktrinären” presents a clear critique of the political discourse of the sixties, attempting to expose the forceful, polemical style as the product of a cookie-cutter grammatical formula.

The technique used in this piece reflects Heißenbüttel’s description, given in an interview from 1981, of the project of the early *Textbücher* as “eine bewußte Reduktion auf die Sprache, die [darin] als Material genommen wird.”¹⁵⁹ By treating language as material, Heißenbüttel claims to expose the unacknowledged system that organizes our subjective orientation: “Unser vertrautes Orientierungsschema wird damit völlig durcheinander ge-

¹⁵⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵⁹Martin Lüdke, “Vom Spielraum der Sprache” : Helmut Heißenbüttel (Bücherreport). Hessischer Rundfunk, Film recording, June 29, 1981.

bracht. Von den vertrauten Bedeutungen wird abstrahiert: die Gewissheiten lösen sich auf. Durch die folge der Sätze, die scheinbar nur grammatikalische Formen durchspielen, wird plötzlich das System, das dahintersteht, sichtbar.”¹⁶⁰ This unveiling of the linguistically determined nature of experience occurs as a result of words being ‘abstracted’ from their familiar meanings, depriving texts of their semantic certainty. This may give us a clue as to the significance of the aforementioned dual nature of the text: by combining theoretical concepts and metagrammatical glosses with stylistic estrangement, Heißenbüttel effectuates a two-pronged attack on language—an offensive directed “gegen die Verzerrung der Wirklichkeit.”¹⁶¹

Another tactic employed often in the *Textbücher* is the exploitation of words’ double meanings. In the section quoted above from “Bei Gelegenheit eines Gesprächs”, Heißenbüttel does this in order to show the unconscious organizing force that certain words possess. “Meinung” is introduced first as an “opinion” that one can possess. However, using the phrase “meiner Meinung nach” (“Dinge von denen ich meiner Meinung nach etwas verstehe”) lends an alternate meaning to the following sentences, implying that whether or not one understands something depends on what opinions one holds. The apparently autonomous subject is shown to be unfree, since opinions, which come to the subject from external sources, come to determine the subject’s understanding of the world: the subject does not hold opinions, but rather is held by his or her opinions. Following this train of thought, we can see how Heißenbüttel’s writing often hints at an unsettling epistemological nihilism: here, specifically, that no opinion—moral, political, or aesthetic—is more valid

¹⁶⁰Ibid..

¹⁶¹Ibid..

than any other, since every opinion distorts the subjective faculty of judgment, making unseeing automatons of all who adopt it. However, this extreme, ‘explicit’ version never finds expression in either his literary or his critical texts. While it would be no far stretch of the imagination to imagine an Artaud, or a Schwitters, or another prewar avant-garde writer making such extreme claims—perhaps as part of a manifesto—it is almost impossible to imagine the same with Heißenbüttel. Part of this has to do with Heißenbüttel’s theoretical reframing of his writing within the literary community of the immediate postwar period. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the nihilism, aesthetic extremism, and playful sophism of the historical avant-garde became taboo following the Second World War. As a product of this period—when a moralistic anti-fascism became the accepted prerequisite for any literary output—Heißenbüttel tends towards a modest intellectual voice, raising the possibility of extreme epistemological doubt as a vague specter, but never asserting it in ‘attack mode,’ as Artaud might have done. Though his literary work often matches, and sometimes exceeds the formal radicality of his avant-garde predecessors, the theoretical conclusions he draws appear decidedly tame compared to the fiery manifestos of the twenties and thirties.¹⁶²

Amid the numerous threads—political, linguistic, and epistemological—of “Bei Gelegenheit eines Gesprächs”, there is also a return to the theme of “das Sagbare”: the limits of what is sayable, and the way in which these limits influence verbal expression. Continuing in the formulaic, paratactic mode, Heißenbüttel suddenly takes a reductive turn, redefining the “Rede” of the *lyrisches Ich* in terms of the sayable:

Ich rede. Ich rede vor mich hin. Achte nicht darauf ob jemand mir zuhört. [...] Was ich rede sind nicht Stellungnahmen Antworten Anerkennungen Aberken-

¹⁶²As will be seen below (ch. 3), the situation was decidedly different, for a number of reasons, in postwar Austria.

nungen. Was ich rede sind nicht Meinungen. [Ich meine immer dasselbe.] Was ich rede ist was sich sagen läßt. Was läßt sich sagen? Etwas.¹⁶³

Recalling the conclusion of the “Lehrgedicht über Geschichte 1954”—that the poet must take “Rekapitulierbares” as his or her theme—the political speech of the poem’s subject is demoted from the level of opinion, beliefs, or answers to merely what language allows to be said. Heißenbüttel wants to demystify political speech by showing that, despite its moral and ethical claims, it consists of language, and is thus constrained by the same limitations that constrain philosophy and poetry. Yet the reader can’t help but be frustrated by Heißenbüttel’s ironic clarification of this verbal element simply as “etwas.” The underwhelming conclusion of this piece reflects a weakness of Heißenbüttel’s deconstructive project: that in translating the contingencies of speech into generic formulae, his writing leads to vague and generalized conclusions. His unwillingness to push his literary experiments to more deductive, enlightening conclusions reflects an agnostic linguistic orientation that will later be unfavorably compared with the more progressive and positivist orientation of linguistic semanticists.¹⁶⁴

In the final volume of the initial series, *Textbuch 6*—which bears the subtitle “neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand”—Heißenbüttel includes many texts that are concerned with the demonstration of the subliminal substructure of language. In “vokabulär”, words and phrases are grouped together according to their etymological and aural similarity, which Vietta calls the “*Klangverwandtschaft der Wörter*.”¹⁶⁵ Vietta also observes that the poem’s language “[versteht sich] hier nicht mehr aus einem Dingbezug”¹⁶⁶: the connection

¹⁶³Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 2*, p. 20.

¹⁶⁴See the discussion of Dieter Wellershoff below.

¹⁶⁵Vietta, *Sprache und Sprachreflexion in der modernen Lyrik*, p. 136.

¹⁶⁶*Ibid.*, p. 135.

between the words operates by way of their tonal qualities, not by way of what they represent. The poem's title is an adjective derived from the noun *Vokabular*, implying the meaning of "vocabularial"; the poem's collection of words is thus compared to an individual's collection of words:

einsetzen Einsatz
Aufsatz Vorsatz
vorsätzlich Satz
der Satz vom
Grunde Grund-
satz grundsätz-
lich Grundsatz-
referat gründlich
grundlegend
Grund gründen
auf begründen
Gründergenera-
tion Gründerzeit

abgründig Ab-
grund grundlos
hintergründig
untergründig
Hintergrund Un-
tergrund Unter-
grundbewegung
Grundbesitz
Grund und Boden
Blut und Boden
bodenständig
bodenlos Boden-
satz der Boden [...] ¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷Helmut Heißenbüttel, *Textbuch 6. Neue Abhandlungen über den menschlichen Verstand*. Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1967, pp. 11-2.

Read in light of the volume's subtitle, this poem appears as an attempt to illustrate the influence of language's non-representative visual and sonic aspects upon an individual's conceptual apparatus. An individual's vocabulary sets limits on his or her verbal expression, not only by determining the personal category of the "sayable", but also by forcing unacknowledged cognitive associations by way of a word's etymological and tonal characteristics. The attempt of "vokabulär" to expose the shared etymological traces of its individual pieces, and thus to cast new light upon the meanings and uses of words, can be compared with Victor Klemperer's project in *LTI — Lingua Tertii Imperii* of illustrating the installation of Nazi ideology within the German language. Heißenbüttel's inclusion of Nazi-era terms like "Blut and Boden" alongside other historical terms like "Gründerzeit" especially point towards this similarity. With Klemperer, Heißenbüttel sees language as a tool that can be used to influence a subject's thoughts and beliefs, not only by the rhetorical arguments of its surface meaning, but also by the subliminal effects of the surplus meanings hidden within etymological and syntactical structure.

While the preceding overview by no way offers an exhaustive account of the theoretical issues broached in the *Textbücher*, it does address a number of central themes pertaining to language that make appearances throughout the six volumes. The concept of the "sayable" is repeatedly invoked, in order to assert the fundamentally limiting nature of language, which acts as a barrier between truth and representation. The linguistic subject—whether engaged with poetry, history, or politics—has recourse to a limited palette of discursive possibilities, which determines the way the subject thinks, perceives, and communicates. The "unsayable," which the early Wittgenstein equates with the mystical, is here presented as something more resembling Freud's "repressed": a spectral element that disrupts the

discourse in which it finds no expression. The writer that ignores this unsayable element—by failing to acknowledge how his or her own discourse is determined by the category of the “sayable”—effectively misrepresents the epistemological character of linguistic discourse. The *Textbücher* attempt to develop a method of writing that would avoid this linguistic “bad faith”: a literature that acknowledges the necessary limitations of its raw material.

Beyond the fundamental division between the sayable and the unsayable, Heißenbüttel also emphasizes the split between the primary, intended meaning of language, and the secondary meanings that are implicated by language’s polysemic nature—to continue in a Freudian mode, this can be understood as the split between language’s manifest and latent content. This division is presented in order to further deconstruct the myth of the autonomous language user. Heißenbüttel exposes the unacknowledged and unintended multiple meanings that not only distort the intended message of the speaking subject, but also exert a powerful influence on the subject’s own consciousness, actively forming his or her thoughts and beliefs discursively. Heißenbüttel’s subtly terrifying depiction of language as an authoritarian system in which the subject finds no liberty of expression, and through which direct access to the empirical reality of the world remains barred, can be distinguished lurking in the background of the majority of the texts comprising the first six *Textbücher*.

Far from reducing language down to its basic elements, as is suggested in many reviews of Heißenbüttel’s work,¹⁶⁸ the *Textbücher* flatten the linguistic landscape by asserting the fundamental failure of all forms of language—simple or complex, poetic or polemic—to serve mankind as a tool with which to describe the world, interpret its functioning, and com-

¹⁶⁸For example, the back covers of the first three *Textbücher* all include blurbs and review excerpts that describe the work as reductive: “Reduktionsgedichte”; “Reduzierung der emotionellen Aufladungen”; “Der Autor reduziert die Sprache auf das Notwendige.” See: *Textbuch 1, 2, 3*.

communicate one's experience to others. In opposition to the myth of the autonomous linguistic subject, the *Textbücher* aim to expose the myriad ways in which language determines how a subject experiences and speaks about the world.

The Linguistic Model of Heißenbüttel's Theoretical Writings

The respect Heißenbüttel was accorded as a poet and experimental writer was increased by his activity as a literary theorist and critic. Unlike many other practitioners of avant-garde writing, he was able to cultivate a reputation as a sober, analytical, and hyper-intellectual critical voice. By the late sixties, through active publication of critical essays in literary journals such as *Merkur*, *Akzente*, and *Der Monat*, book reviews for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, editorial radio work for the *Süddeutscher Rundfunk*, and the publication of *Über Literatur*,¹⁶⁹ Heißenbüttel had become one of the most prominent critical voices in West Germany. Though Heißenbüttel sometimes chose experimental writing techniques for some of his theoretical texts, he usually employed a conventional critical style, which stands in marked contrast to that of his literary texts. As is the case with his friend Bense, Heißenbüttel's critical work outlines the experimental theoretical program that is enacted in his literary texts. In what follows, I will attempt to delineate the claims made about language in his critical writing, which often involve implicit demands made upon literary writing.

In my overview of Heißenbüttel's critical work I will be largely ignoring the texts that

¹⁶⁹For a complete bibliography of Heißenbüttel's critical publications and radio work, see: Armin Stein, *Bibliographie Helmut Heißenbüttel*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1999.

deal with literary history, and concentrating instead on the texts in which he elucidates his theory of language and considers the consequences for avant-garde writing. The “Voraussetzungen”, cited above, are a useful starting point for understanding the specifics of Heißenbüttel’s theoretical understanding of literary language. From his primary assertion, ‘Literatur besteht aus Sprache,’ and his primary question, ‘Was bedeutet das?’, Heißenbüttel continues by claiming the fundamental significance not of the word alone, but of the grammar that determines its use:

Sprache umfaßt einen weiten und vielfach differenzierten Bedeutungsbereich. Zwei Komponenten spielen dabei eine Rolle. Die Wörter und die satzmäßige Verknüpfung der Wörter miteinander. Die Wörter sind dabei nicht zeichenhaft eindeutig, sondern haben gleichsam einen Hof um sich. [...] Die syntaktische Verknüpfung beruht auf einem Grundmodell, dem von Subjekt-Objekt-Prädikat.¹⁷⁰

This grammatical structure is decisive for the function of human understanding; however, Heißenbüttel sees the historical role of literature as a discursive organ that does not simply conform to this structure, but rather pushes language beyond its predetermined boundaries: “Wenn die Sprache von sich aus Grundmodell und Schemata für die menschliche Orientierung in der Welt geliefert hat, so ist die Literatur jeweils darüber hinausgegangen und hat immer neue Sondermodelle hergestellt.”¹⁷¹ Heißenbüttel sees these “Sondermodelle” as stemming from the historical development of language, which literature documents, reflects, and spurs onward: “Die Veränderungen der Sprache bedeuten Veränderungen der Weltinterpretation. Die Literatur wächst aus diesem Prozeß heraus und treibt ihn gleichzeitig voran.”¹⁷² According to this historical model, in which literature is progressive only in so

¹⁷⁰Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 220.

¹⁷¹Ibid.

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 221.

far as it is linguistically progressive, the mild realism of Heißenbüttel's contemporaries is presented as conservative and old-fashioned, following a literary blueprint tailor-made for the nineteenth century: "Wer heute Balzac oder Fontane als Muster nehmen wollte, könnte dies nur, wenn unser Welt und ihr sprachlicher Ausdruck in wesentlichen Punkten die gleichen wären wie die unser Großväter und Urgroßväter. Sie sind es gewiß nicht."¹⁷³ In this way, Heißenbüttel converts his linguistic literary theory into a progressive aesthetic polemic, justifying his own literary practice to the detriment of others (which, at any rate, was par for the course in the lion's den of postwar German letters). A realist model for literature, he argues, fundamentally unchanged for over a century, can no longer hope to represent the linguistic experience of contemporary reality. Better suited to this purpose, Heißenbüttel suggests, is an experimental literature that would deconstruct the ways in which language determines human experience: in other words, literature finds itself at a certain syntactical dead end that must be radically and decisively overcome in order for literature to regain its relevance. Again we see here how Heißenbüttel redefines the terms of literary engagement: the ivory tower of the apolitical writer becomes that of the writer who uses language uncritically.

In the penultimate section of the "Voraussetzungen", Heißenbüttel comes to an idea central to his entire linguistic theory: that the inherited grammatic structure of language is no longer valid and must be rejected in order for literature to progress:

Ich erkenne [...], daß das alte Grundmodell der Sprache von Subjekt-Objekt-Prädikat nicht mehr standhält. Wir benutzen es noch. Aber es ist bereits starr. Es erscheint abgenutzt, bröckelt ab, verwittert. Das System der Sprache selbst beginnt im Sinne der Konservatoren "klassisch" zu werden. [...] Alle Argumente sammeln sich im Postulat vom Immergültigen. Aber versteht man

¹⁷³Ibid.

es in Wahrheit noch? Wie wird geredet? Formelhaft. Wie reagiert? Wie auf Signale. Der Unterschied zwischen dem, was ich als mich bezeichne, und dem, was ich nicht bin, verwischt. Gar nicht (oder von außen her) orientiert. Kann ich darüber reden?¹⁷⁴

Heißenbüttel suggests that that it is not language per se that has ceased to function properly, but rather the subject-oriented predicate logic coded into the grammatical system of language, whose formulae force language users to make false statements with an implied finality that necessarily misrepresents the state of things. It is implied that any literary work that fails to reflect this state of affairs forfeits its claims to relevance. In his 1964 *Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, Heißenbüttel expresses the same idea, again in defense of experimental writing: “Der gesellschaftliche Grund der neuen Literatur besteht nicht im Verfall sozialer Bindung in der solipsistischen Isolierung, sondern in der Auflösung des subjektiven Bezugspunktes. Die Literatur hat die Einheit des subjektiven Selbstbewusstseins als eine Fiktion entlarvt und damit zersetzt.”¹⁷⁵ Heißenbüttel rejects the prevalent Marxist theories of social dissolution, which situate the problem in economic relations, claiming instead that language is at fault, due to the epistemological fiction that it projects: literature thus engages itself by deconstructing language, or more precisely, by deconstructing the false subjectivity presented by language.

Heißenbüttel’s claim here represents a strange amalgam: the linguistic skepticism of the early twentieth-century *Sprachkrise* fuses with the polemical form of the mid-century debates of literary engagement. Through the latter, a generation of German critics had made it a commonplace to make ‘do-or-die’ statements regarding the future of literature: that if literature can not change itself in order to satisfy a specific set of social, political, and ethical

¹⁷⁴Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 201-2.

demands, then it forfeits any claim to relevance. In Heißenbüttel's critical writings—which should be seen at least partly as a response to the aforementioned critics—he bypasses these various demands without explicitly rejecting them, claiming that none of them can have any meaning due to their blindness to the linguistic issues that take primary importance. Despite rejecting the demands made upon literature by these 'engaged' critics, Heißenbüttel retains the imperative form of their initial statement, replacing their socio-political demands with his own linguistic concerns: if literature cannot challenge the faulty epistemological structure built into our language, then literature is no more. Though Heißenbüttel is somewhat equivocal in his aesthetic stances—at times deploring traditional narrative prose, while elsewhere praising detective fiction and the novels of Böll¹⁷⁶—the demand that modern literature follow his example and progress beyond traditional grammatical language is a constant element of his criticism.

In the final section of the "Voraussetzungen", Heißenbüttel addresses the possibilities of a literature that would accomplish this challenge, representing it as a deconstructive project with the following intention: "ins Innere der Sprache einzudringen, sie aufzubrechen und in ihren verborgensten Zusammenhängen zu befragen."¹⁷⁷ The resulting work would be deeply marked by the indeterminacy that results from the rejection of conventional syntax, upon which is built a new form of linguistic representation, replacing old forms such as the image and the metaphor:

Wörter verschleifen ineinander, weil die eindeutige Identifizierbarkeit nun endgültig in den Bereich aufgeht, der in sich unbestimmbar bleibt. Dieser wesentliche Unbestimmbarkeitsfaktor läßt es niemals zu dem kommen, was man Bild oder Metapher nennen könnte. [...]. Satzsubjekte, Satzobjekte,

¹⁷⁶See: *Ibid.*, pp. 96 ff.; and

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 222-3.

Satzprädikate fallen weg, weil die Erfahrung, von der geredet wird, außerhalb der eindeutigen Subjekt–Objekt-Beziehung steht. Nur die Formulierung, die eines der Glieder im alten Grundmodell offen läßt, vermag darüber etwas zu sagen. Zusammenhänge bilden sich nicht in systematischer und logisch-syntaktischer Verflechtung, sondern aus Nebenbedeutungen, aus Zweideutigkeiten, die in der verwitterten Syntax aufkommen.¹⁷⁸

Through this indeterminacy, Heißenbüttel hopes to expand language’s realm of representation, encompassing a new world of experience that had previously found no representation through traditional syntax. With clear references to the language of Wittgenstein, Heißenbüttel addresses the borders of language and experience that are at stake:

Es geschieht als Versuch, ein erstesmal einzudringen und Fuß zu fassen in einer Welt, die sich noch der Sprache zu entziehen scheint. Und die Grenze, die erreicht wird, ist nicht eine zum Nichts, zum Sprachlosen, zum Chaos (was immer auch die Gründe sein mögen, die für das Hindrängen an solche Grenze erfunden werden), es ist die Grenze zu dem, was noch nicht sagbar ist.¹⁷⁹

Heißenbüttel sketches out a utopian vision of a new literature, avant-garde in character, that is able to represent realms of existence hitherto untouchable by language—or in other words, “das nicht Sagbare.” This literature does not reject the realm of words, nor does it want to escape language, but rather constructs a new syntactical structure upon which to hang words, in order to extend the empires of language. Heißenbüttel’s literary theory sets itself apart from those of other avant-garde writers not only by its intellectual sophistication and rationalism, but also by its apparent utopianism: its belief that the practice of experimental writing can produce a more accurate verbal representation of the world.

In another, shorter text written in 1961, “Über den Einfall”¹⁸⁰, Heißenbüttel offers a different take on his linguistic model in order to affirm a general skepticism as to language’s

¹⁷⁸Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁷⁹Ibid.

¹⁸⁰First Published in *Akzente*.

symbolic representation of the world. He identifies the contingent historical character of experience—which, according to his literary theory, should be reflected by the literature of the present day—but observes that the basic mechanisms of language do not correspond to lived experience—which remains fundamentally incomprehensible to the subject—but rather accomplish an *a posteriori* illumination and organization of this experience: “Wörter, Wortgruppen, Sätze richten sich auf etwas, das mir begrifflich zunächst nicht einsichtig wird. Dennoch bedeuten diese Sprachteile so etwas wie Lichter, die meine grundsätzliche Blindheit durchbrechen.”¹⁸¹ Language therefore cannot be used to experience or to understand reality directly, but can be used to analyze and organize the sensory information received through experience after the fact. Heißenbüttel clarifies that the “Erhellung” accomplished by language is directed neither towards reality, nor towards experience, but rather relates exclusively to the isolated ontological realm of language itself: in other words, language does not represent the world, but instead forms its own representational microcosm that bears no direct relation to the facts of the world. For Heißenbüttel, this situation constitutes a new variety of *Sprachkrise*—and where a Hofmannsthal or a Trakl would declare a state of linguistic crisis, Heißenbüttel is less alarmist, referring instead to the “Dilemma” at hand, and noting mildly that language has become “problematisch”¹⁸²—and raises the specter of the impossibility of speaking, in asserting the loss of language’s representative function:

[Sprache] erscheint nicht länger als Mittel oder als Waffe oder als eine Art Signalanlage; die Möglichkeit oder Unmöglichkeit des Sprechens selbst tritt in den Mittelpunkt. Warum? Weil die verbindlichen Vorprägungen des Sprechens, vom einfachen Satz bis zu den literarischen Gattungen, ihre Verbindlichkeit, das heißt die Fähigkeit, stellvertretend zu stehen, verloren haben.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 224.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 224, 226.

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 224.

This loss of functionality is attributed to Heißenbüttel's linguistic bugbear: the subject–object–predicate substructure of grammar. All systems of occidental philosophy, religion, and literature, says Heißenbüttel, are built upon the fiction that, “es gäbe etwas, das, in sich ruhend, Mittelpunkt bilde, etwas anderes, das dem gegenüber stehe, und es gäbe von einem zum anderen Verknüpfungen von Tätigkeiten, Reaktionen, Verhaltensweisen, Relationen.”¹⁸⁴ The dilemma facing modern literature arises from the realization that this embedded grammatical fiction bars language from making true statements about the world, after which one can only in bad faith use language uncritically: “[. . .] daß ich, wenn ich konsequent bin, jeden Satz, den ich sage, schon sofort wieder in Frage stellen muß.”¹⁸⁵ This is the most basic formulation of Heißenbüttel's personal language skepticism, which, as we will see later, takes very different forms for other writers.

Heißenbüttel offers no resolution to the dilemma he identifies in “Über den Einfall”, insisting that the two most prevalent responses—on the one hand, a conservative attempt to save what can be saved from the ruins of language, and on the other hand, a freewheeling use of linguistic particles as abstract material—only succeed in exacerbating the problem. While asserting that “es im Moment gar keine Lösung geben kann,” Heißenbüttel nevertheless claims the necessity of including this dilemma as a thematic element in contemporary literature: “Ich bin ebenso überzeugt, daß man heute nicht literarisch sprechen kann, wenn man sich dieses Dilemmas nicht immer bewußt ist, oder, besser, wenn nicht dies Dilemma immer schon im Mittelpunkt, im Kern aller Erfahrung steckt.”¹⁸⁶ Heißenbüttel subsequently addresses his own work, modestly claiming only to have made the effort, “etwas von diesen

¹⁸⁴Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Ibid., p. 226.

allgemeinen Erfahrungen mit in das Gemachte hineinzunehmen,” while also stating that he prefers to call his works “Demonstrationen” rather than “Gedichte” or “Texte.”¹⁸⁷ He clarifies that “Demonstration” should be taken in both senses of the word: the process of showing or proving something as well as a public expression of a personal view.

By ending his essay with this superficially humble endorsement of his own work, Heißenbüttel opens himself to the objection that his critical discourse lacks impartiality: that his arguments are directed by the attempt to justify his own work at the expense of others’. Though this accusation can certainly be leveled against a majority of critical work written by authors, it is also crucial for understanding the function of Heißenbüttel’s literary theory. For example, take “Über den Einfall”, which offers the reader a microcosm of his critical oeuvre, since it contains all of his most characteristic rhetorical methods. The essay begins in a disarmingly poetic mode—perhaps leading the reader to expect an anti-grammatical *Sprachdemonstration* rather than a coherent critical statement—which veers quickly into a dense, technical explication of linguistic theory. This discussion leads to the conclusion that language fails to properly represent reality, that the consequences of this failure have not been acknowledged, and that literature has failed to reflect this shift in consciousness vis-à-vis language. Without offering a solution to the problems caused by language, Heißenbüttel advocates for a literary practice that takes up the challenge of this ‘linguistic turn’—indeed, more strongly put, Heißenbüttel declares it impossible for literature to continue to ignore these problems. As an example of a possible response to the challenge, Heißenbüttel humbly points towards his own work. This summarization may be slightly unfair, but it highlights an important aspect of Heißenbüttel’s critical work: that

¹⁸⁷Ibid., p. 227.

its central function was to offer a conceptual assessment of the current literary situation, according to which his own works are shown to best address the most pressing issues at hand. While most literary criticism of the time was doing the same thing on a more social or political level—declaring as irrelevant or immoral literature that did not devote itself to the furthering of the goals of a particular political or ethical ideology, whether Marxist, anti-fascist, pro-democratic, or whatever else—Heißenbüttel was one of the few to make the same claims on a formal, rather than on a political level. As we will see later, this would lead him into direct conflict with other writers, such as Dieter Wellershoff, who were pursuing a program of literary experimentalism at odds with Heißenbüttel’s basic conviction that “die neuen Prinzipien der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts sind antigrammatischer Natur.”¹⁸⁸

Objections To Heißenbüttel’s Theories

In a recent article, Bernd Scheffer comments on the ambiguous nature of Heißenbüttel’s literary theory: “Heißenbüttels Poetik changiert, oszilliert, wechselt oft innerhalb einer einzigen Formulierung zwischen einer Poeten-Poetik und einer wissenschaftlichen Poetik”¹⁸⁹ Heißenbüttel neither demands special treatment (or “poetic license”) for his theory, nor does he present it as properly *wissenschaftlich*. Scheffer points out the critic’s dilemma in approaching this material: that when one criticizes Heißenbüttel’s writings on the basis of scientific theory—which is what they more closely resemble—this may come across as unfair, since it applies scientific standards to something written by a poet. Here we see

¹⁸⁸Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁸⁹Bernd Scheffer, “Literaturtheorie ohne Welttheorie? Zur Poetik von Helmut Heißenbüttel”. In Friedrich and Hanuschek, “*Reden über die Schwierigkeiten der Rede*”: *Das Werk Helmut Heißenbüttels*, p. 48.

another example of Heißenbüttel's tendency to create an individualistic position for his own work in the liminal spaces between different literary conventions, separate from the literary community, and thus immune to its critical criteria. I agree with Scheffer that, despite this critical dilemma, it is still a worthwhile endeavor to identify the differences between Heißenbüttel's theory and "einer Poetik, die auch als wissenschaftliche Literaturtheorie und Poetik überzeugen könnte"¹⁹⁰—that is to say, to point out the conceptual weaknesses in his theoretical formulations. Of particular interest here will be those parts of his theory that relate to language, as well as other aspects that were rejected by certain other writers, who, in turning away from Heißenbüttel's linguistic model, prepare the space for a different approach to avant-garde writing towards the end of the sixties.

Starting from the ground up, there can be found in Heißenbüttel's critical work the same aporia that one finds in Hofmannsthal's "Ein Brief": namely, that language is used effectively to describe language's inability to function. Lord Chandos speaks of his own inability, "über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu denken oder zu sprechen"¹⁹¹ in clear, comprehensible, and evocative prose. Likewise, Heißenbüttel utilizes the subject-object-predicate "Grundform" of language in order to make the statement that this "Grundform" has ceased to function. The following very simple objection can be raised: if Heißenbüttel doesn't feel it necessary to challenge the epistemological fictions imbedded into the grammar he utilizes for his critical writing, why does he see this as necessary for literary writing? Furthermore, apart from a few moments where they slip into an experimental or poetic voice, Heißenbüttel's critical statements conform to the elevated style of discourse prevalent in

¹⁹⁰Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁹¹From "Ein Brief", in: von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke, Band VII*, p. 465.

German intellectual society since the dawn of metaphysics; they are riddled with traces of an idealist tradition that, according to some schools of *sprachkritisch* thought—Wittgenstein’s, for example—is built upon egregious misuses of language. In other words, Heißenbüttel recommends the most extreme self-critical use of language for literature, without seeming to make the slightest attempt to question the language used in his critical statements. It is not clear how Heißenbüttel draws such a clear distinction between literary and critical writing, nor is it clear why the representative function of language has deserted the former and remained unchallenged in the latter.

The closest Heißenbüttel comes to addressing these issues is in response to Heinrich Vormweg in their *Briefwechsel über Literatur*, a critical discussion in epistolary form. Nearing the end of their exchange, in a discussion addressing the aversion to literary criticism, Vormweg voices something similar to the objections raised in the previous paragraph:

Steht nicht alles kritische Reden über Literatur, das ja doch auf Verständigung und Vermittlung und damit auch Veränderung durch Sprechen und Sprache zielt, in einem radikalen Gegensatz zu dem, worum es eben jetzt in der Literatur geht? [...] Wenn wir nun—ich zitiere Sie wieder—“in unserem beschreibenden, beobachtenden, kategorisierenden, rationalisierenden, kritischen Vermögen darum herumreden”, wenn wir also immer noch artikulieren und modifizieren,—folgt daraus nicht jedenfalls, daß wir eben das noch betreiben, was in der Literatur gerade als grundsätzlich inadäquat ausgeschieden worden ist? Geht kritisches Sprechen in einer so völlig anderen Sprache vor sich?¹⁹²

The problems Vormweg raises here are crucial, and can be read as containing a sharp critique not only of literary criticism in general, but specifically of Heißenbüttel’s critical writings. If literary criticism should at all be allowed to set formal guidelines for literature based on linguistic theory, then should not the same guidelines apply to both literary and

¹⁹²Helmut Heißenbüttel and Heinrich Vormweg, *Briefwechsel über Literatur*. Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1969, p. 81.

critical writing, since both are creatively constructed using language? And if critical writing can communicate coherent messages, shouldn't literature also be granted the freedom to use language in the same way? Unfortunately, Heißenbüttel's reply fails to address these challenges explicitly. He begins by rephrasing Vormweg's questions:

Wenn in der Literatur und in den anderen Künsten grundsätzliche Veränderungen zu beobachten sind, kann dann die Kritik, die sich der Sprache bedient, weiterhin auf ein unverändertes kritisches Vermögen vertrauen? Muß nicht, wenn die Literatur ein verändertes Verhältnis zur Sprache anzeigt, die Kritik, die sich der Sprache bedient, ebenfalls diese Veränderung reflektieren?¹⁹³

Yet instead of seeing these issues as a challenge to the demands made upon literature, Heißenbüttel focuses on the perspective of those who object to criticism. He states that, for him, "die Frage nach der Berechtigung der Kritik [. . .] nicht prinzipiell problematisch ist." And as for the demands made upon literature on the basis of linguistic theory, Heißenbüttel offers a description a hierarchy of linguistic meaning, according to which the basic function of communication remains pure by separating itself from more complex constructions of meaning:

Die Veränderung unseres Verhältnis zur Sprache, so meine ich, betreffen die theologische, philosophische, ideologische und metaphorische Sinngebung der Sprache (und damit an erster Stelle die Literatur) nicht aber deren Grundfunktion, also etwa die der Mitteilung. Im Gegenteil, Sprache ist, aus den Vorurteilen von Theologie, Philosophie, Ideologie herausgelöst, nun erst recht Mitteilung geworden.¹⁹⁴

This seems at odds with most of what we know of Heißenbüttel's ideas on language. If he admits that language, when it is "ideologisch vorurteilsfrei," is simple communication,

¹⁹³Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁹⁴Ibid.

“Information über Welt,”¹⁹⁵ that would seem to contradict his ideas regarding the distorting lens of grammar itself, presented in “Voraussetzungen” and “Über den Einfall”. In his response to Vormweg, Heißenbüttel aims to defend criticism against an ideologically focused *Sprachkritik*; however, after affirming that, in critical writing, language can function as pure communication and information, he fails to address the consequences that this linguistic model would have for literary writing. Unfortunately, as is often the case in the frustrating *Briefwechsel*, Heißenbüttel’s glossing over of Vormweg’s legitimate objection gets lost in the critical fray, and Vormweg is too polite to press the point.

While Heißenbüttel’s brand of language skepticism was given a great deal of attention in West Germany during the sixties, the decade also gave rise to a number of authors who, while not belonging to the literary establishment criticized by Heißenbüttel, nevertheless took issue with the demands made by his theories upon literature. The criticisms raised by these dissenting voices, which often center around disagreements about language, are crucial for understanding the various ways in which the ‘progressive’ German literature of the late sixties grew away from the literary vision prophesied by Heißenbüttel. One of the most prominent of these critiques was voiced in the critical writings of Dieter Wellershoff. Although Wellershoff and Heißenbüttel were roughly the same age, occupied a similarly peripheral position with respect to the literary mainstream, and shared several formative influences—Gottfried Benn, Gustav Flaubert, and the *nouveau roman*—they developed contrasting literary programs which would inevitably come into conflict with each other.

To begin with, Wellershoff objected to the inwardness of Heißenbüttel and other practitioners of “linguistisch oder strukturell interessierten Schreibweisen,” and their tendency to

¹⁹⁵Ibid.

avoid representative writing: “Es war eine gängige Auffassung, Literatur müsse vor allem sich selbst und ihr Medium, die Sprache, reflektieren. Daß sie Welt oder Leben darstellen solle, sagte niemand.”¹⁹⁶ In an essay from 1969 on Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, which had just been translated into German, Wellershoff makes a similar remark, contrasting the critical impetus of Flaubert’s epigones—identified in a list topped by Nathalie Sarraute, and also including “die Nonsensdialoge des absurden Theaters, die Sprachparodien Queneaus, der Sprachterror Handkes, die Sprachspiele der Wiener Schule [*sic*], die Collagen und Reduktionsformen Heißenbüttels und Mons”—with that of Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire* itself, lamenting the turn of the critical eye from the social content of language to linguistic form itself:

Der Blick [verschiebt sich] von den Inhalten des Sprechens auf die Formen der Sprache, und die Gesellschaftskritik verwandelt sich in einen überzeitlichen erkenntnistheoretischen Skeptizismus, der mehr daran interessiert ist, daß Sprache nicht das einfache Abbild der Realität ist, sondern eine Eigenwelt aus Phantasmen.¹⁹⁷

Wellershoff praises instead the semantic theories of Alfred Korzybski, Samuel Hayakawa, and Anatol Rapoport for showing “daß die Sprache sich zur Realität etwa so verhält wie eine Landkarte zum wirklichen Territorium, also nur ein System abstrakter Zeichen ist”—a linguistic model that makes possible the establishment of a “realitätsorientiertes Verhalten” in place of a “Symbolgesteuertes.”¹⁹⁸ Wellershoff sees the literary theories of language presented by Heißenbüttel and company as drawing the opposite conclusions, working

¹⁹⁶From “Literatur als Erfahrung : Gespräch mit Jos Hoogeveen”; in: Dieter Wellershoff; Keith Bullivant and Manfred Durzak, editors, *Werke 5 : Vorlesungen und Gespräche*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1997, p. 895.

¹⁹⁷“Der Gemeinplatz und das einzig richtige Wort”, in: Dieter Wellershoff; Keith Bullivant and Manfred Durzak, editors, *Werke 4 : Essays, Aufsätze, Marginalien*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1997, p. 220.

¹⁹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 220-1.

towards the opposite goals to those of semantics: “Die Nicht-Identität von Sprache und Wirklichkeit ist aber im vergrößernden Nachgerede zur Deckungsideologie gerade für das Gegenteil geworden, nämlich für ein solipsistisches Sprachspiel, das schon die Möglichkeit der Realitätsorientierung leugnet.”¹⁹⁹ Contained in this position is “das Einverständnis mit einer ewigen Nicht-Authentizität des Sprechens,”²⁰⁰ which is something Wellershoff was clearly unwilling to accept.

This particular critique is echoed by Harald Weinrich in a 1968 essay, “Linguistischen Bemerkungen zur modernen Lyrik”, in which he promotes a critical practice that turns to linguistics in order to interpret experimental writing. He bets that any linguist would be able to see Heißenbüttel’s belief that language contains “eine vorgängige und verführerische Interpretation der Welt” as a product of the influence of the “These vom sprachlichen Weltbild” derived from the writings of Humboldt, Sapir, Whorf, and the pan-Celtist linguist Leo Weisgerber.²⁰¹ Weinrich notes that this theory has come to be viewed as highly questionable by modern linguists; in the case of Weisgerber, it even becomes ideologically suspect.²⁰² Weinrich criticizes Heißenbüttel’s writings not on their own aesthetic merit, but in light of the linguistic concepts of which they are a reflection; characterizing these ideas as “grundfalsch,” Weinrich in turn casts doubt on the quality of the literary work. In the same essay, Weinrich argues for the necessity of linguistic awareness for contemporary literary

¹⁹⁹Ibid., p. 221.

²⁰⁰Ibid.

²⁰¹Harald Weinrich, *Literatur für Leser : Essays und Aufsätze zur Literaturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971, *Sprache und Literatur* 68, p. 122.

²⁰²Weisgerber had close ties to the Breton independence movement, many of whose members sided with the Nazis during the occupation of France. His ethnolinguistic work during the Third Reich, based on the theory of a fundamental difference in experience between linguistic cultures, increasingly reflects a racist and pro-Germanic worldview. See: Christopher Hutton, *Linguistics and the Third Reich: Mother-Tongue Fascism, Race and the Science of Language*. London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 143 ff.

criticism: “Was die moderne Lyrik betrifft, so kann eine Ästhetik ohne Linguistik nicht mehr als adäquate Grundlage des Geschmacksurteils angesehen werden.”²⁰³ Turning back to Wellershoff, we can see how his extended critical engagement with Heißenbüttel’s work is effective for precisely the reasons Weinrich states: it accurately assesses the work as an aesthetic expression of a set of linguistic and epistemological beliefs.

In the course of his critique, Wellershoff wanted to delegitimize the epistemological skepticism that dominated Heißenbüttel’s literary vision. In 1968, a year before Heißenbüttel was awarded the Büchner Prize, Wellershoff published a short essay, “Eine Dame ohne Unterleib, oder Die moderne Ästhetik der Distanz”, in which he harshly criticizes the abstract, didactic, ironized literary aesthetic attaining prevalence at the time. Although Heißenbüttel is not identified as the target of this piece, the first paragraph includes a clear reference to his well-known maxim regarding literature having “[es] mit Sprache zu tun.” Wellershoff sarcastically admires how this position reveals to the naive reader that “dies ist ein Buch, und es regnet nur in der Sprache, keiner von uns, der das Buch gelesen hat, ist naß geworden.”²⁰⁴ He continues in this derisive tone:

Besonders fortschrittlich ist es, wenn der Autor zwischendurch selbst zu verstehen gibt, daß es nicht wirklich regne, oder gar das Geschriebenwerden des Regens schreibt. Man will also im Trockenen bleiben. Das scheint wichtig zu sein, draußen zu bleiben mit trockener Vernunft. Als aufgeklärt gelten deshalb alle Methoden, die die Einfühlung des Lesers in die dargestellten Vorgänge und Situationen verhindern, also ironische Distanzierung, parodierende Verzerrung und vor allem lehrhaftes Zeigen und zugleich Unterscheiden des Dargestellten und der Darstellung.²⁰⁵

Wellershoff calls into question the enlightened pose of literature that takes as its starting

²⁰³Weinrich, *Literatur für Leser*, p. 122.

²⁰⁴In: Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, p. 168.

²⁰⁵Ibid.

point an understanding of language as “der Niederschlag des allgemeinen Bewußtseins,” and that purports to reveal, by way of an abstract and ironized form of writing, the sociolinguistic “Schablonen” that organize perception. The practicality and efficacy of such a program is cast into doubt in Wellershoff’s account:

Was erreicht man? Daß man mit wissendem Lächeln darauf starrt. Das ironische Vorzeigen der Schablonen reproduziert sie zugleich und bleibt, wenn auch wissend, an sie gefesselt. Ironie wird zu einem komfortablen Einverständnis, das billig zu haben ist. So entstehen keine neuen Erfahrungsmöglichkeiten, sondern man betreibt, was man kritisieren möchte, eine fort dauernden Selbstzitat, und was als selbstkritisches Bewußtsein sich immer noch empfiehlt, wird zur Deckungsideologie für den Erfahrungsschwund einer Berufsgruppe, die nur noch mit sich selbst beschäftigt ist.²⁰⁶

Not only do such works fail to empower the reader to transcend the epistemological distortions of language: for Wellershoff, they even reinforce the hegemonic stability of these “Schablonen.” The ironic reflection of inherited cultural forms masks an underlying defeatism: an unwillingness to revolt against the influence of such forms, which Wellershoff also presents as the mark of a self-referential cultural solipsism. This aesthetic ideology is unacceptable to Wellershoff, who believes in the possibility of developing new forms of literature that would escape the linguistic determination demonstrated by writers like Heißenbüttel, and thus invent new “Erfahrungsmöglichkeiten.” Although Heißenbüttel would protest that he, too, aims to create new “Erfahrungsmöglichkeiten”—by attempting to use anti-grammatical writing to approach what is “noch nicht sagbar”, as he explains in the “Voraussetzungen”—Wellershoff sees this approach as trapped in an insular linguistic model that can have no recourse to actual lived experience.

In opposition to Heißenbüttel’s language-skeptical fundamentalism—his belief that the

²⁰⁶Ibid., p. 169.

absolute disconnect between the symbolic system of grammar and the empirical experience of the world prohibits any naive, non-reflective, unironized use of language—Wellershoff asserts his own fundamental faith in language’s ability to reflect the world. In an interview from 1979, Wellershoff states as much, responding to a question about his relation to the postwar “Krise des Erzählens”: “Die Grundsituation, daß ein Mensch in der Welt lebt und darauf reagieren kann, indem er sie darstellt und darüber spricht, ist unangefochten, kann ja garnicht angefochten werden. [. . .]. Insofern gibt es für mich keine Krise.”²⁰⁷ In Wellershoff’s theory, the idea of the “Sagbare” loses the negative connotation it bears in Heißenbüttel’s writings:

Es kommt eben nur darauf an, das zu sagen und zu formulieren, was man sagen kann, d.h. den Zugang zu seinen eigenen Erfahrungen zu finden und dies zu formulieren für die Zeitgenossen in einer Sprache, die verständlich ist.²⁰⁸

Whereas for Heißenbüttel, the “Sagbare” implies the *limitations* of language, for Wellershoff it implies language’s *possibilities*. The limitations of the “Sagbare” are not fatal to communication, since every speaker can approach language as individuals, and make themselves understood by their contemporaries. Language is not a remote and absolute system, but a malleable social tool; for Wellershoff, it is thus not a question of what can be said, but of what can be understood. This distinction points towards the manner in which certain German writers, towards the end of the sixties, would turn away from Heißenbüttel’s literary vision: by overcoming, or simply denying the validity of the crisis of epistemological skepticism, and by reclaiming the basic functionality of verbal communication for literary writing. The sense of linguistic possibility achieved thereby would serve as a foundation for the

²⁰⁷Dieter Wellershoff, *Die Wahrheit der Literatur*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1980, p. 141.

²⁰⁸Ibid.

development of new literary applications—observational, narrative, or impressionistic—of representational language.

Beyond the issue of linguistic skepticism, Wellershoff takes issue with the rationalist, pedagogic style of the aforementioned “moderne Ästhetik der Distanz,” situating it within a twentieth-century neo-Enlightenment tendency leading back to Brecht. Works of this tradition diminish the role of “emotional resonance” in order to appeal to the spectator’s reason. Wellershoff sees this approach as lacking in psychological nuance: by ignoring the emotional aspect of cultural spectatorship, one operates from a severely truncated understanding of art, “ungefähr wie das, was die Dame ohne Unterleib von der Liebe weiß.”²⁰⁹ Wellershoff regrets the tendency of modernist literature to treat the reader as a “Dame ohne Unterleib [. . .], die garantiert keine außerrationalen Erlebnisse hat.”²¹⁰ With this critique of ‘anti-libidinal’ literature, we can see the clear connection between Wellershoff and Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, who would later call for the advent of a new, sensually oriented literature.²¹¹ In a literature designed to safeguard the reader’s critical distance, “die libidinöse Bindung an das ästhetische Objekt [wird überall] verhindert”—something Wellershoff sees as an unnecessary moralistic measure, employed to conceal a deeper discomfort with “uncertainties”:

So streng ist diese Moral, daß man Angst dahinter vermuten muß. Der dozierende Stil, scheint mir, ist die Selbstverteidigung eines versteiften Denkens, das keine Unabsehbarkeiten mehr ertragen kann und deshalb die Welt austrocknet bis auf ein paar armselige Positivitäten, die fixen Bedeutungen seiner Ideologie. Der ironische Stil legt im Gegensatz dazu die Welt auf die entleerten Schablonen fest, die er sich überall zu zeigen bemüht.²¹²

²⁰⁹Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, p. 169.

²¹⁰Ibid.

²¹¹See below (ch. 5).

²¹²Ibid., pp. 169-70.

Wellershoff's view of literary *Sprachdemonstration* here—as a mode of writing that avoids the uncertainties of representative language—differs greatly from that presented by Heißenbüttel in the “Voraussetzungen”, where he describes a literature that thrives on the indeterminacy following from the rejection of traditional syntax. We see here an important conceptual split between the rival authors' literary models: whereas Heißenbüttel sees grammar as concealing the indeterminacy inherent to linguistic expression, and thus advocates for an anti-grammatical writing, Wellershoff sees this fixation on abstract linguistic forms as a way of avoiding the indeterminacy that results from the attempt to establish a representative relation between language and reality, and retreating to an intralingual solipsism—which, furthermore, attempts to negate the indeterminacy arising from the individual reader's libidinal reaction to literature. The distinctions between these two avant-garde programs of indeterminate literature will return later, when we look at the critical reception of writers like Brinkmann and Handke, whose work reflects aspects of Wellershoff's theories.

Wellershoff's critique of Heißenbüttel was one of the first to come from the perspective of an experimental, progressive literary aesthetic, rather than from a conservative one. Few conservative criticisms of Heißenbüttel's work progressed beyond a nonplussed disgruntlement; with Wellershoff, for maybe the first time, a criticism was leveled from someone who purportedly ‘understood’ what Heißenbüttel was trying to do. It is altogether possible that Heißenbüttel's prominence in the mid-sixties resulted from a widespread *lack* of comprehension of his work: that the validity and feasibility of the linguistic model presented by his work was praised—patronizingly, as “experimental”—without being understood enough to be subjected to a proper critical reading. In other words, the texts' formal abstraction may have lent a similarly abstract character to the theory presented therein, which was

received as something more poetic than scientific. Wellershoff's familiarity with the sources influencing Heißenbüttel—especially the programmatic experimentation of the *nouveau roman*, still widely unknown in Germany at the time²¹³—gives him common ground from which to understand Heißenbüttel's project, and subsequently to criticize its assumptions and its claims. This 'opening up' of Heißenbüttel's writing allowed a more clear-headed, less aesthetically knee-jerk assessment to be made.

Subsequent criticisms of Heißenbüttel's writing would often focus on the defeatist attitude inherent in his ironized use of language. Matthaei identifies a conservative streak in Heißenbüttel's writing, and connects it to an outdated literary aesthetic from the fifties: "Heißenbüttel kultiviert in dem Gefühl einer Ohnmacht vor der unüberschaubaren verformelten Wirklichkeit, die ihre Zusammenhänge verdunkelt, die resignative Einstellung der 50[er] Jahre."²¹⁴ This opinion is echoed by Joachim Kühn in his 1972 study of Fritz Mauthner, in which he compares Heißenbüttel unfavorably with Oswald Wiener. Like Weinrich, Kühn criticizes the "auf sehr schwachen Füßen stehenden, letztlich auf Benjamin Lee Whorf beruhenden Sprachtheorie"²¹⁵ that leads Heißenbüttel to rather unadventurous and uninteresting critical formulations, citing examples from the *Briefwechsel über Literatur*: "Darf ich den Grundsatz wagen, daß wir Sachen nur insoweit haben, als wir sie sprachlich haben?"²¹⁶; or: "Wir [können] nichts sagen [...], was wir meinen, sondern etwas, das die Sprache uns vorschreibt."²¹⁷ For Kühn, the resigned literature that stems directly from this theory reflects these weaknesses:

²¹³See Wellershoff's discussion of the *nouveau roman* in relation to Brinkmann, below (ch. 5).

²¹⁴Matthaei, *Grenzverschiebung*, p. 22.

²¹⁵Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, p. 6.

²¹⁶Heißenbüttel and Vormweg, *Briefwechsel über Literatur*, p. 134.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 137.

Die Erkenntnis über den desolaten Zustand der Sprache und das gebrochene Verhältnis des Dichters zu ihr wird nicht mehr als Herausforderung zu einer künstlerischen Überwindung verstanden, sondern unter dem Vorwand, Sprach- und Herrschaftsstrukturen aufdecken zu wollen, akzeptiert. So entsteht eine öde und sterile Literatur.²¹⁸

What the individual criticisms of Kühn, Matthaei, and Wellershoff share is the common accusation that the experimental form of Heißenbüttel's "Demonstrationen" serves as an alibi for an underlying conservatism. In a curious way, Heißenbüttel's linguistic theory—his fixation on the ways in which the forms of language determine human experience and expression—acts as both impetus and impediment to the production of avant-garde writing during the sixties: while defending experimental writing as a valid linguistic endeavor, it also sets strict limits on how language can be used. While Heißenbüttel and his colleagues used these ideas to break from what they saw as a stagnant realist tradition dominating the literary scene in the fifties, Wellershoff and other like-minded writers saw these theories as conceptual obstacles, impeding the experimental development of new uses of language and literary form.

Looking back on the sixties from the perspective of the mid-eighties, Bernd Scheffer identifies a "Theorieverlust" discernible in the intervening decades, giving a dated sheen to the high-minded linguistic theorizing of avant-garde authors—of whom Heißenbüttel is the prime example: "Die alten sprach- und werkimmanenten Theorieslogans und die autor- bzw. leserfreie Interpretationsmetaphorik [. . .] kann man nicht mehr gut wiederholen."²¹⁹ Scheffer presents Heißenbüttel's linguistic theory as riddled with contradictions, stemming not only from his Whorfian orientation, but also from a more general misjudgment of linguistic

²¹⁸Kühn, *Gescheiterte Sprachkritik*, p. 6.

²¹⁹Bernd Scheffer, "Moderne Literatur läßt sich nicht länger sprachtheoretisch begründen: Helmut Heißenbüttel als Beispiel". *Merkur*, 40.7, 1986, p. 565.

function. In attempting to develop a non-metaphorical, non-symbolic, “post-subjective” literature, Heißenbüttel advocates a “sprachimmanent” practice—“ein literarisches Reden [. . .] das den eigenen Wortlaut nicht übersteigt.”²²⁰ With Heißenbüttel, Max Bense called for texts that conveyed “Information in der Sprache über Sprache und nur das.”²²¹ For Scheffer, this attempt is founded on the fiction of a pure language: “[Das] Mißverständnis, man könne Literatur allein aus Worten so machen, daß sie mit konventionellen Inhalten, mit Ideen überhaupt nichts mehr zu tun habe.”²²² The attempt to use language in an absolutely non-representational, “sprachimmanent” manner is futile: “Noch in den reduziertesten Texten der ‘Experimentellen Literatur’ verweist Sprachverwendung auf etwas Anderes. Noch im radikalsten Text von phonetischer oder visueller Poesie weist Sprachmaterial über sich hinaus, es verliert nie eine (para-)semantische Komponente.”²²³ Scheffer’s argument makes it hard to see how Heißenbüttel and Bense could consider their attempts at a non-representative literary language at all successful. Indeed, Scheffer presents the aesthetic success of such texts as comprised precisely by their failure to accomplish this goal: “Positiv zu werten ist die Praxis der ‘Experimentellen Literatur’, der ‘Neuen Poesie’ überhaupt nur deshalb, weil die Bemühungen der Autoren, auf Sprache allein zu zielen, dann doch wieder die Welt treffen.”²²⁴

The shift in German and Austrian avant-garde writing at the end of the sixties away from abstract, demonstrative text combinations, towards a newly revitalized usage of descriptive or narrative language, reflects the failure of Heißenbüttel’s project of a “sprachimmanent”

²²⁰Ibid., p. 572.

²²¹Quoted in: Ibid., p. 573.

²²²Ibid., p. 572.

²²³Ibid., p. 573.

²²⁴Ibid.

literature. As we will see in later chapters, writers like Wellershoff, Handke and Brinkmann abandon a vision of literature as a linguistic self-reflection—and with it, leave behind a belabored theoretical discourse—and attempt instead to develop new, experimental relations between language and world.

3. Konrad Bayer: “die muttersprache als fremdsprache”

The work of Konrad Bayer, who committed suicide in 1964 at the age of 31, is marked by a playful formal experimentalism, an abstract approach to narrative and description, and a pronounced skepticism regarding linguistic representation and subjective knowledge. Bayer employed a wide variety of styles in his writing, with his final works moving towards a mode of fragmented narrative prose, exposing and exploring cognitive interferences between subject, world, and language. Bayer read and was influenced by theoretical writings on language, psychology, and epistemology; however, unlike someone like Heißenbüttel, Bayer never assumed the role of the rational intellectual, and is a closer heir to the anarchic sensibility of the prewar Dadaists. In a review of Bayer’s work, Heißenbüttel himself characterizes it as representing a late-period revival of “die Bemühungen der älteren Moderne, in diesem Fall des Dadaismus und des Surrealismus.”²²⁵ As Uwe Herms notes, however, representing Bayer as a “Spätling von Dada und Surrealismus” is a method of making him “klein und unschädlich”²²⁶: by placing emphasis on the formal similarity between Bayer’s work and

²²⁵Quoted in: Ulrich Janetzki, *Alphabet und Welt : über Konrad Bayer*. Hain, 1982, *Literatur in der Geschichte, Geschichte in der Literatur* ; 7, p. 27.

²²⁶Ibid.

that of the prewar avant-garde, the focus is moved away from what is most original and most unsettling about Bayer's work: namely, its expression of the author's personal experience of a deep epistemological doubt.

Before exploring the specific character of this doubt in further detail, it is worth looking at the cultural situation of postwar Austria from which Bayer emerges. As detailed above (see ch. 1), the literary establishment in Austria after 1945 was different from that of the postwar *Bundesrepublik*, and can generally be seen as more conservative—aesthetically, as well as politically. The anti-fascist, pro-Western orientation of West Germany was augmented here by zealous anti-communist sentiment²²⁷; reflecting this atmosphere of political restorationism, the official literary culture of postwar Austria also exhibited a marked intolerance towards experimental and avant-garde tendencies. Even as late as 1964, when Gerhard Fritsch published experimental poems by Bayer and his *Wiener Gruppe* colleague Gerhard Rühm in the well-respected literary journal *Wort in der Zeit*—which was the first major exposure to the general Austrian literary public that either of these writers had received, despite their having been active in less prominent literary and artistic circles for over a decade—a scandal erupted, with several critics writing letters to the journal denouncing the “Kühnheit und Scharlatanerie” of these young literary “Amokläufern,”²²⁸ ultimately costing Fritsch his editorial position. The general resistance to literary experimentalism led many young Austrian writers to flee towards the comparatively more open-minded attitudes of

²²⁷A remarkable example of the latter can be seen in the so-called *Wiener Brecht-Boykott*, led by the prominent publishers Friedrich Torberg and Hans Weigel, which succeeded in banning Brecht's works from performance in most Viennese theaters during the period between 1953 and 1963. Any theater that persisted in showing works by Brecht and other communist writers, such as the Scala theater, were subjected to a widespread press boycott. See: Kurt Palm, *Vom Boykott zur Anerkennung. Brecht und Österreich*. Vienna and Munich: Löcker, 1983.

²²⁸See: *Wort in der Zeit* 7/8 (1964), pp. 5 ff.

West German publishing houses.

This intolerance to works of an avant-garde character can be partially explained by the relatively minor presence of the “historical avant-garde” in prewar Austria. In a discussion of postwar Austrian experimental literature, Klaus Kastberger points out that the Austrian avant-garde had always been repressed—more so than in Germany, France, or Switzerland—and describes the main threads of avant-garde literature in prewar Austria, represented by writers like Georg Trakl and Franz Werfel, as a kind of “Expressionismus light” that never managed to fully escape traditional literary form.²²⁹ As another impediment to the development of the historical Austrian avant-garde, Kastberger points to the imposing presence of Karl Kraus, whose relatively conservative aesthetics insisted on linguistic precision and the supremacy of the moral element in art, which Kastberger sees as incompatible with the revolutionary, provocative aesthetics of the historical avant-garde movements: “Für Kraus stand die Grenze des Tolerierbaren fest; eine Zertrümmerung der Form war nicht hinzunehmen. Die Bewertung von Kunst war für Kraus letztlich nicht ohne die Kategorien der Moral möglich—ein Ansatz, der an einer Antikunst wie dem Dadaismus notwendigerweise scheitern mußte.”²³⁰ While developing around the same time as the postwar “neo-avant-garde” in Germany, the Austrian postwar avant-garde surfaces in a different aesthetic environment: one that has not yet passed through the establishment of a preliminary, historical avant-garde movement on its native soil. Referencing Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Kastberger claims an Austrian

²²⁹See: Klaus Kastberger, “Wien 50/60. Eine Art einzige österreichische Avantgarde”. In Eder and Kastberger, *Schluß mit dem Abendland!*, pp. 7 ff.

The one exception to this rule—and the only Austrian that can be considered a central figure of the historical avant-garde—was Raoul Hausmann, who lived and worked almost exclusively outside of Austria (first in Berlin, and then in France), and was practically unknown in his home country before being rediscovered by members of the postwar Austrian avant-garde.

²³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 7.

exception to the historical model of the development of the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde:

Wien 50/60, dieser Cluster aus Wiener Gruppe, Wiener Aktionismus und Umfeld, ist eine weltweit einzigartige Erscheinung, weil er aus einer Simultaneität von Avantgarde und Neoavantgarde besteht. Die Theorie der Avantgarde baut ja gemeinhin auf dem Unterschied und der zeitlichen Abfolge der beiden Phänomene auf; in Wien 50/60 aber fielen die Avantgarde und die Neoavantgarde an ein- und demselben Punkt zusammen.²³¹

Bürger's model fails to take into account the international cultural variations of avant-garde art: that the dissimilar developments of avant-garde movements in different countries necessarily imply different roles, different functions, and different meanings for any neo-avant-garde activity.²³² The relative conservatism of postwar Austrian literary culture, which determines the character of the postwar Austrian neo-avant-garde, must be viewed in connection to the relative weakness of the Austrian historical avant-garde, as well as a general Austrian unwillingness—whether or not of Krausian inspiration—to do away completely with established literary forms.

Towards the end of the fifties, the authors of the *Wiener Gruppe*—Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener, and Friedrich Achleitner (with the somewhat older H.C. Artmann sometimes counted as one of their members)—emerged as leading figures of an underground literary avant-garde developing in almost total separation from the editorial hierarchy of the Austrian literary establishment. The group formed out of the community surrounding the Vienna “Art-Club,” a loose collection of artists, musicians, dancers, architects, designers, and writers. The young writers of the future *Wiener Gruppe* developed their own literary

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² For more on the inapplicability of Bürger's model to the situation of the *Wiener Gruppe*, see: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Eine Avantgarde aus Graz*. Klagenfurt: Carinthia, 1979, p. 14.

voices from direct contact with this interdisciplinary, art-oriented collective, and were much less influenced by any national literary tradition; indeed, the group's members were not exclusively writers, but were also active as musicians, composers, actors, painters, and performance artists. The aesthetic disparity between the *Wiener Gruppe* and the Austrian literary establishment could in part be explained by the former having developed more from an artistic community, rather than from literary society.²³³

The *Wiener Gruppe*'s "artistic" approach to writing was, however, far from an idle aestheticism, and was equally determined by their active engagement with philosophical, linguistic, sociological, and psychological ideas of the period. Kastberger identifies the group's "szientistische Seite," claiming that, alongside the standard avant-garde themes of "Politisierung des eigenen Standpunktes" and "Überführung von Kunst in Lebenspraxis," the *Wiener Gruppe* developed a personal literary theory that viewed "Erkenntnistheorie und Sprachphilosophie [. . .] als Grundlagen des Schreibens."²³⁴ Communal readings of theoretical writings were central features of group activity, with ensuing debates often giving direct rise to writing experiments.²³⁵ While an involvement with theoretical issues of language was not unusual for avant-garde writers' groups of the postwar period, the *Wiener Gruppe*'s engagement distinguishes itself not only by its scientific focus, but also by their willingness to apply these theories on a personal level, rather than remaining in the realm of pure intellect. They look to theoretical sources not only to become familiar with the current

²³³A good overview of the *Wiener Gruppe*'s origins in the Viennese art scene is given by Rühm himself: "vorwort", in: Gerhard Rühm, editor, *Die Wiener Gruppe : Texte, Gemeinschaftsarbeiten, Aktionen : Achleitner, Artmann, Bayer, Rühm, Wiener*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1985, pp. 7-36.

²³⁴Kastberger, "Wien 50/60", p. 8.

²³⁵See: Rühm, *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 27; and Oswald Wiener, "Wittgensteins Einfluss auf die Wiener Gruppe". In *Die Wiener Gruppe : Referate, die im Rahmen des Walter-Buchebner-Literaturprojektes im Juni 1985 in Neuberg an der Mürz gehalten wurden*. Edited by Walter Buchebner. Vienna: Böhlau, 1987, *Walter-Buchebner-Literaturprojekt*, p. 49.

developments in the field and to inform their own writing practices, but also in order to find answers to the doubt they feel disrupts their own subjective experiences. The linguistic experimentation that plays out in their writing is not an intellectual exercise, but is rather geared towards the resolution of personal epistemological crises. It is perhaps for this reason that none of the group's members produced their own critical or theoretical writings (at least not during the group's period of activity²³⁶): rather than continue within the delimited confines of a theoretical discourse, they attempted to apply theories to their own lives, with literary writing as the eventual byproduct.

Due to the personal nature of their reception of philosophy and linguistics, it becomes clear how their particular interests reflect a difficult relation to their native cultural milieu. In his essay on Bayer's life and work, "Einiges über Konrad Bayer", Oswald Wiener explains how the theoretical investments of Bayer and his colleagues developed in reaction to a stiflingly conservative culture in which they felt marginalized and ignored. He specifically points to the inability of these young writers to escape the provincial ideals of their social surroundings: as opposed to today's "Massengesellschaft," Wiener recalls the impossibility of ignoring someone, "bloß weil er Ansatzpunkte und Themen herumtrug, die den eigenen zuwiderliefen. [...] Der Druck der kompakten Gesellschaft hielt alle Divergenzen der Außenseiter zusammen"; as a result of this cultural marginalization, one felt "gezwungen, sich in Bahnen einzudenken, die man nicht freiwillig gewählt hätte." According to Wiener, this social pressure resulted in the individual's alienation from his or her own thought processes, leading to the attempt, "nicht das zu sein, was man denkt, sondern das eigene

²³⁶Oswald Wiener becomes involved with cybernetic science and theories of artificial intelligence, but only starting in the late seventies, long after the dissolution of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the publication of his magnum opus, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa*. See: Oswald Wiener, *Schriften zur Erkenntnistheorie*. Vienna: Springer, 1996.

Denken wie ein fremdes wahrzunehmen.”²³⁷ A group of outsiders such as the *Wiener Gruppe* were thus united not only by their common alienation from their cultural surroundings, but also by their common estrangement from their own subjective identities. For Wiener, the interest in language that developed in this writerly community—as well as the generally accepted understanding of language as an alien and alienating presence for the thinking subject—stems directly from the alienation from both their culture and their selves.

Continuing from Wiener’s account, it becomes clear that for these literary outsiders, writing was not an uncomplicated act of expression, nor did it provide a cathartic outlet, but was rather an activity that *provoked* doubt and led to deeper questions about the nature of thought and communication. Following in part from the influence of concrete poetry—which for Wiener represented “ein Experiment, sich über die Mechanismen des Verstehens und des ‘Wirkens’ von Sprache erste Hypothesen zu verschaffen”²³⁸—Wiener and his colleagues began to see writing not as a medium for expression, but for experimentation and research into questions about the nature of thought and experience—questions which, for these writers, had not been satisfactorily answered by scientists and philosophers:

Schriftstellerische Arbeit damals hat einige von uns schnell zu der Einsicht geführt, daß die wichtigsten Einsichten in die Natur des Denkens und der Mitteilung fehlten.²³⁹

[. . .] Das Schreiben ist nicht ein Mittel künstlerischer ‘Darstellung’ gewesen, sondern ein Instrument zur Untersuchung von Denkvorgängen und für den Schreibenden ein natürlicher Hebel zum Hinausschieben seiner im Schreiben ihm merkbar werdenden Vorstellungsschranken.²⁴⁰

²³⁷Oswald Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*. Vienna: Löcker, 1998, p. 9.

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹Ibid.

²⁴⁰Ibid., p. 10.

[...] Experimentelles Schreiben ist Forschung geworden, ein Versuch, Modelle des menschlichen Verstehens zu erlangen, die ohne Isomorphismen von Zeichensystemen auf inhaltliche Zusammenhänge auskommen; ja ich glaube, daß die experimentelle Kunst seit dem Krieg der Ansatz zu einer Kritik der formalen Kommunikationstheorien geworden ist, und daß sie in den Bemühen langsam vorankommt, dem inhaltlichen Gesichtspunkt als dem individualistischen eine argumentierbare Theorie zu verschaffen.²⁴¹

For Wiener, the literary work of these postwar language-critical writers represents the attempt to use writing as a forum for the exploration of the gray areas of linguistic, epistemological, and psychological theories, and to pose critical challenges to these theoretical disciplines. From Wiener's perspective, dismissive accusations of "formalism" miss the point, since the formal transgressions that are the hallmarks of these works were only an aftereffect of the writers' combative theoretical engagements.

The focus of this experimental literary critique was, in most cases, firmly fixed on language as the interpretive locus for understanding subjective experience. Towards the late seventies, Wiener alters his own theoretical engagement, and becomes deeply involved with the study of cybernetics and artificial intelligence; from this perspective, Wiener looks back at this earlier preoccupation with language as a somewhat misguided exaggeration: "vor dreißig jahren [gab es] ein merkwürdig überhöhter status des bilderkreises *Sprache*; begreifen von *Sprache* schien ein neuer königsweg zum begreifen des naturganzen."²⁴²

It is tempting to try to explain the literary focus on language by the simple fact that, as writers, language was the medium of their chosen art, and was thus seen as central to their own experience of epistemological problems. This theory is denied by Wiener, however, who claims that he only became a writer—and in so doing gave up his career as a

²⁴¹Ibid., p. 19.

²⁴²Wiener, "Wittgensteins Einfluss auf die Wiener Gruppe", p. 46.

musician—because he had already adopted this way of thinking about language: “ich selber wollte schriftsteller werden (hatte mich in der musik vergriffen) weil *Sprache* die nabe aller einsicht und allen umgangs schien.”²⁴³

Wiener speaks of a general heightened awareness of language and the gray areas of linguistic communication in his community of friends. Perhaps developing as an isolated microcultural phenomenon, as Wiener argues in his essay on Bayer, or perhaps developing in connection to various post-fascist cultural trends—such as the attempt to identify traces of fascist ideology in the German language, or the theoretical model of language as a tool of mass control—this sensitivity to linguistic issues led these young writers to question their own uses of language. Language came to be seen as an “other” from which they felt separated as conscious subjects, or as an imperfect tool for self-expression, whose functioning distorted their thinking:

geschärftes sprachbewußtsein führt auch im normalen dialog immer wieder zu im gespräch kaum je manifest werdenden zweifeln, ob man sagt, was man sagen wollte, ob man sagen wollte, was man sagt, ob man wenigstens *auch* verstanden hat, was verstanden zu haben man verstanden wird [. . .]. man nimmt *Sprache* als einen teil der außenwelt wahr, auf dessen eigengesetzlichkeit man seine “inhalte” projizieren muß, sätze als aus-druck, der die ihn hervorrufenden gedanken überdeckt, ja verändert – die muttersprache als fremdsprache.²⁴⁴

Through literary activity, these writers began to discover and explore the fault lines of linguistic systems of representation, breaking language open in order to reveal its inconsistencies and limitations. For the most part, this writing was not a mere intellectual exercise, but was rather intended to spur reflection upon personal use of language; one’s own native language, in whose symbolic system one may have previously felt comfortable, was exposed

²⁴³Ibid.

²⁴⁴Ibid., p. 48.

as a second language into which thoughts and sensations must always be translated—a translation that came to be seen as fundamentally faulty, and insufficient for the demands of both life and literature.

Wiener recalls how this shift in awareness caused him to see his personal subjective experience as split into two separate levels: the authentic pre-linguistic level, and the inauthentic translation of this primal experience into the fragmented realm of linguistic signs:

mir war als bewegte ich mich in einer doppelten welt – eine gefühlte, gewußte, “richtige”, und eine andere “ähnliche”, zwingende, fragmentarische aber überlegene, die nur in der *Sprache* erschien.²⁴⁵

It is worth noting the difference between this conceptual orientation and that of a writer like Franz Mon, who claimed, speaking for himself and his immediate creative comrades: “Für uns sind Sprache und Welt nahezu identisch geworden.”²⁴⁶ Mon’s model, which resembles Heißenbüttel’s view of language, claims language as the totalizing symbolic force: the authentic, pre-verbal world of noumena finds no residence in the individual’s cognitive faculty, which is organized completely by linguistic form. For Wiener, on the other hand, linguistic function is disturbed by the individual’s awareness of a certain pre-verbal reality; he recalls how he and his colleagues were convinced, “dass wir in einer objektiven wirklichkeit lebten, und dass es, in diesem sinne nannten wir uns schliesslich dichter, unsere aufgabe war, die sprache zu einer optimalen annäherung an diese wirklichkeit zu zwingen.”²⁴⁷ According to both Wiener and Rühm, the members of the *Wiener Gruppe* precociously assumed it to

²⁴⁵Ibid.

²⁴⁶Quoted in: Walter Weiss, “Zur Thematisierung der Sprache in der Literatur der Gegenwart”. In *Festschrift für Hans Eggers zum 65. Geburtstag*. Edited by Herbert Backes. Tübingen: PBB, 1972, p. 675.

²⁴⁷Oswald Wiener, “das ‘literarische cabaret’ der wiener gruppe”, in: Rühm, *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 402.

be their responsibility, as writers, to rectify language's problems vis-à-vis this "objective reality." Rühm speaks of his attempt, working with Wiener, to develop "eine schrift, die mit geringstem aufwand genügend differenziert bezeichnen kann," which had led to their realization of "die notwendigkeit, eine neue sprache zu konstruieren."²⁴⁸ These attempted linguistic revolutions—in which the practice of experimental writing was seen as a central catalyst—were the product of a linguistically determined *Weltanschauung*, inspired by their readings of Whorf, Wittgenstein, Mauthner, and others:

wir gingen davon aus, dass das denken des menschen dem stand seiner sprache entspreche, daher die auseinandersetzung mit der sprache die grundlegendste auseinandersetzung mit dem menschen sein müsse. neue ausdrucksformen modifizieren die sprache und damit sein weltbild. das besagt natürlich auch, inwieweit unsere dichtung über ihre ästhetische bedeutung hinaus wirksam sein soll.²⁴⁹

Like Wiener, Rühm looks back in retrospect at this linguistic preoccupation as an "Überschätzung" that bordered on an ideology. This exaggerated focus on language did, however, directly inspire many of the *Wiener Gruppe* members' works, which functioned as either experiments with new forms of linguistic representation (as in Rühm's "abhandlung über das weltall"²⁵⁰), discussions or demonstrations of various linguistic pitfalls (as in Wiener and Bayer's *Sprechstück* "die folgen geistiger ausschweifung"²⁵¹), or demonstrations of the disconnect between language and world (as in the performance piece from the first *literarisches cabaret*, "friedrich achleitner als biertrinker"²⁵²). This is not to say that all, or even most of the *Wiener Gruppe*'s works deal explicitly with sophisticated theoretical themes—one

²⁴⁸Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 27-8.

²⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 189-97.

²⁵¹Ibid., pp. 319-26.

²⁵²Ibid., p. 422.

need only take a cursory look at a poem like Rühm and Bayer's "scheissen und brunzen" ("scheissen und brunzen / sind kunsten [...]")²⁵³ to get a sense of the fundamentally ludic, anarchic, and non-analytic sensibility that directed a large part of their creative output.

Nevertheless, a critical interest in language and linguistic form served as a fundamental inspiration for much of the group's work. While each member's individual project engaged with these themes in different ways, the general form of the group's linguistic preoccupations reflects a basic understanding of language as "das 'fremde', das instrument, die maschine."²⁵⁴ This view provokes the *Gruppe* to develop, through writing, a literary subject that reflects the individual's alienation from the means of expression provided by the socially determined system of language. Bayer's work, more so than that of most of his colleagues, presents the reader with the unsettling consequences of the literary attempt to give voice to this subject, which serves as a stand-in for his own subjectivity, plagued by his own deep-seated doubts.

Bayer's Doubt

Konrad Bayer's writings express a deeply personal experience of epistemological skepticism. If we attempt to define this skepticism, or to identify the theoretical influences that contributed to its cultivation, we encounter numerous problems, not the least of which is Bayer's reticence when it comes to explicit theoretical writing. While Wiener insists that Bayer was not averse to theorizing—"Er war theoretischen Formulierungen viel weniger abgeneigt als seinen Schriften abzulesen wäre."²⁵⁵—the fact remains that very few theoretical

²⁵³Ibid., pp. 298-9.

²⁵⁴Wiener, "Wittgensteins Einfluss auf die Wiener Gruppe", pp. 57-8.

²⁵⁵Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 16.

pronouncements are to be found in his writings. Apart from a few isolated statements about language and perception scattered through *der stein der weisen* and *der sechste sinn*, a short, historical overview of H.C. Artmann's role in the post war Austrian art scene, and a few jokes—such as his claim in “zur kleinschreibung” that his use of *konsequente Kleinschreibung* “ermöglicht den ankauf dieses blattes auch *dem* leser, welcher der grossbuchstaben noch nicht mächtig ist”²⁵⁶—we are left only with the poetic reflection of Bayer's theoretical and critical investments. When attempting to form a precise understanding of Bayer's skepticism, we are thus forced to turn to secondary sources. As Bayer's closest accomplices and first-hand witnesses to much of Bayer's career, Oswald Wiener and Gerhard Rühm offer important insights with their commentaries on Bayer's life and work. However, both of these writers present accounts that only too clearly show the influences of their individual aesthetic preoccupations: Wiener's view is shaped by his own engagement (developing primarily after Bayer's death) with theories of communication and cybernetics, while Rühm's view of Bayer reflects the constructivist aesthetic that his own work follows in the post-Bayer years. An example of this: in contrast to Wiener's socio-epistemological account of the development of Bayer's linguistic skepticism (described in the previous section), Rühm sees Bayer's preoccupation with language as having developed directly from the Wiener Gruppe's collaborative writing experiments, or “poetische gesellschaftsspielen,” which established “eine bewusste gemeinsame auseinandersetzung mit dem material sprache überhaupt [. . .].”²⁵⁷ It is subsequently difficult to determine how much in each account represents Bayer's personal ideas, and how much represents the muddled collective aesthetics of the *Wiener Gruppe* and

²⁵⁶Konrad Bayer; Gerhard Rühm, editor, *Sämtliche Werke*. 2nd edition. Vienna: ÖBV-Klett-Cotta, 1996, p. 712.

²⁵⁷Gerhard Rühm, “vorwort”, in: *Ibid.*, p. 12.

each individual's post-*Gruppe* career.

An additional dilemma is presented by the possibility that Bayer's skepticism was more a reflection of a personal chemical imbalance or psychological disturbance than a result of his engagement with theories of thought and perception. In a talk presented at the 1979 "Konrad Bayer Symposion" in Vienna, Jörg Drews takes issue with attempts to interpretively dissect Bayer's personal "Beunruhigung" into particles of "Sprachphilosophie, Verstehenspsychologie oder Überlegungen zur artificial intelligence"; instead, Drews points to the "konstitutionelle Gründe" behind Bayer's condition, stemming primarily from a combination of "narzißtische Kränkungen plus hohe Intelligenz."²⁵⁸ For Drews, Bayer was not a writer who "hinter einer Theorie von Litterratur herrenn[t]," but rather one who wrote in a less measured, "theorielos" manner, guided by his personal experience of "existentielle Beunruhigung."²⁵⁹ This points towards an essential difference between Bayer and other writers of the language-critical avant-garde: namely, that Bayer's engagement with linguistic and epistemological theory was not purely intellectual, but rather appears to have been guided by his own subjective condition of a kind of existential aphasia.

Nevertheless, Bayer was actively interested in theoretical texts—eagerly reading Wittgenstein and Whorf, as well as political, sociological, and mystical texts—and the influence of such writings can certainly be distinguished in his work. However, Bayer was just as often disappointed as he was *begeistert* by such texts, and he often adopts their views into his work with a large dose of irony. Janetzki shows this to be the case with Wittgenstein, one of Bayer's most important theoretical influences. Against the somewhat lazy critical

²⁵⁸Jörg Drews and Klaus Ramm, "das ist ja entsetzlich. Verdoppelte Bemühung, sich über Konrad Bayer verständlich zu machen". In *Konrad Bayer Symposion Wien 1979*. Edited by Gerhard Rühm. Linz: edition neue texte, 1981, p. 25.

²⁵⁹Ibid.

opinion that sees Bayer's work as a kind of "lyrifizierter Wittgenstein,"²⁶⁰ Ulrich Janetzki shows how Bayer's enthusiasm for the declarations of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* also involves a brazen transgression of the positivistic boundaries set up by Wittgenstein as philosophical law, in an attempt to access the realms of the non-verbal "mystical":

Was Wittgenstein nicht sprachlich einrücken kann, weil es sich nicht den Kriterien seines Objektivismusbegriffes fügt, dessen Existenz er gleichwohl nicht zu leugnen vermag, ohne sich in einer Aporie zu bewegen, will Bayer unter Zuhilfenahme alchimistischer Vorstellungswelten deutlich machen. Mit dem Positivismus Wittgenstein'scher Prägung hat dieses Unterfangen allerdings wenig gemeinsam.²⁶¹

Bayer's reception of theoretical sources was often fanciful, at times admiring a philosopher or a scientist in the same way one admires an alchemist, a shaman, or even a fellow poet. Wiener describes the influence of Wittgenstein on the *Wiener Gruppe* as "zugleich tief und undeutlich,"²⁶² and recounts how their enthusiasm for the *Tractatus* was aided by their habit of reading everything as poetry: "daß wir uns gewöhnt hatten, alles gedruckte als dichtung zu lesen, vergrößerte zweifellos unsere empfänglichkeit gerade für dieses buch."²⁶³ Bayer seems to have been impressed by theoretical systems understood as aesthetic creations, feeling no great compulsion to evaluate the objective validity of such a project.

However, not all theoretical systems were of equal inspirational value, and Bayer, as a committed outsider and nonconformist, generally admired the more esoteric and free-thinking theoreticians, feeling less charmed by writings that projected a rigid ideological structure, in which personal, phenomenal experience was abstracted or constricted. Wiener

²⁶⁰From Karl Krolow, in this case. Quoted in: Janetzki, *Alphabet und Welt*, p. 30.

²⁶¹Ibid.

²⁶²Wiener, "Wittgensteins Einfluss auf die Wiener Gruppe", p. 46.

²⁶³Ibid., p. 49.

describes their disillusionment with texts of anarchist political theory, which they found less useful than literary texts for practical application to the problems of everyday life:

Es schien [...] als sei in gewissen ‘Romanen’ und Gedichten, in den Lebensläufen ungewöhnlicher Menschen, und in Werken, die man zu den Kuriosa zählt, mehr über unsere Probleme zu erfahren gewesen als bei den doch recht einfältigen Revolutionären [...], deren ‘Theorien’ in ihren Voraussetzungen viel zu kurz, in ihren Drängen zu konform, in ihren Zielsetzungen so traulich waren.²⁶⁴

Bayer and Wiener seem here to presage the anti-theoretical theorizing of someone like Raoul Vaneigem, who in his 1967 *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* states that “Il y a plus de vérités dans vingt-quatre heures de la vie d’un homme que dans toutes les philosophies.”²⁶⁵—and indeed, Wiener claims that Bayer’s writing only gives a glimpse of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that was Bayer’s life itself: “Das meiste, was in Form von Anregungen und Ideen von ihm ausgegangen ist, erscheint in seinen Schriften nicht [...]. Konrad hat durch seine persönliche Anwesenheit und durch sein Gespräch weit stärker und folgenreicher gewirkt als durch seine Arbeit [...].”²⁶⁶ Just as Bayer’s literary work was secondary to the primary aesthetic creation that was his life, the literary engagements of his theoretical thinking were secondary to those that related directly to his personal experience. Bayer seems to have valued theoretical formulations only when they help him with his own personal problems, often preferring non-theoretical material as a source of enlightenment.

Following from his rejection of doctrinaire political theories, Bayer would have found little in the fundamentalist *Sprachskepsis* of someone like Heißenbüttel to help him with his own problems with language. Though he struggled with a similar skepticism to that of Heißenbüttel, sharing his belief in language’s inadequacy as a medium for both thought

²⁶⁴Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 17.

²⁶⁵Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*. Paris: Gallimard, 1967, p. 13.

²⁶⁶Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 9.

and communication, Bayer was uninterested in adopting an attitude of resignation towards language. Heißenbüttel's attempts at developing a closed system of non-representative language would have bored Bayer, who always felt compelled to probe the spaces of possible connection between language and world, and to suspend his skepticism in order to attempt a transcendent linguistic breakthrough. Bayer's willingness to experiment with and push the boundaries of linguistic representation, in contradiction to his own skepticism, is a crucial characteristic of his writing. Rühm describes how the progressive solidification of Bayer's *Sprachskepsis*, which brought with it a sense of extreme isolation, failed to snuff out his drive to communicate:

er zweifelte mehr und mehr an einer kommunikationsmöglichkeit überhaupt, stellte die sprache als brauchbaren vermittler in frage [...]. der einzelne ist isoliert, gefangen in seiner subjektiven gedankenwelt. jedes gespräch ist ein monolog, man kann *sich* nicht verständlich machen [...]. dazu im gegensatz hatte er ein starkes mitteilungsbedürfnis und zeigte sich seinen engsten freunden stets verbunden.²⁶⁷

Bayer's skepticism, unlike Heißenbüttel's, did not lead him to a fixed, stable state of absolute alienation from language; instead, it gave rise to a fluctuating relativism that alternately asserted and denied the validity of linguistic representation. In this conceptual orientation Bayer could move, think, and write freely and uninhibitedly, until his doubt returned to negate these efforts: "seine skepsis quälte ihn und sie steigerte sich. aber es gibt nicht *die* schönheit, *die* reinheit, *den* sinn, daher auch nicht ihre negation. es gibt nichts absolutes."²⁶⁸ In other words, Bayer's doubt was advanced enough to doubt itself.

At some point in Bayer's short career—the disorganized state of his premature *Nachlaß*

²⁶⁷Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, pp. 16-7.

²⁶⁸Ibid., p. 18.

makes it difficult, if not impossible to determine precisely when stylistic shifts take place—he moves beyond the abstract language games of his *Wiener Gruppe* colleagues and distances himself from the neo-Whorfian view of the linguistic determination of human thought.²⁶⁹ His work begins to represent a pseudo-mystical quest for evidence of extralinguistic thought, knowledge, and communication, attempting to use literature to represent the non-linguistic strata of his own subjective experience. As Janetzki observes, this put him at odds with the earlier aesthetics of the *Wiener Gruppe*:

Durch die der Gruppenarbeit zugrundeliegende Prämisse, daß Wahrnehmung nur innerhalb der sprachlichen Regelmäßigkeit möglich ist, sah Konrad Bayer sich persönlich ‘bedroht’. Ihn interessierten nicht mehr die literarischen Attacken der Gemeinschaftsarbeiten, die den allgemeinen Charakter der Sprachmechanismen bloßlegten und Sprache damit als Herrschaftsinstrument ausstellten, er war—daraus folgend—an dem auf die eigene Person bezogenen Erkenntniswert interessiert.²⁷⁰

Bayer shifts from the demonstrative “attack” mode to a more introverted quest for subjective transcendence through writing. These later attempts produced mixed results, however, and it appears as though Bayer never really manages to escape his fundamental skepticism; indeed, these later works sometimes presents themselves as the failed result of the attempt to escape the determining force of language:

Konrad Bayers Selbstzweifel ließen sich nicht positiv auflösen, zumal die literarischen und kommunikativen Versuche letztlich nur die Ausgangsposition bestätigen. So lassen sich viele seiner Texte lesen als verschiedenperspektivische Darstellung der Verneinung subjektiv-authentischer Erfahrung.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹Though a clear turning point cannot be identified—and perhaps there was no temporally linear development whatsoever—the perspectival shift between abstract language experiments like “karl ein karl” and “argumentation vor der bewusstseinschwelle” and the narrative prose (however fragmented it may be) of “der kopf des vitus bering” and “der sechste sinn” is obvious.

²⁷⁰Janetzki, *Alphabelt und Welt*, pp. 24-5.

²⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 25.

In other texts, however, Bayer makes more positive assertions about the prospects of successful knowledge and communication of subjective experience. As Janetzki points out, it is neither the visionary voice of subjective transcendence, nor the negating voice of epistemological doubt that forms the character of Bayer's work, but rather the oscillation between these two opposed modes:

Andererseits ist anderen Texten die apodiktische Selbstbehauptung, der Glaube an die Wahrnehmungsmöglichkeit einer subjektiven Erlebniseinheit so immanent, daß die kompromißlose Negation subjektiver Erfahrung überwunden scheint. Das wechselseitige Hinwenden zu einem der beiden Pole und die daraus resultierende Spannung ist bei ihm gleichzeitig auch Ausdruck eines Lebensgefühls, das zwischen engagierter Kommunikationsbejahung und selbstquälendem Skeptizismus schwankt.²⁷²

While Janetzki's model correctly captures the bipolar shifts of Bayer's skepticism, it fails to address the secondarily dualistic nature of this oscillation: Bayer is not only shifting between a negative and a positive attitude towards language, but also between a negative and positive attitude towards visionary extraverbal experience. His doubt as to whether one can successfully use language to represent and communicate personal lived experience is separate from, and in a sense opposite to his doubt as to whether one can actually experience the authentic pre-verbal world of noumena, hidden behind the veil of inauthentic linguistic meaning. If he manages to overcome his doubts about the possibility of linguistic communication, he is plagued by doubts about the authenticity of his experience. If he manages to overcome his doubts about the authenticity of extraverbal, subjective experience, he is plagued by doubts about the possibility of language being able to represent and communicate this experience. The restless, shifting nature of Bayer's skepticism is due to

²⁷²Ibid.

the opposition of these dual doubts, precluding the stasis of an abstract, resigned position.

The pathos of Bayer's work stems in part from the ironic representations of resolved epistemological unity that populate his fictional worlds. Ironic statements of mystical confidence are a leitmotif of Bayer's works: characters claim to be in possession of a "sixth sense," or are described as being "in einklang mit den dingen,"²⁷³ suggesting a transcendence of fragmentary subjectivity, or the attainment of spiritual knowledge. On the other end of the scale, the voice of "seit ich weiss" claims to know "dass alles meine erfindung ist,"²⁷⁴ suggesting a confirmation of his gravest solipsistic suspicions. These statements, which come off as comical or absurd, can be read as Bayer's wishful projections of imaginary utopian subjects, who are ready and able to confidently confirm either spiritual unity or absolute doubt—something that Bayer himself was unable to do. At the same time, another leitmotif of Bayer's work is the fantasy of flying: in the same manner as his characters claim to have achieved an epistemological balance, they also claim to be able to fly: "ich sitze in meinem sessel und schwinge langsam vor und zurück. es ist abend. ich fliege. ich kann fliegen."²⁷⁵ For Bayer, the prospect of resolving his personal skepticism is as fantastic as the prospect of being able to fly. Likewise, his fondness for alchemy perhaps stems from his perception of an affinity to his own literary-philosophical practice: as a mysterious, occult practice ultimately destined to fail in its efforts. Bayer's ironic mysticism stems from his awareness of the doomed nature of his efforts to reconcile objective reality, subjective experience, and linguistic representation, coupled with his determination to persist with these attempts.

²⁷³Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 611.

²⁷⁴Ibid., p. 393.

²⁷⁵Ibid., p. 670.

Bayer's restless self-questioning spurs him resolutely forwards on a quest—not unlike the alchemist's quest for the mythical philosopher's stone, which was the inspiration for Bayer's *der stein der weisen*—in which he attempts to achieve a different relation to his world by breaking through the mediating barriers of cognition. While this quest involves a reconciliation of the linguistic subject with the phenomenal world, its ultimate goal is not a purely linguistic relation, but rather involves the attainment of a transcendent cognitive unity. Unlike the spiritual searchers of later countercultural movements, Bayer found little of interest in the drug experience: although he experimented with hashish, ether, and other drugs, his hallucinogenic and narcotic experiences offered him little in the way of personal enlightenment, only giving him glimpses of “alberne Euphorie,” “experimentelle Oligophrenie,” or at best “Einsichten in das [...] Gebiet des infantilen Protests.”²⁷⁶ For Bayer, language was already a veil that interrupted his direct experience of reality—it seems as though drugs only provided him with different veils to hang between himself and the noumenal world, which was not what he was looking for.

Though Bayer was striving for a more immediate connection with reality, it would be a misunderstanding to see his rejection of the artificiality of language—as well as the artificiality of the drug experience—as expressing a desire for authenticity. Wiener notes Bayer's fascination with the artificial, which inspires a reference to Vaucanson's mechanical duck²⁷⁷ in *der stein der weisen*: “künstliche ente [...], die echten körner aufpickt, und echten dreck von sich gibt.”²⁷⁸ Wiener sees Bayer's interest as fundamentally different to that of the French inventor, revolving around the way in which an artificial replication of

²⁷⁶Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 16.

²⁷⁷The French engineer and inventor Jacques Vaucanson is known for his “Canard Digérateur,” a mechanical duck that purported to perform a real act of digestion and defecation when fed grain kernels.

²⁷⁸Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 526.

nature—which in Vaucanson’s invention is understood as a mere function—destabilizes a cultural understanding of authenticity: “nicht das Streben Vaucanson’s nach Natur, sondern das Künstliche als Natur”; “den Glauben an das *Echte* zu erschüttern und die Gegenstände nur als Funktionen gelten zu lassen, die Eigenschaften einer souveränen Vorstellung sind.”²⁷⁹ From Bayer’s perspective, Vaucanson’s machine challenges our accepted understanding of nature, which loses its status as a cohesive ontological realm, and is exposed as a system of interconnected functions, any of which can be replaced by artificial substitutes.

Over the span of Bayer’s career, there can be observed a shift in his view of language, which is duly reflected in his literary work. From his initial rejection of linguistic meaning as artificial and inauthentic, he moves towards a different model that adopts the same metaphysical model as that of Vaucanson’s duck: linguistic signs come to be seen as operational substitutes for natural functions, linking together and eventually forming a functioning system that completely replaces nature—the ultimate form of “das Künstliche als Natur.” His skepticism does not disappear, but its parameters have shifted: it no longer dwells on the inauthenticity of the isolated linguistic sign—linguistic representation per se—but instead begins to question the sustainability of linguistic structure (which can be compared to Heißenbüttel’s focus on grammar and syntax as the source of linguistic dysfunction). Bayer doubts whether the system of substitute functions can retain its form while continuing to function as a tool of perception, deduction, and communication, without crashing to the ground and dropping the linguistic subject into an abyss of non-meaning. Because of this persistent doubt, Bayer’s turn to long-form narrative prose, beginning in the late fifties with *der kopf von vitus bering*, never results in a smooth, lucid, uninterrupted

²⁷⁹Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 20.

narration, but rather produces fragmented visions that hint at, but never quite manage to sustain a clear narrative representation. In a 1964 book review, Peter Handke remarks upon this feature of Bayer's prose work, mentioning how it consists not of "Geschichten, bei denen sich ein Satz aus der inhaltsgemäßen Logik des vorhergehenden Satzes ergab, linear und eindeutig," but rather "Geschichten, in denen die Sätze Sprünge machen, in denen kein Satz die inhaltliche Fortsetzung des vorangegangenen Satzes zu sein braucht und dennoch formal im Erzählrhythmus der Geschichte wie ein Fortsetzungssatz dasteht."²⁸⁰ In turning to prose, Bayer revises the scope of his experimental literary project: he is no longer responding to the doubts that plague him as to the authenticity of linguistic symbols, but rather to the doubts regarding the stability, sustainability, and therefore the comprehensibility and transmissibility of extended linguistic structure.

However, the issue of communication was only one part of Bayer's preoccupations with language, and he remained concerned with the intrusive influence of language—whether at a symbolic or a syntactic level—on his personal subjective experience. Wiener describes Bayer's life project as an attempt to bypass the filters of language and cognition, in order to achieve a state of mind he characterizes as "eine Art bargeldloses Verstehen"²⁸¹: just as money takes the place of a commodity in an economic exchange, semiotic representation serves as a placeholder in the epistemic exchanges between the subject and the world; Bayer wanted to negate the intermediary distance imposed by the sign. For Wiener, not only Bayer's literary output, but also his personality and social interactions were directed towards the pursuit of this direct comprehension: "Verstehen einer Situation ohne Vertrauen auf

²⁸⁰Peter Handke, "Die Wörter als Wirklichkeit". In de Smedt, *Spiel auf Leben und Tod*, p. 86.

²⁸¹Wiener, *Literarische Aufsätze*, p. 12.

‘manifest’ werdende Züge und das Verwerfen des Verständnisses, sobald man merkt, daß man verstanden hat und danach zu handeln beginnt; die Übung darin, die Befriedigung des Begreifens abzuweisen.”²⁸² As a literary example of this pursuit, Wiener cites Bayer’s apparently unrealized idea for the composition of non-linguistic poems: “[...] seine Idee einer Dichtung aus Körperbewegungen und Vorzeigen von Gegenständen, von Begebenheiten als unverbrauchten *Kodes*, nicht als *Wirklichkeit*, auf die die Worte sich zu beziehen haben.”²⁸³ As personal examples, Wiener refers to Bayer’s ultimately disappointing experimentation with drugs, and, more generally, to his idiosyncratic approach to social interaction—wherein Bayer, by way of his mere presence, was able to impose a tense atmosphere of uncertainty onto most social situations:

Wenn Konrad eintrat, befahl eine gewisse Spannung, die Situation gestattete nicht mehr ein Ruhen in ihr oder eine Bewegung mit ihr, man war nunmehr gezwungen, sie immer wieder, ihre Einzelheiten, die Möglichkeiten ihrer Interpretation, der Interpretation der eigenen Erscheinung in ihr, die konkreten Anblicke und ihre möglichen Bedeutsamkeiten durchzugehen und die Möglichkeiten von Veränderungen vorwegzunehmen.²⁸⁴

For acquaintances who weren’t directly involved with Bayer’s personal projects, he existed as a dangerous figure, whose unpredictable actions presented a threat to the accepted social order; Wiener notes that “für manche ist er heute noch der Teufel.”²⁸⁵ This reputation stemmed not only from his willingness to manipulate his friends’ romantic and platonic relationships like a chemist mixing liquids in a laboratory, but also from the perceived threat that Bayer’s perspectival shifts posed to one’s intellectual and conceptual stability:

²⁸²Ibid.

²⁸³Ibid.

²⁸⁴Ibid., p. 11.

²⁸⁵Ibid., p. 12.

Für einige waren die Lockerungen perspektivischer Zwänge und Identifikationen, die Konrad mit Leichtigkeit, mit Gesten, bewirken konnte, als ein ekstatisches Moment auch dann ohne weiteres begreifbar, wenn sie den intellektuellen Anstrengungen nicht folgen konnten und, meist aus Ängstlichkeit, die ganze Ablösung nicht mitmachen wollten.²⁸⁶

Wiener claims that Bayer's social interventions sometimes went so far as to involve bodily harm—and indeed, Bayer's suicide can be seen as a continuation of his social experiments. Wiener states that Bayer was “von der Todesangst weiter entfernt [...]. Er hat mehrere Male Vorkehrungen getroffen, seinem Leben ein Ende zu setzen; nie waren dafür Gründe zu sehen, die einem konventionellen Begreifen genügt hätten.”²⁸⁷ Franz Schuh suggests that his suicide was the tragic result of a “Spiel auf Leben und Tod” that Bayer played with himself.²⁸⁸ On the day of his death, Bayer re-enacted a scene that he had written into *der sechste sinn*, wherein Goldenberg turns on the gas range, and then sits on his couch, smelling the toxic fumes, before getting up and turning the range off again.²⁸⁹ According to the versions recounted by various friends and colleagues, Bayer had attended a party on the evening of his death in Hietzing, a neighborhood in western Vienna, accompanied by his girlfriend Brita Hutter; he left early, and went home alone to the apartment they shared, making Hutter promise to arrive back home by four o'clock. He then re-enacted the gas scene from *der sechste sinn*, timing it so that Hutter would arrive home on time and save his

²⁸⁶Ibid.

²⁸⁷Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸⁸Quoted in: de Smedt, *Spiel auf Leben und Tod*, p. 107.

²⁸⁹“als goldenberg wieder in seinem zimmer war, öffnete er beide hähne, schloss das fenster und machte es sich auf dem sofa bequem. der geruch war nicht unangenehm und er wartete auf schlaf. er sah sein leben nicht vor sich abrollen und überlegte ob er die hähne wieder schliessen sollte, als er bereit war aufzustehen und den hähnen den atem zu nehmen, änderte er sich seine meinung und blieb auf dem sofa, als er sich entschlossen hatte auf dem sofa liegen zu bleiben, entschloss er sich aufzustehen und als er dessen sicher war, entschloss er sich auf dem sofa zu bleiben. der geruch war nicht unangenehm und goldenberg atmte das leuchtgas mühelos. schon wollte er das sofa verlassen, er hatte sich seiner sechs sinne erinnert, da schlief er ein, ohne sein leben vor sich abrollen gesehen zu haben. als er erwachte schien die sonne durch das fenster. goldenberg öffnete es und schloss die beiden gashähne.” [Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 590.]

life. Hutter was late in returning to the apartment, and found Bayer already dead.²⁹⁰ Bayer had already prepared for flowers to be sent to his partly estranged wife, Traudl Bayer, on her birthday—October 11th, the day after his suicide.²⁹¹

Bayer's doubt was profound and persistent, resisting vanquishment by shape-shifting: altering its perspective (from a social, communicative level to that of solipsistic, mystical experience), its basic parameters (different understandings of authenticity, different definitions of intelligibility), as well as its target (from linguistic representation to subjective experience), in order to remain an ever-present force of agitation. If Bayer's doubt begins with language—more precisely, with an exaggerated view of language's organizing role in subjective experience—it leads him somewhere else: the preliminary questions raised about language and linguistic representation open a Pandora's box of secondary issues, relating to communication, cognition, literary form, nature, society, and finally, tragically, to Bayer's own body. In Bayer's later work we can see him in the process of shifting away from the primary focus on language, towards these numerous secondary issues. The many aesthetic and epistemological issues addressed by the patchwork prose experiments of *der sechste sinn* attest to this.

der sechste sinn

Though Bayer's final work, the experimental novel *der sechste sinn*, remains an unfinished fragment—Bayer was working on a final draft of the novel at the time of his suicide, and the published version was cobbled together by Gerhard Rühm from the papers Bayer left

²⁹⁰See: de Smedt, *Spiel auf Leben und Tod*, pp. 76-7.

²⁹¹Ibid., p. 49.

behind, involving a not insignificant amount of guesswork on Rühm's part²⁹²—it is arguably the most mature and developed example of his writing. After *der kopf von vitus bering* (which Bayer finished writing in 1960, but was not published until 1965), it is Bayer's second attempt at long-form prose. Progressing from the formal experiments of his earlier works—which are mostly shorter pieces that shift between modes of poetry, prose, and a kind of *Sprachdemonstration* similar to Heißenbüttel—these two long prose works turn towards a form of experimental narration, showing the clear influence of surrealist novels such as Breton's *Nadja*, Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*, and the narrative works of Benjamin Péret. Like his surrealist predecessors, Bayer works passages from his everyday life into his experiments with prose form, creating a mutant narrative that functions partly as a roman à clef of his personal life in the late fifties and early sixties, partly as a philosophical-mystical fantasy novel, and partly as a language-critical deconstruction of prose form and syntax. It is a mark of Bayer's irrepressible joker spirit that such a work is also one of great humor and playfulness, never straying into either pretentious over-intellectualization or dull abstraction.

The narrative of the novel is deeply ambiguous, due both to the unclear relation between the novel's narrative and Bayer's real life and the schizoid formal character of the narration. While the novel's protagonist, Franz Goldenberg, is a clear stand-in for Bayer himself, most of the other central characters, such as Dobyhal, Oppenheimer, and Braunschweiger, seem to be based on composite images of a number of Bayer's acquaintances. At the same time, other characters are clear representations of individual acquaintances, such as Neuwerk and Weintraub, who are stand-ins for H.C. Artmann and the artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser,

²⁹²Rühm describes in detail the extent of his editorial assemblage in his notes to the *Sämtliche Werke*: Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, pp. 807-11.

respectively. Some of the novel's occurrences, such as the visit to Weintraub's house in the countryside (in reality, Hundertwasser's estate in Normandy, La Picaudière), we know to have actually happened, while other events of the narrative are pure fabrication. There is a further tension between certain events in the novel that are written in a more or less realist style, and others that recount impossible or fantastic events (such as the passage recounting a cafe scene, in which rain which begins to fall lightly, then falls more heavily, after which the cafe terrace is submerged underwater and fishes begin to eat from the plates on the table²⁹³): it is unclear which events purport to represent real events, and which are mere representations of the characters' dreams and fantasies. This ambiguity is duly reflected in the formal features Bayer employs. The novel begins as a first-person narration from the perspective of Goldenberg, but shifts after a few pages to a third-person narration. Throughout the novel, the narrative perspective changes several times, and the narration shifts indiscriminately between direct citation and indirect speech. Through this array of indeterminacies and inconsistencies, Bayer lends an atmosphere of ontological instability to the events of his novel, creating uncertainty in the reader's mind as to whether what is recounted is reality (whether part of a fictional reality or something from Bayer's real life) or fantasy.

The binary fragmentation of *der sechste sinn*'s prose narrative—assuring the ambiguity of the work on the levels of both form and content—is a crucial aspect for understanding the importance of Bayer's work, situated among the other works of the postwar avant-garde. In the writing of the concrete poets and other experimental writers of the fifties, such as Heißenbüttel, language is analyzed and deconstructed on a purely formal level. Bayer's

²⁹³Ibid., p. 599.

novel is one of the first works to combine the formalist techniques of *Sprachdemonstration* with a metafictional narrative in which issues of language and cognition are discussed either explicitly or allegorically. Bayer's turn to narrative prose is undertaken not as a reactionary retreat, but as an attempt at expanding and diversifying the critical scope of the postwar avant-garde's engagement with issues of language. If we look back to Dieter Wellershoff's criticism of Heißenbüttel and other practitioners of "linguistisch oder strukturell interessierten Schreibweisen"²⁹⁴ (among whom the *Wiener Gruppe* writers are counted) detailed in the previous chapter—namely, that their fixation on the form of language creates a blindness to the content of what is being expressed through language—we can see Bayer as perhaps trying to make a similar improvement on his own, earlier works: transcending the obsessive fixation on language as a system of abstract symbols, and moving towards a more "realitätsorientiertes Verhalten"²⁹⁵—or, at least, creating with *der sechste sinn* a hybrid work that bridges the two linguistic orientations.²⁹⁶

The experimental formal techniques employed by Bayer ensure that his novel fails to function as a smooth, untroubled narrative. The most basic example of these techniques is the way Bayer breaks the text of the novel into isolated sections, sometimes as short as a single line, and rarely going longer than a page and a half. This technique literally "fragments" the narrative, but also allows for Bayer to switch freely, quickly, and clearly between many disparate modes of writing. Bayer is thus able to include isolated mini-experiments within his narrative, such as a section wherein each word begins with the letter

²⁹⁴Wellershoff, *Werke 5*, p. 895.

²⁹⁵Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, p. 221.

²⁹⁶In his notes to *der sechste sinn*, Gerhard Rühm quotes a marginal remark that Bayer added to the original manuscript, in reference to next-to-last section of the novel in which Olga dies: "!!! das plötzliche des todes mit dem plötzlichen der erkenntnis vergleichen!!" This suggests that Bayer fully intended the subject matter of his narrative to reflect epistemological concepts. See: Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 809.

“d”:

“der darf”, dachte dobyhal. dobyhals darm drückte. dann drang dobyhal durch das dickicht. dabei dachte dobyhal dauernd dasselbe. “dreckschwein”, dachte dobyhal. “deshalb dankte die dänische delegation dieser dauergewellten dame, dame, dame. damals.” dobyhal dachte das deutlich. “das dauert”, dachte dobyhal. der dickflüssige darminhalt dampfte.²⁹⁷

The separated sections also allow Bayer to pair contrasting styles in close proximity. For example, the above “d”-section is followed by a section consisting of the following single line, which could have been picked from an imagist poem²⁹⁸:

ein hügel stellt knürend die bäume auf.²⁹⁹

The disorienting plurality of styles that make up these separated links in the novel’s narrative chain neatly expresses a criticism of traditional narrative form: the use of a single, unified style throughout a work is shown to be a contingent feature of the traditional realist novel.

It is also likely that this technique (which Bayer also uses in *der kopf von vitus bering*) was a necessary innovation on Bayer’s part in order to give himself a point of entry into the practice of writing long-form prose. It would have been too abrupt of a shift to suddenly start writing a single, uninterrupted narrative in a consistent style. By developing this patchwork approach to novel writing, Bayer allows his earlier, short-form writing techniques to develop naturally into this new, longer form: he grafts them together with a modicum of linear, narrative unity, without sacrificing the stylistic plurality and short-attention-span aesthetic of his earlier work.

²⁹⁷Ibid., p. 615.

²⁹⁸At some points, however, the final order of the fragments may correspond more to Rühm’s (necessary) editorial decisions rather than to what would have been Bayer’s original plan. See: Janetzki, *Alphabet und Welt*, p. 131.

²⁹⁹Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 615.

The novel's individual sections contribute to the long-form narrative while also performing experimental demonstrations of the limits of descriptive and narrative language. Several sections stretch syntax to the limits of comprehensibility, in an apparent attempt to show how details must be excluded in order to write an intelligible sentence. As Oppenheimer describes an event from his day, his attempt to include incidental details pushes his syntax towards illegibility:

wir kommen ins haus, die kinder sind mit dem spanischen mädchen, das sie, steiner und frau, jetzt haben, gut entwickelte brust, ausgezeichnete rückansicht, nicht unwillig, attraktiv, sehr gut geformte beine, taille 58, geschieden, hielt sie, das mädchen, zuerst für indianerin, ich, marcel oppenheimer, bevorzugen wie du, franz goldenberg, wissen solltest, konjunktiv, den indianischen typus, ausgegangen.³⁰⁰

The sentence becomes a demonstration of how a simple comment can be almost infinitely qualified, implying a series of tangential statements—in this case, attributive modifiers of a mildly psychosexual character, spanning the three lines between “haben” and “ausgegangen.”³⁰¹ These attempts at precision and truthfulness bring Oppenheimer's sentence to the limits of intelligibility, showing how a traditional narrative functions only by way of exclusion. Several pages later, Bayer offers us another version of this: a description of a street that devolves into abstraction along a disorienting chain of modifiers separated by commas:

der asfalt läuft, springt, teilt, bricht im dünnen, breiten, schlanken, eleganten, klumpig, gequirlt, stürzend, die quelle, das wasser, rinnseln, rinnsal, gerinnsel,

³⁰⁰Ibid., pp. 591-2.

³⁰¹For a longer example of this same technique see Bayer's “die birne” from 1961, a prose piece consisting of a three-page long sentence beginning with the biting of a pear, and going on to describe in great detail the pear's origins. See: Ibid., pp. 403-5.

aus, empor, der aufbrechenden, berstenden, aufgebrochenen, gerissenen strasse, spalte, risse, gletscher.³⁰²

By multiplying the words used to describe the scene, in the hope of getting tangentially closer to the objective, extraverbal truth, Bayer's sentence loses its form, like the disintegrating asphalt being described, spiraling centrifugally away from its object. In a later, somewhat different example, the same will to precision, this time applied to the description of an individual person's movement, again derails the narration's sensible description of events. As Goldenberg walks towards a building, the narration turns inward, and begins to describe the bodily events that are taking place:

seine muskeln brachten ihn ohne weitere zwischenhaltung über das bewusstsein zum stehen. sein herz schlug 80mal in der minute. unentwegt wuchsen die haare aus seiner kopfhaut. in seinem magen schwammen die vorverdauten reste eines reichlichen frühstücks im bier. in kurzen abständen sog er teile aus der ihn umgebenden, hell erleuchteten luft ab, verwandelte, machte zauber, chemie, behielt was er brauchte und stiess den rest aus maul und poren. sein elastisches rückenmark erlaubte ihm, sich aufrecht zu halten. schallwellen erreichten ihn und er musste hören.³⁰³

Here, the syntax of the sentences are left untroubled: it is their subject matter—ostensibly, a description of a man standing before a building—that is pushed towards absurdity. Despite the fact that these observations are for the most part accurate, they make little sense inserted into a novelistic narrative. Like the previous excerpts, this passage destabilizes the traditional narrative form, showing that truth and facticity are not proper measures of what belongs within a coherent narrative—and again, that coherence is not identical with truth, but rather functions by excluding the facts that don't fit into a certain perspective. The statement that the hairs continue to grow out of the skin of a character's head can be accurately inserted

³⁰²Ibid., p. 601.

³⁰³Ibid., p. 623.

into every novelistic situation involving all but the most severely bald of living humans—yet the inclusion of such a remark would almost always interrupt and destabilize the narrative’s logical flow.

There is also a further critique in this particular example that connects back to certain of Heißenbüttel’s concerns about language. By presenting the individual as a motley conglomeration of various bodily events, Bayer satirizes the conventional formal fiction of the unified autonomous subject—which is part of what Heißenbüttel describes as “das alte Grundmodell der Sprache von Subjekt-Objekt-Prädikat.”³⁰⁴ Where a conventional narrative would use this accepted model, and state that “Goldenberg hears” something, Bayer removes the fiction of autonomy built into this syntax, instead saying “er musste hören”—i.e. his body hears, and goldenberg has no say in the matter; instead of saying “Goldenberg stands,” Bayer describes how his spine *allows* him to stand. Beneath the disarming whimsy of such passages, Bayer expresses the same critiques that Heißenbüttel attempts to voice with his more sternly abstract and analytical texts: in this case, human agency is shown to exist only as a function of grammar, a syntactical fiction that achieves clarity at the expense of a precise representation of the unruly, decentralized event that is human, bodily existence.

The previous three excerpts are good demonstrations of how Bayer, in *der sechste sinn*, approaches narrative prose not as a simple medium for description and storytelling, but as a culturally determined linguistic field of largely unacknowledged instability and uncertainty, just waiting to be complicated, convoluted, and subverted by a writer who is ready and willing to experiment. It is clear to see how Bayer’s earlier formal experiments lead directly to the idiosyncratic prose style he develops in *der kopf von vitus bering* and *der sechste*

³⁰⁴Heißenbüttel, *Über Literatur*, p. 222.

sinn; he retains the same fundamental approach, only the scope of his experimentalism has changed.

Beyond the various subversions of narrative convention, the experimental style of *der sechste sinn* also reflects a deep ambivalence regarding language itself. The novel's fundamental critique involves an exaggerated depiction of language as a system of preconceived conceptual cells, similar to the ideal forms of Plato's cave, which have no direct relation to the real things they purport to represent. The sensation that Wiener described as living in a "doppelte Welt," swinging between the inauthentic symbols of linguistic representation and the authentic reality of non-verbal experience, finds expression here in Bayer's use of "stock" phrases that repeatedly intrude into the narration, blocking out the reader's access to the fictional reality in the same way that language blocks the individual subject's access to extraverbal reality. These phrases are presented by the narrator as if they represented the actual objects, actions, or situations of the fictional reality, though the story they describe veers into the absurd. Some of the most prevalent phrases are:

- im stil der jahrhundertwende
- ein vornehm wirkender junger mann
- wo leben und eigentum bedroht werden, da hören alle unterscheidungen auf
- ich habe den sechsten sinn
- die dame in rot
- die ereignisse zeigten sich in einem neuen licht
- was will mein körper/meine seele von mir?

Bayer introduces these phrases in the novel's first pages, modulating and altering them as they reappear throughout the first few scenes. Already with the first paragraph, before the phrases

begin to reappear, the reader senses them as intrusions into the novel's narrative—they seem to mark the presence of a system of representative signifiers that is not fully understandable to us:

die bäuerin blieb ungerührt im stil der jahrhundertwende, obwohl es gerade ein paar minuten vor der essenszeit war. ein vornehm wirkender junger mann beobachtet uns. er klirrt im salon. sie lächelt kaum merklich. wo leben und eigentum bedroht werden, da hören alle unterscheidungen auf. nina, die auf dem toiletetisch lag, hatte ringe unter den augen und war voller haare.
“ich habe den sechsten sinn. .” und seufzte.³⁰⁵

These intrusions appear at first merely as manifestations of an eccentric prose style. It is when the phrases begin to reappear that they achieve a deeper alienating effect: the narrated reality threatens to dissolve completely as the text becomes a collage of empty signifiers. In the novel's first few pages, the repetitions of the stock phrases are especially numerous. Despite Bayer's modulation of the phrases to make them fit into different syntactical situations, their presence as interrupting, alien signifiers barely changes:

es war fast eine flucht, der vornehm wirkende junge mann fiel auf die theke und die ringe klirrten auf seinen fingern. nina drückte ihm im vorbeigehen die hand und seufzte: “was will mein körper von ihnen?” ein vornehm wirkender kellner beobachtet uns. er hat den sechsten sinn. das passiert oft. die sechs damen in rot schütteln meine hände. ich bin voller haare und klappe zusammen. mein blondes haar ist schon etwas schütter. zu hunderten lehnen wir an der theke. ich bin barfuss und habe einen roten pelzmantel über mein hemd gelegt. der kellner schreit. es regnet in strömen. es war ein schöner abend — ganz im stil der jahrhundertwende, dabei erinnerte ich mich meiner telefonate und plötzlich erscheinen die ereignisse in einem neuen licht. wo leben und eigentum bedroht werden, verlieren sich die unterscheidungen.³⁰⁶

Bayer uses these phrases to present a model of language that remains always under the threat of slipping into meaningless grammatical construction. The novel's first pages represent the

³⁰⁵Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 577.

³⁰⁶Ibid., pp. 578-9.

birth pangs of Bayer's narrative—and perhaps of Bayer as a writer of narrative prose—as it struggles to break through the representational blocks of these stock phrases, in order to establish a place for its fictional reality within the symbolic system of language.

Gradually, although never completely, the narrator begins to resist the intrusions of these preset phrases, and develops his own descriptive language. Despite the persistence throughout the book of several stock phrases, the narrator manages to assert a form of descriptive prose that at times achieves an almost photographically precise clarity. However, this descriptive precision is also pushed to the limits of absurdity, resulting in a prose that is more hyperreal and psychedelic than it is clear and evocative. One example of this is the striking passage relating the ingestion of apple strudel,³⁰⁷ which comes early in the novel, and represents one of the first instances when the narrative voice escapes the intrusions of the stock phrases:

wir kommen hin, es gibt rotwein und apfelstrudel. ich nehme eine gabel und esse den apfelstrudel. dann schicke ich alexander, man kennt ihn, und er bringt mir noch einen apfelstrudel. ich nehme den teller mit dem apfelstrudel und setze mich ein wenig abseits. den teller auf den knien führe ich dem apfelstrudel die gabel ein. sachte teile ich den strudel in zwei annähernd gleiche teile. die äpfel sind sehr hell, der strudel dürfte ganz frisch sein. ich lege die gabel seitlich auf den teller. dann nehme ich das rechte stück mit daumen und mittelfinger meiner rechten hand und hebe es vorsichtig hoch. ich beuge meinen kopf und lecke langsam, sehr langsam den zucker von der kruste. natürlich wird man gestört, ekelhaut viele menschen! ich bohre meine zähne behutsam in das apfelfleisch, tatsächlich, ganz frisches, weiches, süssliches apfelfleisch, ich lasse etwas füllung in meine mundhöhle gleiten. mein speichel und das apfelfleisch sind ein weicher süsslicher brei. plötzlich schlucke ich apfelfleisch. es gleitet, lauwarm und weich durch meine speiseröhre. immer mehr speichel sammelt sich in meiner mundhöhle. ich steche jetzt ganz fest in den strudel. die kruste bricht. die zinken versinken rasch im weichen apfelfleisch. langsam drehe ich die gabel in der füllung. breiig gibt alles nach. ich steche noch einmal in den

³⁰⁷It is somewhat unclear whether the first-person description is being related by Goldenberg, Nina, or Oppenheimer.

strudel. fetzen apfelfleisch hängen an den zinken. mein kopf schnell vor und mit einem schlag meiner zunge reisse ich die fetzen apfelfleisch von den zinken der gabel. zwischen meinen zähnen knirscht strudelkruste. hastig schlucke ich strudel. ich steche in den strudel, schlucke, steche in den strudel, meine zunge bohrt sich in teig, ich schlage meine zähne in die ränder des aufgerissenen apfelstrudels. zwischen meinen zähnen kracht harte, feste apfelstrudelrinde. meine zunge wühlt im teig des apfelstrudels, meine lippen sind mit staubzucker bedeckt. ich schlucke teig, teig. jetzt beginne ich zu kauen. langsam, sehr langsam kaue ich. mehr und mehr teig sammelt sich in meiner mundhöhle. ich schlucke und schlucke und kaue sehr, sehr langsam. jetzt bin ich satt. reste von apfelstrudel kleben an meinen lippen. ich lecke die krumen von meinen lippen und kaue. speichel sammelt sich in meiner mundhöhle, dann schlucke ich alles. alexander kommt mit einem leeren teller. “es gibt keinen apfelstrudel mehr”, sagte marcel oppenheimer [. . .]³⁰⁸

This passage gives us the impression that the narrator, who has managed to replace his meaningless signifiers with words that correspond directly to a real situation (“apfelstrudel,” “teig,” “teller,” “gabel,” “kauen,” “schlucken”), is now faced with the task of fitting these representative signifiers together in a prose form that accomplishes the literary function of description. The newfound ability to describe a situation directly, in detail, is intoxicating after the disorienting collages of the previous pages. The narrator, along with the reader, gets lost in a surreal, sensual dream of chewing and swallowing. After the initial presentation of language as a system of meaningless symbols, Bayer here presents the exact opposite: language as a medium capable of intoxicatingly clear and precise representation of the phenomenal world. This dichotomy, which can be seen throughout Bayer’s life and work—we can think back to Janetzki’s description of his oscillation between “engagierter Kommunikationsbejahung und selbstquälendem Skeptizismus”³⁰⁹—persists throughout *der sechste sinn*, and ultimately finds expression through the theoretical dialogues between

³⁰⁸Ibid., pp. 587-8.

³⁰⁹Janetzki, *Alphabelt und Welt*, p. 25.

certain characters.

One of the principal ways that Bayer's novel sets itself apart from other works of avant-garde *Sprachdemonstration*—apart from its narrative form, of course—is by supplementing its formal interventions with explicit discussion of linguistic and philosophical topics in the narrative's subject matter. In certain sections, the characters' dialogue broaches the subjects of language and knowledge, and the narrator's description of events likewise becomes influenced by these discourses. In his treatment of these theoretical subjects, Bayer utilizes the rather traditional novelistic technique of anthropomorphizing ideas through his characters—most strikingly in the interchanges between Goldenberg and Dobyhal, who come to represent opposed epistemological orientations. Goldenberg represents the naive, visionary faith in the power of language to serve as a functional medium between subject and world, while Dobyhal represents the doubt that questions both linguistic representation and subjective knowledge of the world. In their interchanges, Bayer provides himself a fictional stage for the working out of his personal linguistic conflicts and his restless, shifting doubt.³¹⁰

Menasse Dobyhal's³¹¹ entrance into the narrative of *der sechste sinn* unsettles the semi-stasis of Goldenberg's private world, appearing first as the man who propositions and then sleeps with Goldenberg's friend Mirjam. When Goldenberg and Dobyhal finally meet,

³¹⁰With Janetzki I consider it possible that Dobyhal represents Oswald Wiener to a large extent, since Wiener was probably the most zealously skeptical of Bayer's friends, and was an almost constant partner in intellectual discourse with Bayer. See: *Ibid.*, p. 153

³¹¹The character's first name "Menasse" cannot be a reference to the later Austrian avant-garde writer Robert Menasse, who was only 10 years old at the time of Bayer's death, but could be a reference to his father, the soccer player Hans Menasse, who played for FK Austria Wien and the Austrian national team during the fifties. Considering Dobyhal's position within the narrative, it is likely that Bayer wanted to draw a connection to the French "menacer" or the English "menace."

Goldenberg initially sees him as a “menschenförmig[e] sprechanlage.”³¹² His optimism regarding the possibility of communication is disappointed, however, as Dobyhal refuses to respond verbally to his greeting. Dobyhal soon comes to represent the negative, diabolic counterpoint to the pseudo-messianic figure that Goldenberg represents. After an amusing section wherein Nina refers to Goldenberg as “der schutzheilige der tiere”—whereupon hordes of wild animals flock expectantly to Goldenberg, who disappoints them by “lying” that he is not Christ—Dobyhal is presented as a force of violence and destruction, claiming to be ready to commit suicide at any time, and then killing and skinning a snake.³¹³ The dichotomy between the two is continued, as Goldenberg claims to have reacquired “den sechsten sinn” and is described as being “in einklang mit den dingen,” while Dobyhal is depicted as distinctly out of harmony with the world: he constructs an oven out of wood, which burns down once a fire is lit within. These associations lend a certain significance to the following passage, coming a few pages later:

goldenberg war ein mensch, der seine handlungen nicht erklärte. es ist unsinn sich mit worten zu verteidigen, sagte dobyhal stolz. goldenberg schwieg.³¹⁴

Dobyhal appears to represent skepticism as a destructive force, sowing seeds of doubt in Goldenberg’s mind that begin to disturb his heretofore uncomplicated relation to language. As someone who “does not explain his actions,” Goldenberg appears at times to enjoy an untroubled existence as a linguistic subject, for whom language may serve a social and psychological function, despite lacking any meaning; for example, in the following section:

“la la la”, sang goldenberg. “bla bla bla”, antwortete braunschweiger. hierauf

³¹²Bayer, *Sämtliche Werke*, p. 605.

³¹³Ibid., pp. 606-8.

³¹⁴Ibid., p. 621.

waren beide, braunschweiger und goldenberg, minutenlang glücklich.³¹⁵

The doubt brought on by Dobyhal's entrance threatens Goldenberg's peaceful acceptance of his linguistically determined environment, leading him to ruminate about the function of language, and inspiring him towards reflective theoretical daydreams. The "la la la" section quoted above—which asserts language's social, communicative, and therapeutic functionality—is followed by a section in which Goldenberg fails in his use of language for a different purpose: namely, of discovering truth:

oft fragte sich goldenberg auf parkbänken oder in kaffehäusern sitzend irgendetwas. in den seltensten fällen fand er eine antwort. und wenn, dann revidierte er sein urteil innerhalb von stunden. so alterte goldenberg.³¹⁶

The doubt that takes seed in Goldenberg's mind centers around the instability of a system of linguistic meaning that serves its communicative function without being able to represent absolute truth. Goldenberg is not immediately devastated by this idea, however, and at times he is inspired towards pragmatic reflections upon language, such as in the following passage—a wholly reasonable questioning of the relation between language and thought that could be included among the fragments of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*:

“wie in china”, dachte goldenberg und er sagte es auch, obwohl er nie in diesem land gewesen war. ist es ein land, dachte goldenberg später, oder eine stimmung. es wird zum land, wenn ich hinfahre. vorher is es eine stimmung die ich china nennen darf bis ich hinfahre und sie umbenennen muss.³¹⁷

Goldenberg's naive and earnest theoretical disposition leads him towards a pragmatic view of linguistic meaning, but also allows him to resist the alarmist, extremist philosophical exhortations of his acquaintances:

³¹⁵Ibid., p. 627.

³¹⁶Ibid.

³¹⁷Ibid.

“wissen sie”, sagte paolo farka, “dass wir gar keinen freien willen haben.” vielleicht ein bisschen, grübelte goldenberg als er nach hause ging. “wir haben doch ein bisschen freien willen”, antwortete goldenberg nach 3 tagen, er hatte viel nachgedacht.³¹⁸

This naive resistance to theoretical hysteria is also an expression of Goldenberg’s generally pacific philosophical spirit. In response to Tassilo Krenek’s query “was ist zeit?,” he answers: “zeit ist meine ruhekissen.”³¹⁹ Yet Goldenberg’s convictions are never static, and he is often shown to be willing to question and rethink his own conclusions—in this case, Goldenberg revises his answer a few pages later: “zeit? staunte goldenberg und einige tage später, nachdem er sich die sache überlegt hatte, meinte er, ist nur zerschneidung des ganzen und durch die sinne [. . .].”³²⁰ In this, Goldenberg represents a certain spirit of open, non-doctrinal, anti-ideological discourse. At the same time, however, he is often presented as foolishly naive in his contentedness: “wissen sie [. . .] mir geht es ganz gut. mein fleisch ist fest geworden. und ich rauche teure zigaretten und whisky und so. wissen sie.”³²¹

As Goldenberg’s linguistic thinking progresses, it comes to resemble more closely that of Bayer himself. In response to his own question, “was ist zu tun?,” Goldenberg answers: “in allem das gleiche zu erkennen.”³²² This reply draws a clear connection to Bayer’s earlier work *der stein der weisen*. Included in this mysterious collage of poetry and prose are a few remarks of a philosophical character. At the end of a section entitled “topologie der sprache,” which mostly consists of a long list of words and phrases that use the word *blau*, Bayer inserts the following lines:

³¹⁸Ibid., p. 626.

³¹⁹Ibid., p. 632.

³²⁰Ibid., p. 636.

³²¹Ibid., p. 628.

³²²Ibid., p. 630.

es gibt nichts gemeinsames. nur die sprache schafft gemeinsamkeiten. [. . .]
alle meine vorfahren und auch alle anderen haben die sprache zusammenge-
bosselt, haben ihre reaktionen damit eingerüstet und so wurde mit der sprache
[. . .] alles gleich gemacht und nun ist alles das gleiche und keiner merkt es.³²³

Bayer suggests here that things become standardized in a world organized by language—the act of running is always “running,” and any book is always a “book”; language imposes sameness on what is different. In *der stein der weisen*, language is not criticized for creating this system of false identities; rather, it is the community of language users who are criticized for failing to acknowledge the establishment of these identities—for remaining oblivious to the fact that, in a linguistically determined world, differences are negated. Similarly, Goldenberg is uninterested in asserting differences between things; quite on the contrary, he takes as his *raison d’être* the project of recognizing “in allem das gleiche,” and thus accepting the linguistic world view, in which difference has been abolished, as absolute truth. A subsequent pronouncement seems to echo this positive acceptance of symbolic order: “alles ist in bester ordnung, antwortete goldenberg, nur unsere ansichten müssen geändert werden.”³²⁴ Against Dobyhal’s skepticism, Goldenberg plays the role of the pragmatist, adapting his own thinking to fit the dominant symbolic structure of reality.

In the pages following this pragmatic turn, Goldenberg appears exultant, celebrating the metaphysical powers of his linguistically empowered subjectivity. In a raving monologue delivered to Nina, he identifies himself as a kind of epistemic “hero” and magician:

ja ich bin ein held, [. . .] ich habe ein paar warnungen gebannt, eindrücke,
wie man so sagt, wieder ausgebuchtet, dicken zauber gemacht und jetzt ist die
wahrnehmung in essig und öl, in formalin, in spiritus, ganz harmlos ist sie jetzt
und ich kann sie sogar aufheben und macht mich nicht mehr unruhig, heissa,

³²³Ibid., p. 529.

³²⁴Ibid., p. 632.

mit der taufe in die traufe, [...] benenne ich es und banne und taufe und bin überhaupt der ganz grosse magier, weiss, schwarz, mit einer kleinen höhle und da ist mein wortSCHATZ drin, alles fein eingepökelt, eingemachte abziehbilder aus laut und leise, gemalt und gedacht [...]³²⁵

Goldenberg claims to be able to protect himself from his perceptions by naming them, using words as a kind of psychic forcefield that accomplishes the perceptual equivalent of preserving a biological specimen in formaldehyde. Language becomes the “antidote” to the dangers presented by confrontations with real people and real sensory stimuli, which become “sterilized” by being named:

[...] da treffe ich einen und nenne ihn und nenne es guten tag und wir atmen auf und er nennt mich und bannt mich, das heisst das was er von mir fürchtet, weil er es wahrnimmt, das ihm in die augen klatscht und ins ohr stiert und in die nase bohrt und ja das sterilisiert er gleich mit vielen namen, die er als gegengifte in seiner hirschalkammer bereit hat.³²⁶

Despite Goldenberg’s visionary confidence, the narrative raises doubts as to the validity of his ideas: Nina’s curt response to the above monologue—“du spinnst”—underlines this and points to Goldenberg’s isolation from his friends and colleagues.

In the subsequent dialogues with Dobyhal, Goldenberg’s discourse is marked above all by a cheerfulness, stemming from his readiness to accept the same state of affairs that sets Dobyhal in a state of desperate anxiety. This dichotomy suggests a kind of affective filter that can be utilized to accomplish a shift in philosophical perspective. When Dobyhal asks “was soll ich tun” while showing the physical signs of despair—“seine augen waren starr auf goldenberg gerichtet, seine hände zitterten, die tränen versickerten auf seinen rockaufschlägen”—Goldenberg replies: “ganz einfach [...], du musst dich freuen.”³²⁷ It is

³²⁵Ibid., p. 657.

³²⁶Ibid.

³²⁷Ibid., p. 658.

also, however, this affective filter of cheerfulness that will bring Goldenberg close to the limits of nihilism and solipsism.

The affective dichotomy reflects a deeper philosophical difference between the two characters. Dobyhal's anguished questioning often reflects a pseudo-existentialist orientation, while that of Goldenberg represents the gleeful deconstructions of those who have taken the "linguistic turn." In reply to Dobyhal's drunken existential query, "wer bin ich?," Goldenberg soberly responds by dissecting the question on a linguistic level: "das sind wir doch alle, [. . .] jeder nennt sich so jeder heisst so, ich, das bist du und er und sie und die andern und jeder und vielleicht auch die steine und die blumen, was weiss ich was die denken [. . .]."

When Dobyhal (who, it is noted, had not been listening to Goldenberg's reply) persists with his existential questioning—inquiring instead as to meaning rather than existence: "was heisst ich, was soll das sein, [. . .] hallo was heisst das?"—Goldenberg tries another line of argument:

"weisst du, wir haben schlechte bilder, und vielleicht sollten wir uns gar keinen machen und wir sollten sie alle zurückweisen und dann krachts hier", goldenberg zeigt in seine hirschale, "und das resultat oder mehrere fallen aus dem computer ohne dass ich mir so eine assoziative bildchenpyramide zusammengeschestert hätte. vielleicht soll man sie nicht stören, weisst du, die mechanik meine ich, nicht mit dummen bildchen dazwischenfunken, verstehst du? bildchen machen, kleine gedanken machen, nicht warten können."³²⁸

Against Dobyhal's demand for truth and meaning, Goldenberg presents the mere concepts of 'truth' and 'meaning' as "dumb little pictures" that interfere with the brain's direct cognitive processing of the world's stimuli. He seems to be advocating for something similar to what Oswald Wiener identified as Bayer's personal objective: a state of "bargeldloses Verstehen,"

³²⁸Ibid., pp. 659-60.

a direct understanding of external stimuli, bypassing the subjective construction of a conceptual “bildchenpyramide” by way of language. In making this argument, Goldenberg contradicts his previous celebration of the power of language to “sterilize” perceptual stimuli. Later, when Dobyhal criticizes Goldenberg’s ideas—telling him: “dein weltbild ist passé, verstehst du?”—Goldenberg agrees, and restates his newfound conviction in the inadequacy of language’s artificial order to represent the world:

ich weiss, sagte goldenberg, nichts ist dasselbe, wir haben mit dem vokabular künstliche kategorien gezüchtet, haben die erregung des unbestimmten als gefährlich einbalsamiert, können leichtfertig sagen, haha eine maus, und haben keine ahnung, jedes wort ein schlechter vergleich [...] ³²⁹

From his previous position of recognition and affirmation of the functional symbolic order of language, Goldenberg has become alienated from language, and now sees the conceptual categories of language as artificial, viewing words as “bad comparisons” with the objects they ostensibly represent. This fall from grace, which comes about as a result of his interactions with Dobyhal, is reflected in the novel’s plot: Goldenberg becomes estranged from his lover, Nina, who then becomes romantically involved with Dobyhal.

In a passage of comparatively coherent philosophical prose towards the end of the novel, Dobyhal finally succeeds in expressing his personal epistemological skepticism:

wir können in die welt nicht eindringen, wir haben nichts mit ihr zu tun, wir schaffen bilder von ihr, die uns entsprechen, wir legen methoden fest, um uns in ihr zu verhalten und nenne es die welt oder wenn es kracht, ich in der welt, es ist hochmütiger als man denkt, wenn wir also einen bemalten vorhang brauchen, vor dem wir unsere gesten und persönlichen wünsche, die wir als dinge, zusammenhänge und ähnliches bezeichnen, nennen, tragieren, dann nehme ich den bunten schleier der fröhlichkeit und was ist dahinter? fragte dobyhal. ³³⁰

³²⁹Ibid., p. 661.

³³⁰Ibid., p. 664.

Against the optimistic version of language as a functional semiotic system, affirmed both in the narrative form of the novel as well as in Goldenberg's initial theoretical pronouncements, Dobyhal asserts his view that language is a hermetic system bearing no relation to the real world: a symbolic system that the subject uses to construct an imaginary fantasy of the world in order to manage his or her own affective reactions. Despite the mechanical functionality of language's system, Dobyhal claims that we remain, as linguistic subjects, completely alienated from the real, noumenal world. What we accept as experience and knowledge are only secondary representations, 'painted curtains' based on the cognitive structures of language, which effectively block a direct connection to the objective world.

In the fictional battle between Dobyhal and Goldenberg—allegorically representing the power struggle between a positive and a skeptical view of language—Dobyhal appears to emerge victorious: Goldenberg finds no response to Dobyhal's skeptical claims, but simply laughs, and then vanishes into thin air: "mitten im gespräch, mitten im satz hatte er sich in nichts aufgelöst, war vor den augen dobyhals verschwunden. er war weg, er war nirgends, einfach nicht da."³³¹ Dobyhal's views resembles the fundamentalist *Sprachskepsis* of Heißenbüttel, whose work insists on the essential disconnect between language and experience, and who would have seconded Dobyhal's call to arms: "weg mit den bildern, rief dobyhal laut."³³² Immediately following this passage, Bayer allows the negating presence of Dobyhal to prematurely snuff out the narrative: on an otherwise blank page, Dobyhal says "machen Sie das buch zu!"³³³ With Goldenberg no longer present, the novel ends with Dobyhal's final triumphant negation of the word.

³³¹Ibid.

³³²Ibid., p. 665.

³³³Ibid., p. 666. (We must surely assume it to be pure coincidence that the diabolical Dobyhal's ultimate negation arrives on page 666 of the most recent edition of the *Sämtliche Werke*.)

Coda: Oswald Wiener's Linguistic *Entwicklungsroman*

It is unfortunate that Bayer was not able to continue his literary *Aufarbeitung* of these linguistic issues; we can only guess as to what resolution he might have arrived at. Around the time of his suicide, Bayer was living in the Schloss Haggenberg, a semi-abandoned seventeenth-century castle in the countryside north of Vienna, and was struggling to finish *der sechste sinn*. According to the testimony of Armin Ackermann—from Ferry Radax's film about Bayer's death, *Konrad Bayer oder : Die Welt bin ich und das ist meine Sache* (1969)—Bayer was losing interest in the novel, and felt that he had already moved beyond the epistemological preoccupation at the center of the narrative: “Denn für ihn war, trotz allem, der ‘sechste sinn’ doch schon eine etwas abgeschlossene Sache. Er hat mir damals gesagt, es sei genauso wie mit der Kinderoper [der Wiener Gruppe], also an der letzten Grenze der Möglichen, es überhaupt jetzt noch fertig zu machen, weil er doch schon über diesen ganzen Komplex hinausgewachsen war.”³³⁴ When we consider Dobyhal's triumph at the end of *der sechste sinn*, it certainly seems possible that Bayer might have retained his fundamental skepticism, renouncing narrative and descriptive prose, and returning to a literary model resembling Heißenbüttel's non-representative *Sprachdemonstrationen*. However, if the novel's central problems had already ceased being of importance to Bayer at the time of his death, we can also imagine him arriving at a reconciliation with language—or simply, like his *Wiener Gruppe* colleague Oswald Wiener, coming to see this preoccupation as merely an exaggeration of language's importance.

The development of Wiener's linguistic skepticism may give us an idea of how this latter

³³⁴Ferry Radax, *Konrad Bayer oder : Die Welt bin ich und das ist meine Sache*. Film recording, 1969; quoted in: Janetzki, *Alphabelt und Welt*, p. 129.

possibility might have played out. In 1958, apparently in reaction to an intensive study of Wittgenstein and Mauthner, Wiener destroyed the entirety of his literary work up to that point.³³⁵ All that remains from his early career are the collaborative works he wrote with his *Wiener Gruppe* colleagues, as well as vague remembrances of the content of a certain “cooles manifest” written in 1954, which served as an aesthetic manifesto for Wiener and his circle of friends and collaborators.³³⁶ For several years following his act of aesthetic negation, Wiener was opposed to literary activity in general; in 1962, however, Wiener was convinced by Bayer to return to writing, and in the next few years he produced the experimental novel *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa*. This remarkable work—which shares many formal and stylistic characteristics with *der sechste sinn*—was serially published by the Graz journal *manuskripte* between 1965 and 1967, and was finally released in book form by Rowohlt in 1969.³³⁷ Like Bayer’s novel, the *verbesserung* contains both formal experiments with language and explicit discussion of linguistic theory; however, Wiener claims that over the course of the book, the narrative subject progressively liberates itself from this preoccupation with language, eventually overcoming it completely. For Wiener, his novel marked the beginning of his own liberation from the ideological *Sprachskepsis* that, since the late fifties, had come to govern his thinking:

³³⁵See “Kurzbiographie” in: Kurz, *Die Transzendierung des Menschen im “bio-adapter”*: Oswald Wieners *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa*, Roman.

³³⁶Gerhard Rühm’s recounts his recollection of the lost manifesto’s content: “hier wurde der kalauer als pikanterie betrachtet, denn es kommt ja nur auf die betrachtungsweise an; es wird der laune anheim gegeben, an welchen objekten man sich emotionell hochjubelt, was plötzlich ‘schön’ ist. eine distanzierung von der umwelt durch indifferenz wird erprobt, das banale zum eigentlichen erklärt, die beliebigkeit von wertmasstäben entlarvt. nun stand alles zur verfügung, unser geschmack hatte die wahl. [...] der schock wird als unmittelbarster eindruck bewusst in die kunst eingeführt. ‘eindruckskunst’ statt ‘ausdruckskunst’. das heisst, das psychologische wird nicht beschrieben oder ausgedrückt, sondern im hinblick auf den konsumenten, sozusagen als dimension, kalkuliert. die auswirkungen des ‘coolen manifestes’ reichen bis zur ‘kinderoper’ und der operette ‘der schweissfuss’.” In: Rühm, *Die Wiener Gruppe*, pp. 13-4.

³³⁷Long out of print, *die verbesserung* was published in a new edition in 2013. See: Oswald Wiener, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa*. Salzburg and Vienna: Jung und Jung, 2013.

Also damals, in der 50er Jahren [...] habe ich in der Sprache das wichtigste Ding gesehen, mit dem man sich gedanklich beschäftigen kann und muss. Ich bin in meiner Sprachgläubigkeit auch sehr weit gegangen—aber das war eben damals. In der Zwischenzeit habe ich mich davon ganz abgewandt, weil ich finde, dass die Wahrnehmung und das Denken von der Sprache unabhängig sind und dass man im Denken über die Weltbezüge des Menschen bei den eigenen ansetzen muss. Heute ist Sprache für mich etwas geradezu Nebensächliches geworden. Damals war ich wittgensteingläubig und mauthnergläubig: Ich war nicht mit allem einverstanden und in der *verbesserung* kann man schon nachvollziehen, wie ich von diesem Konzept zunehmend abrutsche. Deshalb bezeichne ich dieses Buch auch als einen Entwicklungsroman. Es ist meine Entwicklung, die hier quasi protokolliert wird und die führt zum Schluss in eine ganz andere Richtung, in die ich seither weitergegangen bin.³³⁸

For Wiener, this turn away from language was a gradual process. Though he would only rarely return to literary writing, Wiener published several essays dealing with linguistics, semantics, and cybernetics. In these critical and academic writings, Wiener appears to be mostly interested in destabilizing the confident conclusions of contemporary semantic science.

In an essay entitled “subjekt, semantik, abbildungsbeziehungen,” originally presented at a conference on “Probleme der semantischen Textanalyse” in 1969, Wiener systematically calls into question the conclusions of most of the major schools of semantic theory at the time. Wiener’s arguments center on the mental operation by which consciousness experiences and processes language. All theories of semantics are grounded upon what Wiener calls the “widerspiegelungs-hypothese,” according to which “die erkenntnis sei eine widerspiegelung der ‘objektiven realität’ im menschlichen bewusstsein.”³³⁹ For Wiener, this

³³⁸Oswald Wiener and Wenzel Mraček, “‘Intelligenz ist die Fähigkeit, Maschinen zu bauen’: Oswald Wiener im Gespräch mit Wenzel Mraček”. *KORSO*, October 12, 2006 (URL: <http://files.flageorgia.org/hkurz/wiener/mracek.htm>).

³³⁹Oswald Wiener, “subjekt, semantik, abbildungsbeziehungen”. In *Text Bedeutung Ästhetik : Probleme der semantischen Textanalyse*. Edited by Siegfried J. Schmidt. Munich: Bayerischer Schulbuch Verlag, 1970, *Grundfragen der Literaturwissenschaft* 1, p. 4.

hypothesis avoids the question of how the subject processes the symbolic elements of reality. Wittgenstein's picture theory rests on this hypothesis, and thus can be called into question: "wittgensteins behauptung (tractatus 2.12, 2.13) 'das bild ist ein modell der wirklichkeit' ... 'den gegenständen entsprechen im bilde die elemente es bildes' geht nicht auf die frage ein, wie man sich diese entsprechung konkret vorzustellen habe." Furthermore, if we accept a model by which language orders reality, it should consequently be impossible to compare language with reality, since all our empirical information about the world remains filtered through linguistic structures. This poses a problem for the "wiederspiegelungs-hypothese", which doesn't acknowledge this linguistic determination: "[sie] greift in der sprache nach 'aussersprachlichen' 'tatsachen', um die sprache rückbezüglich zu definieren, sie kommt aber nirgends aus der sprache heraus."³⁴⁰ He criticizes Whorf on similar terms, claiming that Whorfians ignore the way the "innerer sprachform" of their own native tongue determines the structure their own theories take; he also claims that it is "unmöglich, mit einem anhänger whorfs zu diskutieren: ansätze zu einer kritik auf der basis anderer hypothesen [...] können stets mit dem argument zurückgewiesen werden, dass diese hypothesen eben bloss auf dem grund einer unkorrigierten 'europäischen weltanschauung' wachsen."³⁴¹ Similar critiques are leveled against the structuralist traditions of the Prague and Copenhagen schools, as well as the rationalism of Jerrold Katz and Noam Chomsky; Wiener claims that the opposition of rationalism to empiricism is obsolete, and states that the only question that interests him in such a debate is "ob sich das menschliche bewusstsein über die genetische struktur seiner anlagen und über die kommunikative struktur seiner bildung erheben kann"³⁴²—a remark

³⁴⁰Ibid., p. 5.

³⁴¹Ibid., p. 6.

³⁴²Ibid., pp. 8-10.

which underlines again the difference between Wiener's skepticism and Heißenbüttel's resigned acceptance of linguistic determination.

Wiener continues by calling all semantic theory into question, based on the idea that, in addition to the impossibility of comparing symbolic form with objective reality, the mental experience of one subject cannot be empirically compared with that of another: "die schwierigkeiten der semantik liegen nicht bloss in der unüberprüfbarkeit sprachlicher strukturen an den strukturen der sinnlichen wirklichkeit, sondern auch und ganz besonders in der unüberprüfbarkeit der bewusstseinsinhalte an den bewusstseinsinhalten anderer menschen." The possibility remains that even the most basic sensory information, like the perception of color, is processed differently in each subject's consciousness: the possibility, "dass was ich als grün empfinde ein anderer als orange sieht," illustrates for Wiener "die grenzen jeder möglichen semantik."³⁴³ Wiener criticizes the cartographic model of language presented by Korzybski—who Wellershoff had invoked to criticize the *Sprachskepsis* of writers like Heißenbüttel—as inadequate, and "zu sehr nach 'ausen' gewandt," preferring instead the "eisenbahnkarte" model of Carnap, which itself falls short by similarly failing to recognize its own linguistic embeddedness: "die eisenbahnkarte ist in ein abbildungssystem eingebettet, es gibt explizite zuordnungsvorschriften, weil sie *in* der sprache ist, weil sie als strukturmodell zwischen innersprachlichen bilder vermittelt; und insofern in der sprache die abbildungsregel das abbildungsmedium selbst ist, sagt man (wittgenstein, untersuchungen) ausserhalb der sprache sei nichts."³⁴⁴ The failure to acknowledge the different ways in which different subjects can process and inhabit language leads semanticians and theorists alike,

³⁴³Ibid., p. 10.

³⁴⁴Ibid., p. 11.

Wittgenstein included, towards a faulty behaviorist model of language-limited experience:

wenn die sprache nun (so wie ich whorf interpretiere) ein sinnesorgan ist, so ist sie jedenfalls eins, das jeder für sich benützt und auf seine spezifische weise wie sein auge oder ohr. die unmöglichkeit des vergleichs von empfindungen etc. ausserhalb der sprache führt nun wittgenstein und andere dazu, auf behavioristischer art die welt, die wirklichkeit, die empfindung in der sprache enden zu lassen.³⁴⁵

We can see here how, towards the end of the sixties, Wiener's earlier *Sprachskepsis* has modulated into a skepticism regarding semantic, linguistic, and philosophical theory. Wiener accepts language's aporia for what they are, and he employs them to destabilize theoretical attempts to reduce experience to rational form. Wiener's anarchic sensibility is reflected in his willful unsettling of logocentric discourse, which also leads him to a renewed respect for literature, as a realm of non-rational discourse, fit for the free explorations of linguistic inconsistencies.

If Wiener's *verbesserung von mitteleuropa* recounts the subject's *Entwicklung* away from a linguistic obsession, then Bayer's alleged difficulty in finishing his own novel could point towards a similar shift in personal orientation. While it is doubtful that Bayer would have followed Wiener in turning towards theories of cybernetics and artificial intelligence—Wiener had already been involved with such activities in the late fifties, and little suggests that Bayer shared his friend's interest with the same enthusiasm—it is altogether likely that Bayer, unlike Heißenbüttel, would have arrived at some sort of reconciliation with language and linguistic representation, transcending the linguistic determinism that inspired his initial skepticism. I would argue that in the bilateral perspective of the theoretical polemics lacing his writings, as well as in his willingness, in *der sechste sinn*, to explore language's multiva-

³⁴⁵Ibid.

lent representative capacities—not to mention his cunning experiments with interpersonal interactions, socially determined meaning, and extraverbal communication—there exist the seeds of the same kind of *Entwicklung* that Wiener claims plays out in his *verbesserung*, and it is our great misfortune to have been deprived of what surely would have been a fascinating continuation to this aesthetic struggle.

With Bayer having vanished, like Goldenberg in the final pages of *der sechste sinn*, and Wiener having continued his difficult relationship with literature by once more renouncing writing following the publication of the *verbesserung*, the task of completing the denouement of this interrupted *Entwicklungsgeschichte* fell to a generation of younger authors. In his 1964 radio review of Bayer's work, a young Peter Handke is perceptive to this shift, shrewdly identifying the progression of Bayer's treatment of language between his early works and *der sechste sinn*:

Er hatte wohl erkannt, daß er keine neue Sprache zu erfinden brauchte, um sein Bewußtsein zu beschreiben, sondern daß schon eine fertige Sprache vorhanden war, aus der er sich gewissermaßen sein Bewußtsein aussuchen konnte. Das Bewußtsein bestand aus der Sprache: er brauchte die Sätze nur zu suchen, sie waren schon vorgeformt, eine Erfindung war nicht mehr vonnöten.³⁴⁶

For Handke, Bayer's *Entwicklung* consisted in abandoning the project of constructing a new language—which the members of the *Wiener Gruppe* initially viewed as necessary, according to Rühm³⁴⁷—and coming instead to see language as an open depository of ambiguous meaning, from which one could pick and choose what corresponded to one's individual impressions. The alarmist angst of his initial vision of language as an alien, totalizing force of untruth begins to unravel in the agile, fluid prose of *der sechste sinn*. In

³⁴⁶Handke, *Spiel auf Leben und Tod*, pp. 86-7.

³⁴⁷See: Rühm, *Die Wiener Gruppe*, p. 27.

the latter part of the sixties, Handke and other younger writers pick up on this aspect of Bayer's work, continuing its interrupted development in their own work.

4. Peter Handke: “Momente der Sprachlebendigkeit”

Throughout his career, Peter Handke has consistently avoided any static aesthetic orientation; Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler refers to this as his “Prinzip der Innovation”: “Er hat sich [...] das Prinzip gesetzt, mit jedem Werk einen neuen Stil oder eine neue Position zu beziehen, in jedem Werk auch ein anderes Verfahren der Sprache zu bringen.”³⁴⁸ While this aesthetic restlessness persists even in Handke’s most recent works, it is more clearly manifested in the first two decades of his career. From Handke’s literary breakthrough with *Die Hornissen* in 1966, to *Die Wiederholung* in 1986, almost every publication features a formal and stylistic approach that differs somehow from the preceding work. As Schmidt-Dengler points out, each new aesthetic development—whether it involves a new treatment of form or representation, or a new perspective on literary culture and political engagement—also involves a new “Verfahren der Sprache”: a new understanding of how language functions, and how it should be approached in literary writing. In this chapter I aim to trace these shifts in Handke’s view of language—his doubts about language’s representative function, his

³⁴⁸Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 255.

subsequent affirmation of poetic language, the influence of linguistic theories on his writing, and finally the formation of his personal linguistic mythology—across the first several stages of his literary career.

In an article on Handke's Wittgenstein reception, Schmidt-Dengler compares the evolution of Handke's literary linguistic model to the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. He sees Handke's early works like *Kaspar* as reflecting a view of language similar to that presented in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—the clear references that the play makes to the text of the *Tractatus* make this connection obvious.³⁴⁹ Less obvious is the connection Schmidt-Dengler draws between Handke's subsequent work (from *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* to *Wunschloses Unglück*) and the "late Wittgenstein" of the *Philosophical Investigations*.³⁵⁰ He sees Handke retreating from the claims of his early language-critical stances—which involved an attack on language, regarded as an alien system of signifiers bearing no direct relation to individual experience—and moving instead towards a more open exploration of language, which has come to be understood as a functional, if faulty, vessel of transmissible meaning, determined by social relation. The effort Handke makes to restore language's representative function also aims to revive the narrative potential of literary writing. Especially with *Wunschloses Unglück*, Handke attempts to access the symbolic reserves of the linguistic system he previously attacked: "Anders als in *Kaspar* wird der Sprachfundus nicht mehr attackiert, sondern verfügbar, abrufbar gehalten. [. . .]. Nur so ist nach der experimentellen Phase denn auch die Rückkehr zu der Erzählung möglich, deren Prinzip ja zuvor radikal demontiert worden war."³⁵¹ After analyzing Handke's early

³⁴⁹See discussion of *Kaspar* below.

³⁵⁰See: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, "'Wittgenstein, komm wieder!' : Zur Wittgenstein-Rezeption bei Peter Handke". In *Wittgenstein 'und' : Philosophie - Literatur*. Vienna: Edition S, 1990, pp. 181-91.

³⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 187.

language skepticism, evaluated within the context of postwar German literary culture, I aim to analyze this subsequent, secondary “linguistic turn” towards a literary redemption of language, as well as his later progression, from the mid-seventies onwards, towards a pseudo-mystical conception of language and writing—a shift that Schmidt-Dengler connects with a return to the “mystical” aspects of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*.

When analyzing the later critical stances taken by Handke during the seventies, as well as the formal techniques he uses, it becomes clear that his youthful enthusiasm for a theoretical language skepticism has not disappeared, but has simply changed in perspective and parameter, leading him to different conclusions about writing and representation. Though his works from the seventies largely eschew the kind of explicit treatment of linguistic themes employed in *Kaspar*, Handke retains an active and profound engagement with issues of language—which remains something fragile and insecure, with the threat of speechlessness lingering always close by. His narrative works from the early seventies explore language’s representative possibilities, and link together to form a progressive corrective to his earlier *Sprachskepsis*—similar to the way in which the *Philosophical Investigations* correct the errors of the *Tractatus*.

This latter period of Handke’s work has often been grouped under the generic marker of *Neue Subjektivität*, or sometimes the more pejorative *Neue Innerlichkeit*. According to this characterization, these works are narcissistic explorations of subjective feeling, often involving an alienation from one’s culture and a disillusionment and retreat from social or political engagement. In the De Boor-Newald *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, Manfred Durzak sums up the accepted understanding of the movement as follows:

Es schien so, als habe auf breiter Front eine Rückwärtsbewegung eingesetzt, eine hypochondrische verquälte Beschäftigung mit den Verwundungen und Empfindlichkeiten des eigenen Ichs, ein Rückzug aus der politischen Arena eines programmatisch eingestimmten Kollektivs in die Selbstvergewisserungsversuche eines beschädigten und isolierten Ichs, das seine enttäuschten Gefühle und Hoffnungen, seine Schmerzerfahrungen und individuellen Stabilisierungsbemühungen nun für wichtiger hält als die Veränderung der gesellschaftlichen Funktionen, in die es sich nach wie vor widerwillig eingebunden sah.³⁵²

New Subjectivity's critics, most of whom were following the more general historical model positing a break between the politically oriented literature of the sixties and the more personal literature of the seventies, also exhibit a fixation on the straw man of the perceived emotionality and solipsism of writers like Handke. In an article analyzing Handke as a New Subjective author, Linda Demeritt paraphrases received conceptions of New Subjectivity as "a questioning of and a search for one's self," or "the confrontation of the subject with himself as a subject," wherein "instead of reality, feelings are portrayed": "For the New Subjectivists the real world exists only within the self."³⁵³ As will be seen, not only do these characterizations have little to do with the actual content of Handke's works, they also fail to recognize the underlying linguistic thematic unfolding in the writing, which persists as an aftereffect of the stances of 'linguistic engagement' taken by Handke in his earlier work. The change that takes place between *Kaspar* and *Wunschloses Unglück* is not an inward turn away from socio-political concerns, but is rather a pragmatic reassessment of linguistic function: an acceptance of language as something malleable, socially determined, and—most importantly—functional despite its imperfections. This same evolution can be observed in many other works of so-called *Neue Subjektivität*, especially those of Handke's

³⁵²Manfred Durzak, "Nach der Studentenbewegung: Neue literarische Konzepte und Erzählentwürfe in den siebziger Jahren". In Barner, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur*, p. 626.

³⁵³Linda C. DeMeritt, "The Question of Relevancy: New Subjectivity and Peter Handke". *Modern Language Studies*, 16.4, 1986, p. 26.

colleagues in the literary scene based in Graz³⁵⁴ and those of certain German writers like Rolf Dieter Brinkmann.

As Schmidt-Dengler notes, Handke's later period (from the late seventies and onwards) involves a turn towards a pseudo-mystical model of language and writing. While this later stance can often appear hopelessly pretentious and self-absorbed, I aim to show how even these later works continue Handke's dialog with language, affirming poetic language as a necessary tool for understanding and describing lived experience.

“Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in den USA”

Handke's rise to fame via his *Schmährede* at the *Gruppe 47* meeting in Princeton—his denunciation of the “Beschreibungsimpotenz” practiced by most of the established novelists gathered there—has become a well-known and oft-repeated literary-historical truism; however, when looking at the actual text of the speech, one may wonder at first why it created such a fuss at the time, and why it has been presented as such a pivotal moment in literary histories. The Princeton meeting, which took place over three days in April 1966, was a prestigious one: it was the first time the group had met outside of Europe, and the event was marked not only by the presence of stalwarts like Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, but also by concurrent anti-Vietnam protests, a conference debating the issue of “The Writer in the Affluent Society,” and a separate event focused on American art featuring Allen Ginsberg, Tom Wolfe, and Milton Babbitt.³⁵⁵ Yet strangely, the most reported incident of the entire

³⁵⁴Handke attended university in Graz from 1961-1965, where he also began writing, publishing works in Alfred Kollertisch's *manuskripte* journal, and giving readings at the Forum Stadtpark arts center.

³⁵⁵See: Wegmann and Reiber, “Landmarks: Gruppe 47”.

weekend was the awkward outburst of a dandyish young Austrian. Closely examining the text of the speech, as well as that of the essay Handke published later in an attempt to clarify his primary statement—and it is rare that the actual content of the speech is discussed, since it is usually either glossed over in preference of commentary on the young Handke’s mop-top haircut and mod clothing, or dismissed outright as a cynical (and successful) attempt to attract attention to himself³⁵⁶—one finds a peculiar and somewhat contradictory aesthetic position that demands more analysis than it is usually given.

The outburst came towards the end of the three-day event, during the critical discussion following Hermann Peter Piwitt’s reading.³⁵⁷ Handke begins by expressing his dismay at the tendency of contemporary German writers to approach writing as an act of simple, unreflective description of events and things:

Ich bemerke, daß in der gegenwärtigen deutschen Prosa eine Art Beschreibungsimpotenz vorherrscht. Man sucht sein Heil in einer bloßen Beschreibung, was von Natur aus schon das billigste ist, womit man überhaupt nur Literatur machen kann. Wenn man nichts mehr weiß, dann kann man immer noch Einzelheiten beschreiben. Es ist eine ganz, ganz unschöpferische Periode in

³⁵⁶Due to Handke’s subsequent meteoric rise to fame, his outburst in Princeton has often been characterized as a calculated move, by which he would gain attention and possibly lucrative publishing contracts. This view is somewhat compromised by the fact that gaining attention and a publishing contract was the goal of pretty much every single young writer reading at *Gruppe 47* meetings; normally, however, this goal was accomplished by garnering praise from the established critics that made up the core of the group’s members. Handke may have intended to create a stir, but he shouldn’t be vilified for making his mark by way of confrontation, rather than the customary sycophancy.

³⁵⁷It is not clear whether Handke’s speech was meant to refer directly to Piwitt’s reading, since he mentions no specific names, and seems to direct his speech outward as a general provocation, aimed at the *Gruppe 47* as a manifestation of the West German literary establishment (which is how the speech is normally characterized). Handke later links his comments to works read in Princeton by Walter Höllerer. (See: Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms*, p. 33.) Earlier during the meeting, Handke had attacked Höllerer’s reading in unambiguous terms: “Entschuldigen Sie, wenn ich ein wenig unsachlich sein könnte, aber ich halte diese Prosa für völlig indiskutabel und für nicht druckbar. Mir ist es die ganze Zeit vorgekommen als sei sie in einer völlig toten Sprache geschrieben, also, als ob er gar nicht wüsste, dass er mit der Sprache schreibt, [muffled] . . . mit der Kamera das auch fotografiert. Die ganze Geschichte ist völlig geistlos, und, und . . . Also ich—Sie entschuldigen wenn das unsachlich herauskommt, aber es gibt gar nicht darüber zu diskutieren, ich kann Ihnen dabei nichts raten.” Transcribed from the Princeton *Gruppe 47* recordings: <http://german.princeton.edu/landmarks/gruppe-47/recordings-agreement/recordings/>.

der deutschen Literatur doch hier angebrochen, und dieses komische Schlagwort vom “Neuen Realismus” wird von allerlei Leuten ausgenützt, um doch da irgendwie ins Gespräch zu kommen, obwohl sie keinerlei Fähigkeiten und keinerlei schöpferische Potenz zu irgendeiner Literatur haben. (*Gemurmel*) Es wird überhaupt keinerlei Reflexion gemacht. Es wird eine Philosophie vorgegeben, eine Weltanschauung vorgegeben, in der man so tut, als gäbe es nur die Beschreibung von Einzelheiten und Vorgängen. Und das ist auch eine Art *cinéma vérité* der Literatur, nach meiner Ansicht.³⁵⁸

He continues by claiming this sterility to be the result of an exclusively negative process of elimination, wherein writers take care to avoid literary clichés and metaphoric or formulaic language, but don’t bother to develop or experiment with literary innovations:

Es ist zwar zu sehen, daß gewisse Fehler der alten Literatur nicht mehr gemacht werden, zum Beispiel wird mit Metaphern sehr vorsichtig umgegangen, aber es ist zu beobachten, daß also vor allem die Errungenschaften dieser neuen Literatur in einer Negation bestehen. Daß also die Fehler oder die Klischees der alten Literatur zwar abgeworfen wurden, daß aber das Heil keineswegs in einer neuen Position gefunden wurde, sondern in einer ganz primitiven und öden Beschränkung auf diese sogenannte “Neue Sachlichkeit”.³⁵⁹

The result of this negative tendency is what Handke sees as the domination of an old-fashioned and unimaginative treatment of language and form in contemporary literature, comparing its use of words to that of a dictionary:

Die Form dieser neuen deutschen Prosa [...] ist fürchterlich konventionell, vor allem in Satzbau, in der Sprachgestik überhaupt. Auch wenn die einzelnen Worte also, wie gesagt, metaphernlos sind, ist die Gestik dieser Sprache völlig öd und den Geschichten der früheren Zeiten fürchterlich ähnlich. [...] Das Übel dieser Prosa besteht darin, daß man sie ebensogut aus einem Lexikon abschreiben könnte. Man könnte den Sprachduden, diesen Bilderduden verwenden und auf die einzelnen Teile hinweisen. Und dieses System wird hier angewendet und (es) wird vorgegeben, Literatur zu machen. Was eine völlig

³⁵⁸Peter Handke and Hans Mayer, “Im Wortlaut: Peter Handkes ‘Auftritt’ in Princeton und Hans Mayers Entgegnung”. *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 24, 5th ed., 1989, p. 17.

³⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 17-8.

läppische und idiotische Literatur ist. (*Allgemeines Gelächter, vereinzelter Applaus*)³⁶⁰

This train of critique could be constructively compared with the more general criticism, voiced decades later by Charles Bernstein, of the domination of Anglo-American writing by the “authoritative plain style.”³⁶¹ While Bernstein situates the same kind of neutralizing linguistic shift in a more wide-ranging cultural history of technocratic hegemony, Handke sees it somewhat naively as the result of literary culture’s internal critical impetus. Handke could be criticized for a certain literary myopia here, in that he neglects to acknowledge the influence of socio-cultural linguistic trends on the language of literature.³⁶²

After criticizing the realism practiced by established German writers, Handke turns his attack towards the critics associated with the *Gruppe 47*, declaring their senses of critical acumen to be equally unimaginative, uninnovative, and outdated:

Und die Kritik ist damit einverstanden, weil eben ihr überkommenes Instrumentarium noch für diese Literatur ausreicht, gerade noch hinreicht. (*Erneutes Gelächter*) Weil die Kritik ebenso läppisch ist, wie diese läppische Literatur. [...] Wenn nun eine neue Sprachgestik auftaucht, so [...] vermag die Kritik nichts anderes, als [...] entweder zu sagen, das ist langweilig, sich in Beschimpfungen zu ergehen, oder auch eben auf gewisse einzelne Sprachschwächen einzugehen, die sicher noch vorhanden sein werden. Das ist die einzige Methode, weil das Instrumentarium [der Kritik], das überkommene, eben hier nicht mehr hinreichen kann, während sie bei dieser läppischen Beschreibungsliteratur eben noch hinreicht, weil’s eben hier adäquat ist.³⁶³

Central to Handke’s literary and linguistic critique is this view of the complicity between the German critical apparatus and German writing. For Handke, the linguistic inventiveness

³⁶⁰Ibid., p. 18.

³⁶¹See: Charles Bernstein, *Content’s Dream: Essays, 1975-1984*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001, pp. 221 ff.

³⁶²As we will see below with *Kaspar*, this blindness to the social properties of language goes hand-in-hand with Handke’s early language-critical stances.

³⁶³Handke and Mayer, “Im Wortlaut”, p. 18.

of writers has been stifled by a dominant critical culture severely lacking in linguistic sophistication. A reading in front of the *Gruppe 47* critics could make or break a young writer's career, and it was standard practice for book contracts to be offered and signed directly following a successful reading. Handke argues here that the German critics' uninventiveness deafens them to the reception of innovative literature—which calls to mind the infamously ambivalent reception of Paul Celan at the 1952 *Gruppe 47* meeting in Niendorf.³⁶⁴ What is important to note here is that Handke characterizes this literary innovation as a technical treatment of language, a “Sprachgestik” that requires an awareness of the linguistic character of literature to be understood and appreciated.

At this point in the speech, a voice identified as that of Hans Werner Richter, the unofficial director of the *Gruppe 47*, interrupts Handke, informing him that, customarily, critical commentary must relate directly to the text that had been read (in this case, that of Piwitt).³⁶⁵ Handke states that he wishes to say something else, and adds a cutting commentary as to the shallowness and obliqueness of contemporary literature's treatment of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust:

Es muß irgendwo . . . hinter der Rose muß irgendwie auch Auschwitz auftauchen, wenn auch nur in einem sogenannten Nebensatz oder ganz beiläufig. Aber es muß jedenfalls beiläufig, oder ganz lässig muß es da sein. (*Gemurmel*)³⁶⁶

After more interruptions from the audience, Handke loses steam a bit, and haltingly brings his speech to a close without raising any other specific critiques, but repeating his insult, referring to “dieser ganz dummen und läppischen Prosa.”³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴See: John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Eine Biographie*. Munich: C.H.Beck, 1997, pp. 98 ff.

³⁶⁵Handke later claimed to have been unaware of this convention. See: Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms*, p. 29.

³⁶⁶Handke and Mayer, “Im Wortlaut”, p. 18.

³⁶⁷Ibid., p. 19.

The incident was discussed heavily in the German literary press, with most commentators focusing more on what Handke was wearing than what he was saying,³⁶⁸ as is mimicked in an essay by Ernst Wendt:

Da stand irgendwann [...] ein junger Mann auf, schmal gewachsen, etwas linkisch, schwarzer Cordanzug, mädchenhaftes Gesicht, Beatlefrisur, und er gab bekannt, unhöflich und respektlos, daß er all das, was da in Lyrik und Prosa dem Gruppen-Spiel ausgesetzt worden sei, doch ein bißchen sehr altmodisch und außer der Welt finde. Und setzte sich wieder.³⁶⁹

As Wendt points out, the uproar caused by the combination of Handke's beatnik style and his lack of respect for the lions of the postwar literary establishment had less to do with the specific critiques proffered by the young writer, and was more a reaction to the way in which the speech marked an undeniable and irreversible generational break—one which, as Wendt explains, differentiates itself from earlier generational breaks due to the mediatic cultural image of youth propagated in the early sixties:

Handke [...] hat damals mit seiner ungeniert jugendlich respektlosen Attacke nicht nur entschieden auf sich selbst, den Schriftsteller Peter Handke, sondern zum erstenmal ganz deutlich auch auf einen Unterschied zwischen den Generationen aufmerksam gemacht: das ist nicht mehr jener ewig wiederkehrende zwischen Vätern und Söhnen, der ist abgeschafft, sondern jener, welcher sich aus der von der Gesellschaft zu ihrem Nutzen bewerkstelligten Inthronisation von Jugendlichkeit ergibt: die geschäftstüchtige Erfindung von "Twens"³⁷⁰ schlägt auf die Erfinder als Vorwurf der Vergreisung zurück, die Jugend geht hindurch durch die Welt, die nicht sie selber aufgebaut, die nicht sie selber zu verantworten hat, und sie nimmt auf, was ihr brauchbar darin erscheint — und ignoriert die Alten.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸As an example, Alfred Kuby's description of Handke in *Der Spiegel*: "Dieser Mädchenjunge Peter mit seinen zierlich über die Ohren gekämmten Haaren, mit seinem blauen Schirmmützchen, fast ist man versucht zu sagen, mit seinem blauen Schirmmätzchen, seinen engen Höschen, seinem sanften Osterei-Gesicht [...]" Quoted in: Otto Lorenz, "Literatur als Widerspruch. Konstanten in Peter Handkes Schriftstellerkarriere". *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 24, 5th ed., 1989, p. 16.

³⁶⁹Ernst Wendt, "Der Behringer der Beat-Generation". In Scharang, *Über Peter Handke*, p. 125.

³⁷⁰A sixties media term equivalent to "twentysomething."

³⁷¹*Ibid.*, pp. 125-6.

Thus, the reception of Handke's speech was heavily tinted by the more general media frenzy regarding the establishment and entrenchment of a modern 'youth culture.' Without a doubt, this hysteria took on a different character in Germany and Austria than in other countries, due to the relative youth and fragility of postwar cultural values. In the case of the German literary establishment, the *Gruppe 47* was seen as the embodiment of a national literary conscience, the aesthetic standards of which were of central importance to the stability of postwar German culture. Handke's brazen attack on precisely these aesthetic standards—declaring them to be impotent, outdated, and obstructive to literary innovation—seemed, at the time, to reveal the ultimate unsustainability of the *Stunde Null* postwar literary model.

Despite the relative lack of close attention paid to the specifics of Handke's arguments—which would have probably received less attention had they been voiced by an older or more conservatively dressed writer—it remains noteworthy that his critique focuses on issues of form and language. Despite the shock it provoked, Handke's protest was not actually expressing new, youthful ideas, but was rather continuing in the footsteps of earlier aesthetic polemics, some of which had previously been voiced by *Gruppe 47* member Heißenbüttel, as Otto Lorenz observes:

Die Sprach- und Formreflexion, die Autoren wie Helmut Heißenbüttel, Franz Mon und Jürgen Becker ständig vorantrieben, hatte den schlichten Abbildungsrealismus, der weiterhin die allermeisten Schreibweisen beherrschte, nicht zu überwinden vermocht. Immer noch traute man sich einen direkten Zugriff auf die Wirklichkeit zu, ohne sich auf die erkenntnis- und sprachtheoretischen Voraussetzungen eines solchen Zugriffs zu besinnen. Mit seinem Vorwurf der "Beschreibungsimpotenz" zielte Handke genau auf diesen Mangel an Reflexion der Wahrnehmungs- und Formulierungsbedingungen, die jeweils nur ein

konstruiertes Bild der Wirklichkeit erscheinen lassen.³⁷²

Following this view, Handke's Princeton speech is significant not as the rejection of the 'old' in favor of the 'new,' but rather as the announcement of Handke as heir to an extant tendency of postwar literature—one which had flourished in France, but remained marginalized in Germany: that of formal experimentation, represented by the *nouveaux romanciers*, the concrete poets, and the *Stuttgarter Schule*. While Handke only acknowledges his connection to the former, his arguments set him on the side of the "Formalisten" (who had already been active within the *Gruppe 47* for over a decade), against the market-friendly realism that dominated the literary market in the fifties and sixties.

In Handke's more measured essay, "Beschreibungsimpotenz. Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in den USA", published a few months after the Princeton meeting, in the June 1966 issue of the radical student journal *konkret*, he further underlines the formal and linguistic aspects of his speech.³⁷³ This essay functions as both a corrective to the inchoate ideas he expressed in Princeton,³⁷⁴ as well as a defense against the numerous criticisms and misinterpretations of his speech published during the intervening months in the German press. He begins by addressing the issue of description, claiming that in decrying the "Beschreibungsimpotenz" of contemporary German literature, he was not denouncing description per se, but rather description as it was employed in the so-called *Neuer Realismus* of many *Gruppe 47* writers:

³⁷²Lorenz, "Literatur als Widerspruch", pp. 11-2.

³⁷³The article was later published in *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* as "Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in den USA". See: "Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms Entstehungskontext | Handke Online", accessed April 22, 2014, <http://handkeonline.onb.ac.at/node/1344>.

³⁷⁴The extent to which Handke had prepared the remarks of his original speech beforehand is unclear. Friedrich Christian Delius claims to have seen Handke correcting the typewritten manuscript of what may have been the text of the speech a day earlier, outside the Princeton venue, but this obviously can't be confirmed. See: Friedrich Christian Delius, "Meister der Provokation". *Cicero : Magazine für politische Kultur*, May 2012.

Ich habe nichts gegen die Beschreibung, ich sehe vielmehr die Beschreibung als notwendiges Mittel an, um zur Reflexion zu gelangen. Ich bin für die Beschreibung, aber nicht für die Art von Beschreibung, wie sie heutzutage in Deutschland als “Neuer Realismus” proklamiert wird.³⁷⁵

For Handke this is not merely a stylistic issue, nor a purely formal matter, but relates to underlying assumptions made about linguistic representation. In doing so he harkens back to Mallarmé’s famous remark about words and things, just as Heißenbüttel did a decade earlier:

Es wird nämlich verkannt, daß die Literatur mit der Sprache gemacht wird, und nicht mit den Dingen, die mit der Sprache beschrieben werden. In dieser neu aufkommenden Art von Literatur werden die Dinge beschrieben, ohne daß man über die Sprache nachdenkt, es sei denn, in germanistischen Kategorien der Wortwahl, usw. Und die Kritik mißt die Wahrheit der Literatur nicht daran, daß die Worte stimmen, mit denen man die Gegenstände beschreibt, sondern daran, ob die Gegenstände “der Wirklichkeit entsprechen”. So werden die Worte für die Gegenstände als die Gegenstände selber genommen. Man denkt über die Gegenstände nach, die man “Wirklichkeit” nennt, aber nicht über die Worte, die doch eigentlich die Wirklichkeit der Literatur sind.³⁷⁶

Like Heißenbüttel, Handke criticizes traditional conceptions of literary engagement for failing to acknowledge that literature is a linguistic entity; in doing so, he also emulates the position taken by Roland Barthes, siding with the *nouveaux romanciers* against Sartre in the fifties.

Handke makes this connection explicit in referring to Sartre’s “komische[r] Vergleich [. . .], der die Sprache, mit der Prosa geschrieben werde, mit dem Glas vergleicht: man glaubt also naiv, durch die Sprache auf die Gegenstände durchschauen zu können wie durch das sprichwörtliche Glas.”³⁷⁷ Handke demands that both critics and writers acknowledge the

³⁷⁵Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms*, p. 29.

³⁷⁶Ibid., pp. 29-30.

³⁷⁷Ibid., p. 30.

problematic nature of linguistic representation, and cease treating language as an untroubled medium of description. His arguments are similar to those voiced earlier by Heißenbüttel, but are delivered with more conviction and force: where Heißenbüttel proposes a model of literature that didactically exposes the true nature of language through experimental texts, Handke demands more direct action: “Das ‘Glas der Sprache’ sollte endlich zerschlagen werden.”³⁷⁸ However, despite this provocative presentation, Handke’s early literary program differs little from that of Heißenbüttel, ultimately seeing literary texts as *Demonstrationen*: “Anstatt so zu tun, als könnte man durch die Sprache schauen wie durch eine Fensterscheibe, sollte man die tückische Sprache selber durchschauen und, wenn man sie durchschaut hat, zeigen, wie viele Dinge mit der Sprache gedreht werden können. Diese stilistische Aufgabe wäre durchaus, dadurch, daß sie aufzeigte, auch eine gesellschaftliche.”³⁷⁹ Even more so than Heißenbüttel, Handke emphasizes the extent to which this literary revelation of linguistic form is an endeavor with social consequences: somewhat surprisingly, he shows himself here as remaining committed to a form of literary engagement, or at least to an aesthetic conception of the writer’s social task.

Like Heißenbüttel before him, Handke sees writerly engagement as the active involvement with language, and mocks the linguistically blind engagement of the *Gruppe 47*: “In Princeton nun mußte ich hören, wie sehr das sogenannte gesellschaftliche Engagement des Schriftstellers von den Kritikern in der Gruppe 47 an den Objekten gemessen wurde, die er beschreibt, und nicht an der Sprache, mit der er diese Objekt beschreibt.”³⁸⁰ In this critical piece, as well as in others from this period, Handke tends to use ideas about language

³⁷⁸Ibid.

³⁷⁹Ibid.

³⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 30-1.

less to justify his own writing than to criticize the aesthetic standards of the establishment, which he equates here with the *Gruppe 47*. He speaks snidely about the simplicity of these standards: “Die sogenannte ‘Gegenwart’ galt dann als behandelt, wenn zum Beispiel in einer Geschichte ein Computer beschrieben wurde, die sogenannte ‘Vergangenheit’ war bewältigt, als ein Lichtbildervortrag beschrieben wurde, der von einer Reise nach Polen handelte [. . .].”³⁸¹ Handke decries the “naiv[e] Sprachauffassung” employed in such works, and names Robbe-Grillet as an example of a writer who works actively, experimentally, and critically with the linguistic and formal character of his works. Indeed, it seems as though Handke, with this essay, is trying to modify the critique of his initial speech to accommodate the work of a writer like Robbe-Grillet, whom Handke long admired, and whose work could likewise be characterized as “Beschreibungsliteratur” (in that a work like *Les gommes* features some of the most extremely detailed descriptions in postwar literature). He makes room for the photographic precision of Robbe-Grillet’s descriptive passages by situating the importance of such writing in its treatment of language:

Ich glaube, daß es heutzutage nötig ist, die Welt näher anzuschauen und also detaillierter zu erfassen. Aber wenn diese vergrößert betrachtete Welt nur abgeschrieben wird, ohne daß mit der Sprache etwas geschieht, was soll’s dann? Warum plagt man sich mühsam um die sogenannten passenden Worte und schreibt dann doch nur ab, in überkommener Form, als wäre man ein Ersatzwissenschaftler? Da wäre es doch viel einfacher zu fotografieren. Wenn vorgegeben wird, daß die Sprache ohnehin nur als Linse, als Glas, benützt wird, dann kann man an die Dinge doch viel besser mit der Kamera herangehen.³⁸²

Linguistic description falls short of the documentary standards of a photograph, Handke states here, and is thus only worthwhile when, as in the works of Robbe-Grillet, “mit

³⁸¹Ibid., p. 31.

³⁸²Ibid., p. 32.

der Sprache etwas geschieht.” These vague demands betray a lack of clarity in Handke’s statements regarding language and description, and I would characterize them as an early, failed attempt to draw a clear line between the neo-Sartrean mode of writing prevalent in the German literary establishment, and a new, linguistically and formally enlightened mode of writing represented by his own works as well as those of writers like Robbe-Grillet. Reinhard Priessnitz and Mechthild Rausch, on the other hand, claim that for Handke, “es geht [...] nicht eigentlich um die probleme des *beschreibens*, sondern um die des *erzählens*,” and that Handke’s outburst was really an attempt to conceal the latent conservatism of his own writing behind an avant-garde aesthetic polemic.³⁸³ Peter Strasser sees Handke’s attack on the *Gruppe 47* less as an attempt to articulate his own literary vision than to clear the slate of postwar German aesthetics—“reinen Tisch machen,” in order to create the space to allow his own nascent literary innovations to develop.³⁸⁴

At any rate, in these initial attacks Handke says little that hadn’t already been said before. His insistence on the backwardness of an object-oriented critical judgment aligns Handke with Heißenbüttel’s critical stances from the late fifties and early sixties,³⁸⁵ exposing him to the same criticisms leveled at Heißenbüttel by figures such as Dieter Wellershoff (and indeed, Wellershoff included the early Handke in his list of ill-fated epigones of Flaubert³⁸⁶ who

³⁸³See: Reinhard Priessnitz and Mechthild Rausch, “tribut an die tradition : aspekte einer postexperimentellen literatur”. In Laemmle and Drews, *Wie die Grazer auszogen, die Literatur zu erobern*, pp. 140-141.

³⁸⁴See: Peter Strasser, “Sich mit dem Salbei freuen. Das Subjekt der Dichtung bei Peter Handke”. In *Die Dichter und das Denken : Wechselspiele zwischen Literatur und Philosophie*. Edited by Klaus Kastberger and Konrad Paul Liessman. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 2004, p. 121.

³⁸⁵Compare the above citation with Horst Thomé’s characterization of the central literary assumption of Max Bense, Heißenbüttel’s mentor: “[Die] Annahme, es solle weniger darum gehen, etwas in der Sprache zu veranstalten, also das sprachliche Kunstwerk in der Mitteilung eines höheren oder tieferen oder wo immer auch sonst zu plzierenden Sinns zu begründen, sondern darum, etwas mit der Sprache zu veranstalten.” Thomé, “Max Bense und die Literaten der fünfziger Jahre”, p. 19.

³⁸⁶See above (ch. 2), and: “die Nonsensdialoge des absurden Theaters, die Sprachparodien Queneaus, der Sprachterror Handkes, die Sprachspiele der Wiener Schule [*sic*], die Collagen und Reduktionsformen Heißenbüttels und Mons [...]” Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, p. 220.

were unable to look beyond their own preoccupations with linguistic symbols). However, as Strasser points out, with these attacks Handke opens up “Konfrontationslinien, von denen er auch später nicht mehr abweichen wird.”³⁸⁷ While Handke uses a language-skeptical orientation to accomplish this, he would subsequently and perpetually shift the parameters of his personal understanding and use of language, using writing to explore the liminal spaces between the opposing “symbolgesteuerten” and “realitätsorientierten” orientations of which Wellershoff speaks.³⁸⁸

***Kaspar*: The Individual Within Linguistic Order**

Despite the post-Princeton buzz, Handke’s first novel, *Die Hornissen*—a work that showed a clear influence of the French *nouveau roman*—went largely unread. It was instead his experimental theatrical *Sprechstücke*—most notably *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (first performed in June of 1966, just months after the Princeton meeting)—that brought Handke his first notable literary success. The confrontational attitude of these plays seems to have fit better with the public’s image of Handke as an *enfant terrible* of the literary scene. While *Publikumsbeschimpfung* deals more with a critique of bourgeois theater culture, *Kaspar* (written in 1967, first performed 1968) represents Handke’s first treatment of the theme of language in an explicit, theoretically grounded manner. *Kaspar* marks the peak of Handke’s language skepticism, which somewhat resembles Konrad Bayer’s doubt as manifested in *der sechste sinn*. In Handke’s play, language exists as an abstract, alien entity that takes possession of the individual’s experience, turning the free subject into a machine that thinks and speaks

³⁸⁷Strasser, “Sich mit dem Salbei freuen”, p. 121.

³⁸⁸See: Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, pp. 220-1.

according to prefabricated formulae.

The play presents the process of language acquisition through the historical figure of Kaspar Hauser, whom Handke credits with supplying him with “das Modell einer Art von sprachlichem Mythos.”³⁸⁹ At the play’s outset, the Kaspar character, like the historical Kaspar Hauser, possesses only a single sentence that he repeats uncomprehendingly: “Ich möchte ein solcher werden wie einmal ein anderer gewesen ist.”³⁹⁰ This sentence is a variation of the historical Kaspar Hauser’s alleged sentence, “Ein solcher Reiter möchte ich werden, wie mein Vater gewesen ist.” By removing the specific objects from the original sentence, and turning it into something more closely resembling a line from a grammar textbook, Handke presents his play as an exploration of language understood as an abstract entity. Rather than representing the historical figure of Kaspar Hauser, the Kaspar of Handke’s play serves as a stand-in for the individual inhabitant of a culture organized by language. Due to the surrounding atmosphere of cultural uprising in Europe (the play was first performed in May 1968), *Kaspar* was interpreted by critics as either an allegory for the subjugation of the individual by the state, or as a demonstration of how language is used as a tool of hegemonic domination of the individual.

It is worth noting how Handke, already in this early work, shows a sensitivity to the social and cultural parameters of language and linguistic structure. In doing so, he avoids some of the more solipsistic language-critical positions adopted by writers like Heißenbüttel and Bayer, who seem at times to understand the individual’s experience of language on a purely subjective, non-social level. Nevertheless, Handke follows these earlier writers in portraying

³⁸⁹Quoted in: Werner Thuswaldner, *Sprach- und Gattungsexperiment bei Peter Handke : Praxis und Theorie*. Salzburg: Alfred Winter, 1976, p. 50.

³⁹⁰Peter Handke, *Kaspar*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967, p. 13.

language as an alien force that possesses an individual and dominates his or her experience of the world. As Gunther Sergooris notes, *Kaspar* presents the spectacle of an individual's entry into language, exploring the multiple ways in which the rules and structures of language serve to enforce the hegemonic order of an individual's social situation: "Es [handelt] sich im *Kaspar* [...] um die Beschränkung einer individuellen und kollektiven Freiheit, indem der Sprachbenutzer durch eine unkontrollierbare und übermächtige sprachliche Gewalt dazu erzogen wird, eine gegebene gesellschaftliche Ordnung widerspruchslos als naturgemäß zu akzeptieren."³⁹¹ The treatment of language in Handke's play shows the clear influence of Wittgenstein; however, this is a radicalized Wittgenstein, whose theories are refracted through a poetic lens, becoming existential allegories of power.³⁹²

In Handke's play, Kaspar progresses from the transcendent private language of his primary sentence—his offstage interlocutors characterize his sentence as "[ein] Satz, mit dem du dir s e l b e r schon alles sagen kannst, was du a n d e r e n *nicht* sagen kannst"³⁹³—towards a communicative language, subject to the external order imposed by social forces. Kaspar is inducted into this linguistic system via the pedagogical intrusions of the offstage "Einsager," who dictate to Kaspar his thoughts and feelings in the form of linguistic training. Through the figure of Kaspar, Handke presents a subversion of the traditional narrative of the *Bildungsroman*: here, the protagonist's process of education results not in intellectual

³⁹¹Gunther Sergooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*. Bonn: Bouvier, 1979, p. 112.

³⁹²Priessnitz and Rausch criticize *Kaspar* for, among other things, its overemphasis on "die abbildende" function of language: "'ein tisch ist ein wahrer tisch, wenn das bild vom tisch mit dem tisch übereinstimmt' (handke, 'kaspar')—das stimmt im falle von original und dem es reproduzierenden abbild [...] und ist letztlich trivial, aber wenn handke damit den wittgensteinchen *bild*begriff (den des 'tractatus') meint [...] so faßt er ihn naiv auf und wird selbst zu voreiligen folgerungen verleitet." Priessnitz and Rausch, "tribut an die tradition", pp. 147-8. However, Handke never claims to represent Wittgenstein accurately in his writings—nor does he ever even claim to understand Wittgenstein—, and would probably admit, like Oswald Wiener, that the influence of Wittgenstein on his writing has been "zugleich tief und undeutlich."

³⁹³Handke, *Kaspar*, p. 16.

maturity and independence, but in a gradual subjugation to the hegemonic system represented by his educators.

Though Handke apparently claimed that his play functioned simply as a dramatic fiction, and did not mean to offer a particular thesis as to the relation of language and power,³⁹⁴ the play nevertheless presents a vision of language as a tool for domination and manipulation of the individual. Sergiooris describes it thus, emphasizing the way linguistic structure erodes pluralism, and thereby negates rebellion or resistance:

Es handelt hier um die Uniformierung von Leben und Welt durch Sprache und um das Untergehen des Einzelnen in einer hemmungslosen Vermassung. Die Sprache in Kaspar funktioniert als Negation des Pluralismus. Kaspar soll sich völlig mit einem bestimmten System identifizieren, seine Existenz darf auf diesem Gebiet keinen Gegensatz mehr hervorrufen. Das Dasein soll in Sätzen objektiviert werden. [...] Die Sprache etabliert sich als zentrales Bezugssystem, indem sie vorgeprägt ins persönliche Gespräch aufgenommen wird. Die Sprache wird zur normierenden Gegebenheit, zum Instrument einer Autorität. [...] Kaspar ist mit Wörtern konditioniert worden. Jeder Gegensatz, jede menschliche Originalität ist in ihm mittels einer sprachlichen Aggressivität aufgelöst. Er ist nur noch ein Duplikat von sprachlichen Formeln.³⁹⁵

Important for the model of language here is the opposition between a reflective, self-aware use of language, and a non-reflective, unaware repetition of linguistic formulae. By slowly suppressing the former, and enabling the latter, the Einsager transform linguistic participation from something free and creative to a fundamentally mimetic act:

Die Einsager helfen Kaspar weiter auf seinem Weg zu einer selbstverständlichen, d. h. unreflektierten Anwendung der Sprache. Diese Modelle bringen ein Element der Automatisierung in das Sprechen ein, indem sie dem Sprachbenutzer

³⁹⁴“Es handle sich in Kaspar keineswegs um eine These, daß etwa die Sprache Gewalt ausübe auf Personen, sondern nur um das Spielmodell für ein Theaterstück.” Paraphrased in: Sergiooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*, p. 96. See also: Peter Handke, “Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter”. *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 24/24a, 2nd ed., 1969, p. 45.

³⁹⁵Sergiooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*, p. 101.

vorformulierte Inhalte einhändigen, die die eigene Sprechfähigkeit zu einem
“Nachahmen” reduzieren.³⁹⁶

While not free within language’s system, the language user is nevertheless enabled to impose a certain order onto the objects and experiences of his or her life. Resembling somewhat Goldenberg’s frenetic language-affirming monologue from Bayer’s *der sechste sinn*—“jetzt ist die wahrnehmung in essig und öl, in formalin, in spiritus, ganz harmlos ist sie jetzt und ich kann sie sogar aufheben und macht mich nicht mehr unruhig [. . .]”—Kaspar also rejoices in his newfound linguistic facility:

Früher mit Sätzen geplagt
kann ich jetzt von Sätzen nicht genug haben
früher von den Wörtern gejagt
spiele ich jetzt mit jedem einzelnen Buchstaben [. . .]
Jeder Gegenstand
ist mir zugänglich
geworden
und ich
bin für jeden Gegenstand
empfänglich
geworden [. . .]
und jeden Gegenstand
der mir unheimlich ist
bezeichne ich als mein
damit er aufhört
mir unheimlich zu sein.³⁹⁷

The Einsager’s declarations also present an ironically positive view of language’s powers of organization and simplification: “Beim In-Ordnung-Bringen / ist man nicht so still / und

³⁹⁶Ibid., p. 102.

³⁹⁷Handke, *Kaspar*, pp. 69-70.

ordentlich / wie später / wenn man [...] / mit ruhigem Gewissen / die in Ordnung gebrachte / Welt / genießen will / und kann.”³⁹⁸ However, unlike Goldenberg, Kaspar’s sense of linguistic empowerment comes across as false: though he has acquired the ability to impose order on his experience, Kaspar has also become the powerless receptor of language’s externally determined order, from which personal thoughts and feelings are abolished, as Sergiooris points out:

Kaspars Beziehung der Welt [ist] eine indirekte, weil es ihm nur erlaubt ist sie von bereits vorhandenen Sätzen aus zu betrachten. [...]. Auf diese Weise wird die “persönliche” Auffassung Kaspars ganz und gar “unpersönlich”. Stereotype Sätze uniformieren das Denken nach mustergültigen Regeln. [...]. Die Sprache erlaubt es dem Sprecher seine Welt zu bewältigen, aber sie erlaubt es einer Ordnung ebenso den Sprecher zu überwältigen.³⁹⁹

Handke’s use of rhyme evokes the thoughtless, mechanical quality of Kaspar’s use of language to parrot the *Einsager*’s imperative slogans:

Jeder muß frei sein
jeder muß dabei sein
jeder muß wissen was er will
keiner darf den Drill
vermissen
lassen
keiner darf sich morgens hassen
jeder muß sein Leben leben
jeder muß sein Bestes geben
jeder muß sein Ziel erreichen
keiner darf über Leichen
gehen

³⁹⁸Ibid., p. 77.

³⁹⁹Sergiooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*, p. 104.

keiner darf im Winkel stehen
jeder muß jedem in die Augen sehen
können
jeder muß jedem das Seine gönnen⁴⁰⁰

Sergooris sees the depiction of the totalizing social integration of the individual through linguistic structure as a leitmotif for Handke's theatrical writing from this period:

Handke zeigt in seinen Stücken, vor allem in *Kaspar* und dem *Ritt über den Bodensee*, daß die sprachliche Konditionierung den totalen Menschen betrifft. Sie bestimmt sein ganzes Denken und Verhalten. Sie macht ihn gesellschaftsfähig und nur mit ihr kann er sich unauffällig in die schweigende Mehrheit integrieren und nur noch 'Mitglied' sein.⁴⁰¹

This characterization of this particular phase of Handke's work aligns it with the work of writers like Bayer and Wiener, for whom language is always the other, the alien, the thing that stands between self and world.

However, Handke's understanding of language is already more developed than that of his Viennese predecessors. The focus of *Kaspar* is less on the solipsistic relation of an individual to his or her own subjective experience, but is rather concentrated on how language functions as an organizing principle of social reality. This is reflected in the dialogic form of *Kaspar's* linguistic education, which recalls the primitive language game between the builder and the assistant from the first pages of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*; and indeed, as Mechthild Blanke observes, *Kaspar* does not learn how to use language, but rather how to engage in language games: he doesn't learn the meaning and content of a sentence, but only the function that a sentence serves.⁴⁰² This is a progression from Bayer and Wiener, for

⁴⁰⁰Handke, *Kaspar*, pp. 84-5.

⁴⁰¹Sergooris, *Peter Handke und die Sprache*, p. 127.

⁴⁰²See: Mechthild Blanke, "Zu Handkes 'Kaspar'". In Scharang, *Über Peter Handke*, p. 286.

whom it is language's fallacious assertion of equivalence that precipitates the individual's alienation from the world: Handke realizes that it is not language's meaning, but rather its function—as determined by social order—that exerts a direct influence on an individual's actions.

At the same time, throughout the late sixties Handke retains the skeptical model of linguistic order as a distorting veil imposed between the individual and the world, as evidenced in this excerpt from a review of Gert Jonke's *Geometrischer Heimatroman*, written in 1969, about a year after *Kaspar*'s premiere:

Die Welt der Sätze schreibt der Welt der Personen und Dinge Muster vor. [...] [Jonkes] Sätze machen deutlich, daß das, was man bis jetzt als Leser für die unschuldige Wirklichkeit gehalten hat, von Syntax Vorgeformtes ist. Wenn der Autor über Gegenstände redet, merkte er, daß er, redend, der Gegenstand von Sätzen ist. Und deutlich wird, daß die Welt der Sätze eine hierarchische Ordnung normiert.⁴⁰³

With *Kaspar*, Handke has not yet arrived at a fully mature “Wittgenstein II”-realization: while he has managed to escape some of the basic existential and neo-Whorfian ideas that are embedded in the thinking of certain of his literary predecessors, he still sees language as an absolute, abstract entity. He only manages to complete his secondary “linguistic turn” when he applies his inchoate linguistic theory to his own critical discourse, reassessing how a writer is able to use language.

⁴⁰³Peter Handke, *Meine Ortstafeln. Meine Zeittafeln : 1967-2007*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007, pp. 293-5.

“Das Falsche tun”: The Turn to Narrative, 1969-1973

As the sixties drew to a close, Handke stepped back from the *Sprechstücke* with which he had made his name, and began writing long-form works of narrative prose, beginning with *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter* (published in February 1970). In a letter to Alfred Kolleritsch from March 1969, Handke mentions his work on *Tormann*, characterizing the novel as a “classical” text: “Ich brüte an einem langen Prosatext, einem klassischen [. . .].”⁴⁰⁴ A few months later, he writes to Kolleritsch again to report the completion of the first draft, this time describing it as “conventional”: “Inzwischen habe ich auch eine recht lange Geschichte geschrieben, von der Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter, es ist eine ganz konventionelle Story, es geht ja sonst nichts mehr.”⁴⁰⁵ It is important to note how conscious Handke was that the stylistic shift he was taking was towards the traditional, towards the classical.

This shift came abruptly: he had just published *Die Innenwelt der Außenwelt der Innenwelt*, a collection featuring some of Handke’s most explicitly experimental texts, using collage, cut-up, readymade, and visual poetry techniques. While several postulations can be made as to what inspired this swift change of direction, one event that might appear decisive is the birth of Handke’s first child in April of 1969—only a few days after Handke finished the first version of *Tormann*.⁴⁰⁶ Viewed cynically, Handke’s turn to more traditional prose writing looks like an economic decision: he needed money in order to support his family, and so he tried to write a novel that would sell. However, in the same letter to Kolleritsch

⁴⁰⁴Peter Handke and Alfred Kolleritsch, *Schönheit ist die erste Bürgerpflicht. Briefwechsel*. Salzburg and Vienna: Jung und Jung, 2008, p.25.

⁴⁰⁵Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁰⁶See: “Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter Entstehungskontext | Handke online,” accessed May 14, 2014, <http://handkeonline.onb.ac.at/node/1347>.

in which he reported *Tormann*'s completion, he also remarks with surprise at how well *Innenwelt* had been selling.⁴⁰⁷ If money had been his first concern, it would have surely been wiser to continue with poetry, instead of risking a radical change of style. Furthermore, although he refers to *Tormann* as classical and conventional, this characterization is far from accurate: the novel's experiments with form, style, and language signal a return to the kind of writing he was doing with *Die Hornissen*—a novel that had been received with little critical enthusiasm and sold poorly.⁴⁰⁸ *Tormann* was, however, very successful, with the first printing of 25,000 copies selling out after a few months, rising to number nine on *Der Spiegel*'s bestseller list.⁴⁰⁹

Regardless of what motivated it, Handke's stylistic shift was not straightforwardly reactionary: in his turn to prose, Handke hoped to progress beyond experimental literary abstraction in order to establish a new approach to narrative that would bear little resemblance to the more traditional realist prose that dominated the German book market. In a self-commentary on *Tormann*, Handke spoke of what he calls the "Flaubert'sches Prinzip" enacted in the work, whereby a predetermined "experimental" project results in a narrative that does not necessarily make obvious the principle from which it originated: "Danach ergibt sich die Geschichte, ohne dass man dieses Prinzip freilich immer beim Lesen eingebläut kriegt, man merkt es wohl, merkt, wie's gemacht wird, folgt aber doch immer die Erzählung; wenn man nur die Machart immer sähe, wär's ja alberne experimentelle Literatur."⁴¹⁰

This statement shows two things: firstly, that Handke had come to view ostentatiously

⁴⁰⁷Ibid., p. 27.

⁴⁰⁸See: Rainer Nägele and Renate Vorriss, *Peter Handke*. Munich: C.H.Beck, 1978, *Autorenbücher* 8, p. 36.

⁴⁰⁹See: Peter Handke and Siegfried Unseld; Raimund Fellingner and Katharina Pektor, editors, *Der Briefwechsel*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012, pp. 171-2, and "Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter Entstehungskontext | Handke Online".

⁴¹⁰Handke, "Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter", p. 45.

experimental literature as “albern,” and purposefully made a stylistic shift away from it with *Tormann*; and secondly, that Handke didn’t reject the premise of experimental literature, but intended instead to locate the experiment in the underlying form of the work, as an organizational principle that determines, almost imperceptibly, a narrative’s development. After the overt experimentalism of *Die Innenwelt der Außenwelt der Innenwelt*, *Tormann* represents Handke’s first step towards the development of a writing that is neither properly conventional nor recognizably avant-garde: an experimental writing that conceals the experimental principle by which it is determined.

Language remains a central concern in Handke’s novel: for Schmidt-Dengler, *Tormann* does not break from the pseudo-Wittgensteinian orientation of *Kaspar*—despite its shift to descriptive language and an unfragmented narrative form—but rather continues the investigation of language through a concentration on “Sprachstörungen.” *Tormann* and subsequent works of narrative prose attempt to translate *Kaspar*’s abstract representation of an individual’s subjugation through language into a realist mode: “Daß Handke nun in den nächsten Werken versuchte, dieses Verfahren nach einem Muster (oder Ritual) auf Lebenswirklichkeit abzutasten, diese aber im Detail noch nachhaltiger aufleuchten zu lassen, ist für die nun folgende Erzählprosa kennzeichnend.”⁴¹¹ *Tormann* is a novel with *sprachkritisch* style that continues certain linguistic themes of *Kaspar*, with the disturbed ex-goalkeeper Bloch taking the place of Kaspar, and Bloch’s realistically represented experiences of *Sprachstörungen* replacing the abstract fantasy of Kaspar’s interaction with the *Einsager*.

Despite Handke’s insistence on the “classical” character of *Tormann*, the work repre-

⁴¹¹Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 258.

sents a continuation of his earlier experiments with literary form. Handke himself refers to the book as an attempt, “zu zeigen, wie sich jemandem die Gegenstände, die er wahrnimmt, infolge eines Ereignisses (eines Mordes) immer mehr versprachlichen und, indem die Bilder versprachlicht werden, auch zu Geboten und Verboten werden.”⁴¹² Schmidt-Dengler identifies this thematic feature, and also points out the book’s continuation of earlier formal experiments: “Handke hat damit in dieser Erzählung die Thematik der früheren Sprachexperimente weitergeführt und sie gleichzeitig in eine Form gebracht, die in den folgenden Romanen sich nicht mehr wesentlich ändert: es ist die Form des früher kritisierten Geschichtenerzählens, wobei jedoch der Prozeß der Geschichte gleichzeitig ihre Bedingungen bloßlegt.”⁴¹³ *Tormann* also continues an earlier engagement with the form of the detective novel, explored by Handke with *Der Hausierer* (from 1967, sections of which were read at the *Gruppe 47* meeting in Princeton), an early novel that, like *Die Hornissen*, found little success upon its release: “Hatte der *Hausierer* das Modell des Kriminalromans vorgeführt, so bietet nun der *Tormann* die Story des Kriminalromans ohne dessen Struktur. Er füllt nun nicht die Muster auf, sondern bietet, was nach Abzug der Muster bleibt.”⁴¹⁴ Thus, *Tormann* represents the culmination of several different experimental threads running through Handke’s early work, adapted to a realist narrative.

In the novel’s content and thematic composition—its focus on issues of linguistic disturbance, featuring a protagonist who seems to be always the unwilling participant in a bewildering and alien language game—Handke continues where *Kaspar* leaves off. The novel’s first pages, leading up to Bloch’s murder of the cinema cashier, are a chain of

⁴¹²Handke, “Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter”, p. 45.

⁴¹³Nägele and Vorris, *Peter Handke*, p. 50.

⁴¹⁴Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 259.

misunderstandings and incomprehensions. Bloch is astounded by the most ordinary of interpersonal exchanges, such as the successful purchase of a movie ticket: “Im nachhinein wunderte er sich, daß die Kassiererin die Geste, mit der er das Geld, ohne etwas zu sagen, auf den drehbaren Teller gelegt hatte, mit einer anderen Geste wie selbstverständlich beantwortet hatte.”⁴¹⁵ His estrangement from society takes place on a symbolic level, and he is involved in a series of incoherent communicative exchanges with the people he encounters:

Die Frau hängte sich in ihn ein. Um den Arm wieder freizubekommen, tat Bloch, als wollte ihr etwas zeigen. Dann wußte er nicht, was er ihr zeigen sollte.

[...] Zu der Frau, die ihm schon im Bus, indem sie die Handtasche aufmachte und darin mit verschiedenen Gegenständen spielte, angedeutet hatte, daß sie unwohl sei, sagte er: ‘Ich habe vergessen, einen Zettel zu hinterlegen’, ohne zu wissen, was er mit den Worten ‘Zettel’ und ‘hinterlegen’ eigentlich meinte.

[...] Er versuchte, der Kellnerin in möglichst kurzer Zeit einen Witz zu erzählen; als die Zeit um war und er den Witz noch immer nicht fertig erzählt hatte, brach er mitten im Satz ab und zählte. Die Kellnerin lachte.⁴¹⁶

After several similar minor misunderstandings, Bloch meets a friend who says he’s on his way to referee a lower-league soccer match just outside the city. Bloch initially thinks he’s joking, and plays along, offering to serve as linesman for the match. Even after he sees the friend’s actual referee’s uniform while they drive together to the match, Bloch doesn’t realize that it’s not a joke. Instead he simply decides that “das Spiel hatte ihm nicht gefallen,” and he returns to the city alone.⁴¹⁷ With these minor events—narrated in lucid, realistic prose—Handke offers a poignant portrait of an individual out of kilter with the symbolic universe he inhabits. Though language is central to this symbolic order, it is not supreme:

⁴¹⁵Peter Handke, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 7.

⁴¹⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁴¹⁷Ibid., p. 16.

words are only a part of the sea of gestures, affect, signs, and symbols in which Bloch is drowning. In this, Bloch represents a progression from the character of Kaspar, for whom language alone is determinate; Handke's turn to narrative form in *Tormann* also reflects such a progression: the realization that language is only a single element within a wide and variegated symbolic universe, which allows him to loosen the self-imposed linguistic constrictions that previously guided his writing.

This is not to say that Handke reverts to a conventional form of prose writing with *Tormann*, nor that the book has a traditional novelistic form.⁴¹⁸ *Tormann*'s third-person narrator is not a neutral voice: it fails to maintain its distance to Bloch's struggles, and like in Georg Büchner's *Lenz*, the protagonist's mental instability is reflected in the narration, which is marked here by idiosyncratic stylistic choices, ranging from slightly unusual interjections or modifiers used to describe a situation that wouldn't be used by a remote, neutral narrator—"Das erste Friseur mädchen bot ihm einen Bissen von ihrem Brot an, und als sie es ihm hinhielt, biß er *ganz selbstverständlich* hinein."⁴¹⁹—to an explicit self-questioning by the narrative of its own indeterminate points: "Die Kellnerin brachte das Getränk, das Bloch für sie bestellt hatte. Welche 'sie'?"⁴²⁰ While the eccentric style of narration functions as a reflection of the protagonist's state of mind, there is something else

⁴¹⁸Indeed, starting with *Tormann*, Handke begins to call his novelistic works *Erzählungen*, refusing to present them as novels. Throughout the rest of his career he has usually denied either that he is a novelist or that his works are novels. For example, in a 2009 interview Handke states: "Ich bin kein Romancier, ich kann keine Parallelführung verwirklichen oder multiplexe Konstruktionen, ich habe noch nie einen Roman geschrieben." [From: Peter Handke, Klaus Kastberger and Elisabeth Schwagerle, "'Es gibt die Schrift, es gibt das Schreiben'. Peter Handke im Gespräch mit Klaus Kastberger und Elisabeth Schwagerle in seinem Haus in Chaville, 1. April 2009". In *Peter Handke. Freiheit des Schreibens – Ordnung der Schrift*. Edited by Klaus Kastberger. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 2009, *Profile* 16, p. 30.] However, in 1975 Handke requested that the reprinting of *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* bear the subtitle "Roman". See: Handke and Unseld, *Der Briefwechsel*, p. 291.

⁴¹⁹My italics. Handke, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*, p. 66.

⁴²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 38

going on: namely, Handke is forming his own, personal prose voice, which he will continue to develop over the following decades. In turning towards realist, narrative prose, Handke certainly wasn't trying to imitate Balzac; in the close attention he pays to the minuscule details of syntax, inflection, and affect, as well as his idiosyncratic choice of descriptive details to include, Handke creates a prose style that accomplishes an effect of *ostranenie* comparable to that achieved by his most experimental poetic and dramatic texts.

Thematically, Handke continues the *Aufarbeitung* of his younger linguistic skepticism. In a passage that recalls sections of Bayer's *der sechste sinn*, the narrator indirectly describes Bloch's compulsion to divert the connection between sign, signifier, and intention—in this case, using the names of objects to refer to the people in a room, in order to insult them:

Die aufdringliche Einzelheiten schienen die Gestalten und die Umgebung, in die sie gehörten, zu beschmutzen und ganz zu entstellen. Man konnte sich wehren, indem man sie einzeln bezeichnete und diese Bezeichnungen als Schimpfwörter gegen die Gestalten selber verwendete. Den Wirt hinter der Theke konnte man Eisbecher nennen, und der Kellnerin konnte man sagen, daß sie ein Stich durchs Ohrläppchen sei. Ebenso hatte man Lust, zu der Frau mit der Illustrierten zu sagen: Du Handtasche! und zu dem Mann am Nebentisch, der endlich aus dem Hinterzimmer gekommen war und im Stehen, während er zählte, den Wein austrank: Du Fleck auf der Hose! oder ihm, als er jetzt das Glas leer auf den Tisch stellte und hinausging, nachrufen, daß er ein Fingerabdruck sei, eine Türklinke, ein Mantelschlitz, eine Regenlache, eine Fahrradklammer, ein Kotflügel, und so weiter, bis die Gestalt draußen mit dem Fahrrad aus dem Bild verschwunden war . . .⁴²¹

Werner Thuswaldner sees the above passage as reflecting a condition of “totale Metaphorik,” in which any word may be exchanged for any other⁴²²; this model of language can be compared to the most extreme linguistic skepticism, which sees every connection between word and world as contingent. What has changed in *Tormann* is that Handke represents this














⁴²¹Ibid., p. 85.









⁴²²Thuswaldner, *Sprach- und Gattungsexperiment bei Peter Handke : Praxis und Theorie*, p. 40.






view not as his own, nor as defensible and rational, but as a strange mental meander of a disturbed subject.

Towards the end of *Tormann*, this distanced portrayal of a skeptical orientation returns: Handke's stylistic technique is pushed beyond the borders of language, and words become replaced by visual representations. Bloch sits in his hotel room and turns his gaze from right to left, then from left to right. He likens this movement to reading, and then proceeds to 'read' the room: "Er sah einen 'Schrank', 'danach' 'einen' 'kleinen' 'Tisch', 'danach' 'einen' 'Papierkorb', 'danach' 'einen' 'Wandvorhang'."⁴²³ As he turns his head back from right to left, the parenthesized words are replaced with simple line-figures representing the profile of a chair, a table, a wastebasket, then a door and a lock, then out of the window, rows of houses, train tracks, a bicycle. [See: Fig. 1] Coming near the end of the book, this passage seems to present us with the culmination of Bloch's minor misunderstandings in one final, grand misunderstanding. He mistakes the objects of the room for the words that represent them; as a result, the narrator discards the words and attempts to insert the objects directly into the narrative, through their visual symbolic representatives. Handke would not repeat this little trick, and it seems as though, with *Tormann* and the character of Bloch, Handke bids farewell to his younger obsessions with the inconsistencies of linguistic representation. Replacing words with pictures, or words with the actual objects they represent, fails to change anything for Bloch, who closes the blinds in his room and returns to his muddled state. Handke uses Bloch not only to develop his own distinctive prose style, but also to make a break from his younger *Sprachskepsis*, which is fictionalized as another one of Bloch's misconceptions. With his next novel, Handke continues to develop his stylistic

⁴²³Handke, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*, p. 117.

Blick kam ihm wie ein Lesen vor. Er sah einen ›Schrank‹, ›danach‹ ›einen‹ ›kleinen‹ ›Tisch‹, ›danach‹ ›einen‹ ›Papierkorb‹, ›danach‹ ›einen‹ ›Wandvorhang‹; beim Blick von rechts nach links dagegen sah er einen , daneben den , darunter den , daneben den , darauf seine ; und wenn er sich umschaute, sah er die , daneben den  und die . Er saß auf dem , darunter lag ein , daneben eine . Er ging zum  :  :

     . Bloch zog die Vorhänge zu und ging hinaus.

Das Gastzimmer unten war besetzt von der Reise-

Figure 1: Handke’s use of symbols in text. From: Peter Handke, *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, p. 117.

approach to narration, while further releasing the self-imposed restraint of his linguistic skepticism.

Following a trip to the USA in Spring of 1971, accompanied by his wife, Libgart Schwarz, and Alfred Kolleritsch, Handke began writing his next novelistic work, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*. While this book continues in the same self-reflexive prose mode as that of *Tormann*, it also introduces new elements to Handke’s oeuvre: firstly, by using consistent first-person narration, and secondly, by coming closer to recounting actual autobiographical events. While the novel’s plot is completely fabricated—despite the novel’s final line, spoken by the protagonist’s wife, affirming that “das ist alles passiert”⁴²⁴—there are many direct

⁴²⁴Peter Handke, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972, p. 195.

connections to Handke's 1971 trip to the USA; additionally, the narrator bears a much closer resemblance to Handke than Bloch from *Tormann*.

According to Handke, his decision to write in the first-person went against his basic convictions as to what literature was allowed to do. In his book-length interview with Herbert Gamper, Handke speaks of transgressing the limits of what he considered possible and proper in literature, and of the importance of this for his own development as a writer:

Das ist auch etwas sehr Wichtiges fürs Schreiben, daß jeder neue Ansatz eigentlich nur geschieht über etwas, was nicht möglich ist. Also *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* fing so an, mit dem Wort Ich, daß einer Ich sagt: *Ich erzähle . . . und ich hab gedacht, das geht ja schon alles längst nicht mehr, auch jetzt literaturhistorisch gesehen, und ich habs dann doch gemacht. Und grad das Falsche tun*⁴²⁵—für mich ist das eine Erkenntnis gewesen— . . . das Falsche tun nicht aus Mutwillen, sondern aus einer gewissen Lust und Not zugleich, ist für das Weitergehen und für das Weitertun zumindest im Schreiben unerlässlich. Also in dem Bewußtsein, etwas Falsches zu tun, wird das, wenn es nur aus Bedrängung und Sehnsucht zugleich geschieht, etwas Fruchtbare.⁴²⁶

It appears that Handke felt limited by restricting his writing to uses of language that were deemed 'correct' or 'unproblematic' by literary language theorists (himself included), and thus realized that, in doing what is deemed 'wrong' or 'problematic,' one's awareness of the problematic nature redeems this improper use of language, producing something of literary value, despite the linguistic inconsistencies. In a more recent interview (from 2011, conducted in English, a language Handke speaks only falteringly), Handke responds to a question about the influence of the Austrian tradition of the *Sprachkrise*, from Hoffmansthal to Wittgenstein, and the self-critical limitation of uses of language; he describes this as a

⁴²⁵While Gamper has transcribed this as "das falsche Tun," I think it makes more sense to present "tun" as a verb, with the category "das Falsche" as the object.

⁴²⁶Peter Handke and Herbert Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen. Ein Gespräch, geführt von Herbert Gamper*. Zürich: Ammann, 1987, p. 141.

problem that he had to solve simply by accepting that it becomes necessary to use language in a “wrong” way:

This was my problem when I was young. It [remains] a problem [...] but I make as if it were not a problem. One day I told myself [...] you have to make wrong things in writing. For instance, a book like *Short Letter Long Farewell* [...]—I came a lot from the *nouveau roman* when I was young. To avoid problems of language I decided to start outside: outside people, outside—not to become psychological at all. To stay outside. This was a kind of method in the *nouveau roman*. And then I thought, for the *Short Letter Long Farewell* I told myself—at [that] moment, in the beginning of the seventies, you couldn’t write this way—I think it [goes]: “Jefferson Street is a quiet street in Providence . . . ,”⁴²⁷ and so it goes on like this, and it was very old-fashioned to me: not only old-fashioned, it sounded to myself also wrong. But in that very moment I told myself, “it’s good that it’s wrong.” In literature I think you have to start sometimes in a wrong way to end in a right way. A lot of writers today, they start in a right way and they end in a wrong way. [...] So, to answer your question: I decided to quit language—our Austrian writing problem—and to make as if language doesn’t exist, as if there is no problem in language, and this was a kind of salvation for me, too.⁴²⁸

Thus, *Der kurze Brief* represents a drastic about-face, wherein he ‘quits’ his Austrian preoccupation with language. Back in 1966 at Princeton, Handke strained his voice in order to denounce what he considered to be a “wrong way” of writing, in order to promote a “right way” of writing: a writing that engages itself in a self-critical usage of language and smashes “das Glas der Sprache.” Barely five years later, as Handke claims in the above quotation, he decides to willfully do what is wrong, in order to progress forwards with his writing.

This turn represents not only a shift in Handke’s thinking about language, but also a retreat from his role as *enfant terrible* of postwar German-language literature. His early linguistic stances consisted largely of prescriptive demands delivered in aggressive attacks

⁴²⁷The first sentence from the original reads: “Die Jefferson Street ist eine stille Straße in Providence.”

⁴²⁸“À Conversa com Peter Handke, moderado por João Lopes e Pedro Mexia. 07.11.2011,” FNAC Portugal, accessed May 14, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVrY9GaQaB0>.

against the aesthetics of the literary establishment. This tactic was nothing new, however, and dates back to the realism debates of the 1930s as well as to the postwar debates about literary engagement. By retreating from his earlier prescriptivism, and intentionally doing what he once considered ‘wrong’—whether technically, linguistically, or politically—Handke effectively steps outside of an entire polemical battlefield, retreating into his own personal (to some, solipsistic) literary world, largely oblivious to the aesthetic debates which continued without him. In another recent interview, Handke makes similar comments about *Der kurze Brief*, speaking of the book as ‘unideological,’ flying in the face of the aesthetics demands coming not only from the side of the neo-Sartreans, but from that of the experimentalists as well:

Beim *Kurzen Brief* zum langen Abschied hab ich gewusst, du kannst doch nicht mehr so schreiben, die Zeit war überhaupt nicht fürs Erzählen da, und für so ein unideologisches, freies Erzählen schon gar nicht. Dann fing ich an und dachte mir: Das geht ja nicht, wie du anfängst! Das geht ja nicht, die konkrete Poesie war da, die engagierte Literatur war da, aber es ist eigentlich vollkommen falsch alles, und gerade das hat mir eigentlich die Kraft gegeben weiterzutun. Im Grund geht’s mir immer noch so.⁴²⁹

Handke steps outside of contemporary literary debates by refusing to take a side, and seeing that every side was ‘wrong’ in some way, which in turn authorizes him to do what what he believes is ‘wrong’ as well.

From the perspective of the stalwarts of experimental literature, however, Handke’s turn to realist prose was a betrayal—the act of “ein Reaktionär, der die Sache der literarischen Revolution verrät, indem er die ‘alte’ Poesie in die ‘neue’ Antipoesie hineinschmuggelt.”⁴³⁰

⁴²⁹Handke, Kastberger and Schwagerle, “‘Es gibt die Schrift, es gibt das Schreiben’. Peter Handke im Gespräch mit Klaus Kastberger und Elisabeth Schwagerle in seinem Haus in Chaville, 1. April 2009”, p. 22.

⁴³⁰William H. Rey, *Poesie der Antipoesie : Moderne Deutsche Lyrik : Genesis, Theorie, Struktur*. Heidelberg: Lothar Stiehm, 1978, p. 347.

Heißenbüttel specifically lamented Handke's rapprochement with the realist school of prose writing represented by Gottfried Keller, whose *Der grüne Heinrich* is read by the protagonist of *Der kurze Brief*:

Inzwischen hat sich Handke ganz offen zu einer Poetologie bekannt, die er früher aufs Schärfste bekämpfte. Der gleiche Mann, der sich vor wenigen Jahren gegen Fabel, Handlung, Charaktere wandte, entdeckt nun die literarische Bedeutung des *Grünen Heinrich* und damit des deutschen Bildungsromans. Nicht mehr Sprachspiele, nicht mehr "bloß grammatikalische Ableitungen oder einzelne Sätze" interessieren ihn heute, sondern "die richtigen realistischen Schriftsteller, die aber gleichzeitig eine Menschenfreundlichkeit ganz genau beschreiben, wie Theodor Fontane oder eben auch Gottfried Keller."⁴³¹

However, even in 1966, Handke had never been dismissive of realism per se, but rather of realism as it was practiced by prominent postwar German authors—denouncing what Peter Strasser identifies as "das eigenartige Bemühen namhafter deutscher Nachkriegsautoren, ihre Subjektivität aus dem Dargestellten auszublenden."⁴³² Furthermore, from the perspective of the writers of socially engaged realism, Handke's newest creation appeared hopelessly nihilistic and self-involved; Handke's second attempt at long-form prose only increased his isolation, turning him into an enemy of both the language-critical experimentalists and the engaged realists. This isolation contributed to the negative critical reception of his writing in the early seventies, particularly the pejorative accusations of "Innerlichkeit," which seem to have less to do with the content or character of Handke's work, and more to do with his unwillingness to partake in the mainstream culture of literary debating that had determined the identity of German literature since the end of the Second World War.⁴³³

While *Der kurze Brief* was certainly Handke's most conventional narrative to date, it

⁴³¹Ibid., pp. 347-8. (Only the phrases in quotes are direct citations from Heißenbüttel.)

⁴³²Strasser, "Sich mit dem Salbei freuen", p. 122.

⁴³³The same applies for many of the other writers of so-called New Subjectivity.

also represents a continuation of numerous experimental traits present in his previous work, including his engagement with self-reflexivity—perhaps a lasting aftereffect of his reading of the *nouveaux romanciers*. The novel’s personal, first-person narrative voice is not employed in a neutral, realist manner, but frequently inserts explicit auto-analytical commentary into the narrative. This technique of voicing critical or pseudo-critical commentary directly through the narrator would feature in many of Handke’s works in subsequent years. In *Der kurze Brief*, the self-reflexive voice serves to comment, obliquely, on the distinctive descriptive style of the novel, rich with minute details illustrating minor and insignificant occurrences. The narrator speaks of occasionally feeling an urge to include every detail when recounting an event:

Ich fühlte mich wie früher, als ich eine Zeitlang, wenn ich jemandem beschrieb, was ich gerade getan hatte, zwanghaft keine Einzeltätigkeit, aus der sich die Gesamttätigkeit zusammensetzte, auslassen konnte. Ging ich in ein Haus, so sagte ich statt “Ich ging ins Haus”: “Ich putzte mir die Schuhe ab, drückte die Klinke nieder, stieß die Tür auf und ging hinein, worauf ich die Tür wieder hinter mir zumachte”; und wenn ich einem anderen einen Brief schickte, legte ich immer (statt: “Ich schickte den Brief”) “ein sauberes Blatt Papier auf eine Unterlage, entfernte die Hülse vom Füllfederhalter, beschrieb das Blatt, faltete es zusammen, steckte es in einen Umschlag, beschriftete den Umschlag, klebte eine Marke darauf und warf den Brief ein.”⁴³⁴

Handke describes this technique as a method of coping with the limitations of subjective perception:

Wie hier, in einer Umgebung, die ich kaum kannte, trieb mich auch damals der Mangel an Kenntnissen und Erlebnissen dazu, mich darüber hinwegzutäuschen, indem ich die wenigen Tätigkeiten, die mir möglich waren, im Beschreiben so zerlegte, als ob sie von großen Erfahrungen erzählten.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴Handke, *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*, p. 34.

⁴³⁵Ibid., pp. 34-5.

Here, far from the accusations of *Beschreibungsimpotenz* and the accompanying statement comparing description unfavorably to the documentary capabilities of a camera, Handke declares description to be a valuable analytical tool, and a method of moving closer to the phenomenal world of lived experience. This represents a fundamental refusal of the skeptical doubt in language's ability to accurately represent the world. Language is no longer the veil that conceals reality from our cognitive processes, but is rather a tool that may be used to get closer to reality, to understand it better, and to make up for the epistemic lack that marks our subjective experience. *Der kurze Brief* enacts this claim, exhaustively describing the protagonist's physical and mental experience: what he sees, what he reads, and what he thinks about it all. Handke continues to develop the idiosyncratic prose voice that began to take form in *Tormann*, and which is transposed here onto a subjective viewpoint. The descriptive technique works as a great leveler, bringing the whole of the narrator's subjective experience down to the same linguistic plane. In the strong, unifying character of the novel's prose voice, Handke shows himself becoming more comfortable in language, more confident in his use of it, and more willing to let the forms and structures of language determine the character of his literary creation.

In many ways Handke's next book, *Wunschloses Unglück*, continues where *Der kurze Brief* leaves off: it is written in the first person and deals with Handke's personal experience—however, this time the book is explicitly non-fictional, recounting the suicide of Handke's mother, and the self-reflexivity of his narrator (now openly identified as Handke himself) is both more thorough and more direct. The book includes a motto from Patricia Highsmith—"Dusk was falling quickly. It was just after 7 p.m., and the month was Octo-

ber.”⁴³⁶—which recalls the spare, Chandleresque narration of *Der kurze Brief*. However the novel’s narrative bears little resemblance to that of its predecessor, and consists mostly of a flighty overview of his mother’s life, linking together minute details, isolated anecdotes, and generalized commentary about the social, political, and cultural conditions of the time. Certain words that refer to universally shared elements—things that have a place in every biography—are placed in capitals, separating them from the lowercase singularity of his mother’s story.

Halfway through this biographical retelling of his mother’s life and death, Handke interrupts the narrative with an extended parenthetical self-commentary in which he questions the book’s project, wondering whether his mother’s story is unique and specific to itself, or whether other people (i.e. the book’s readers) will be able to understand it in relation to their own lives. In order to enable the intelligibility and transmissibility of a story, Handke claims, a writer must resort to generalities: “Nur die von meiner Mutter als einer möglicherweise einmaligen Hauptperson in einer vielleicht einzigartigen Geschichte ausdrücklich absehenden Verallgemeinerungen können jemanden außer mich selber betreffen – die bloße Nacherzählung eines wechselnden Lebenslaufs mit plötzlichem Ende wäre nichts als eine Zumutung.”⁴³⁷ However, Handke clarifies, this technique is dangerous, since the generalized formulations threaten to disconnect completely from the historical facts and become a literary exercise with no relation to the actual story:

Das Gefährliche bei diesen Absktraktionen und Formulierungen ist freilich, daß sie dazu neigen, sich selbstständig zu machen. Sie vergessen dann die Person, von der sie ausgegangen sind – eine Kettenreaktion von Wendungen und Sätzen

⁴³⁶Peter Handke, *Wunschloses Unglück*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974, p. 5.

⁴³⁷Ibid., p. 44.

wie Bilder im Traum, ein Literatur-Ritual, in dem ein individuelles Leben nur noch als Anlaß funktioniert.⁴³⁸

Handke directly addresses here what Schmidt-Dengler calls “die Schwierigkeiten, die Aporien des Schreibens”⁴³⁹—which are intimately connected with the aporia of language itself. Language forms a comprehensible picture of the world through generalization, which requires it to relinquish its connection to the isolated concrete facts of reality. All language thus stands under the constant threat of an abstraction that would sever the connection to the world it claims to represent.

However, where a young Handke (or a Heißenbüttel) would perhaps take this aporia as evidence for the necessity of a non-representational literature of pure *Sprachdemonstration*, the Handke of *Wunschloses Unglück* manages to make a ‘leap of faith’ in an attempt to develop a functional methodology for narrating a personal story. Handke suggests that part of the problem concerns the traditional causal order of the writing process: that normally he begins by looking at the facts, and then attempts to find words to fit them. In an attempt to overcome the aforementioned aporia and redeem his narrative project, Handke proposes a reversal of this relation:

Anfangs ging ich [...] von den Tatsachen aus und suchte nach Formulierungen für sie. Dann merkte ich, daß ich mich auf der Suche nach Formulierungen schon von den Tatsachen entfernte. Nun ging ich von den bereits verfügbaren Formulierungen, dem gesamtgesellschaftlichen Sprachfundus aus statt von den Tatsachen und sortierte dazu aus dem Leben meiner Mutter die Vorkommnisse, die in diesen Formeln schon vorgesehen waren; denn nur in einer nicht-gesuchten, öffentlichen Sprache könnte es gelingen, unter all den nichtssagenden Lebensdaten die nach einer Veröffentlichung schreienden herauszufinden.⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁸Ibid.

⁴³⁹Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 265.

⁴⁴⁰Handke, *Wunschloses Unglück*, p. 45.

In an attempt to access the transmissible elements of his personal story, Handke shifts his conception of language in two important ways. Firstly, he steps back somewhat from the view of language as a tool for personal epistemic analysis, as employed in the descriptive narration of *Der kurze Brief*, and instead views language as a preexisting symbolic order that can be used to draw connections to isolated elements of personal experience. Secondly, and more importantly: though he retains his *Kaspar*-period conception of language as an enclosed system, alien to personal experience, he no longer sees it as a purely restrictive or oppressive entity—instead, he sees language as a socially determined database of representative possibilities, which can be accessed and employed to narrate certain sequences of perceptual data. For Schmidt-Dengler, Handke’s commentary here is “gut Wittgensteinisch gedacht: und zwar, wie die Wittgenstein-Forschung sagt, nach dem Wittgenstein II, der die Sprache des Alltags für in Ordnung befindlich erklärt”—Handke resembles the pragmatic Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, for whom language did not need to be refined and perfected, but was already a functioning symbolic system, capable of transmitting meaning, if not truth, as long as the language user doesn’t stray too far from the words’ ‘native’ meanings: “Es geht nicht um die gesuchte Sprache, es geht darum, den Gebrauch der Sprache zu kontrollieren, in möglichst großem Einklang mit dem Gebrauch in der Umgangssprache.”⁴⁴¹

Handke’s self-commentary also reveals that *Wunschloses Unglück*, despite lacking the formal profile of what is normally considered experimental literature, is a work of experimental writing: that is to say, it is a product of an act of literary writing that experiments with language’s representational relation to the world. At the same time, it also fits into

⁴⁴¹Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 264.

an accepted notion of realist writing—and indeed, Schmidt-Dengler points to critics like Walter Weiss, for whom writers like Handke represent a synthesis of the old dichotomy between formalism and realism: “[...] daß das, was man vorher als eindeutige Fronten auszugeben meinte, nämlich die zwischen Realismus und Formalismus, sprich: Lukács und Brecht, Thomas Mann und James Joyce, Reich-Ranicki und Handke, daß diese Fronten doch gar nicht als solche bestehen, und diejenigen, die man als Formalisten denunzierte (Brecht und Handke), im Gegenschlag ihre Kritiker als Formalisten mit durchaus guten Gründen angreifen können.”⁴⁴² By constructing *Wunschloses Unglück* according to his so-called “Flaubert’sches Prinzip”—wherein an experimental approach to writing happens less on the surface, and more on the level of the underlying structure of a work (here, in the underlying assumptions about the symbolic function of language)—Handke helps to redesign the customary formal profile of a work of experimental literature.

By accepting language as flawed-yet-functional, Handke relinquishes all truth claims and focuses on transmissibility. In doing so, he also undertakes a defense of literary language. In another of *Wunschloses Unglück*’s parenthetical commentaries, Handke declares all language to be fictive, and defends poetic language (and by association, literary writing) as the vessel of a more transmissible meaning:

Ist nicht ohnehin jedes Formulieren, auch von etwas tatsächlich Passiertem, mehr oder weniger fiktiv? *Weniger*, wenn man sich begnügt, bloß Bericht zu erstatten; *mehr*, je genauer man zu formulieren versucht? Und je mehr man fingiert, desto eher wird vielleicht die Geschichte auch für jemand andern interessant werden, weil man sich eher mit Formulierungen identifizieren kann als mit bloß berichteten Tatsachen? — Deswegen das Bedürfnis nach Poesie?⁴⁴³

⁴⁴²Ibid., p. 265.

⁴⁴³Handke, *Wunschloses Unglück*, pp. 24-5.

Here again, it is a question of the ‘wrong’ thing being the ‘right’ thing: the more one fabricates in language, the better one is understood. In defending poetic language here, Handke introduces a new dichotomy that would become an important categorical divider for his thinking about language: the split between literary and non-literary language. In the early to mid-seventies, Handke polemicizes in favor of literature as the effective transmitter of personal truth.

This polemic also develops in connection to Handke’s rejection of the demands of politically engaged literature. In the script for *Falsche Bewegung* (written in 1973 and filmed in 1975 by Wim Wenders), Handke addresses the issue of language in political discourse. The protagonist, based on Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, discusses his failed attempts at writing political literature:

Wilhelm: “Eigentlich ist mir das Politische erst mit dem Schreiben unfäßbar geworden. Ich wollte politisch schreiben und merkte dabei, daß mir die Worte dafür fehlten. Das heißt, es gab schon Worte, aber die hatten wieder nichts mit mir zu tun. Ich hatte überhaupt kein Gefühl dabei. Das ist doch nicht von mir, dachte ich.”⁴⁴⁴

This passage shows the persistence of the same issues that inspired his outburst in Princeton—which perhaps remain relevant for Handke due to critics’ continued attacks on his work and person for being unpolitical. Again, we see Handke using the theme of language to defend himself against criticism, only this time he bolsters his defense more thoroughly by aligning himself with the larger category of the poetical:

Der Alte: “Das wäre doch ein Grund gewesen, politisch aktiv zu werden und mit dem Schreiben aufzuhören?”

⁴⁴⁴Peter Handke, *Falsche Bewegung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975, p. 51.

Wilhelm: “Aber ich hatte doch gerade m i t dem Schreiben gemerkt, daß meine Bedürfnisse eben nicht auf politische Weise formulieren konnte. Ich fand sie bis jetzt nie von einem Politiker geweckt, immer nur von den Poeten.”⁴⁴⁵

Whereas in 1966, Handke decried the German take on *littérature engagée* as being constructed on an invalid linguistic forms, he now frames the question as a matter of the efficacy of different branches of cultural discourse: political discourse (and thus, political language) is unable to speak to the individual, who is more receptive to literary discourse.

In an open letter to Dieter E. Zimmer (a German literary critic interested in questions of science and psychology) written in 1976, Handke voices a similar opinion, stating his personal indifference to scientific systems, which he designates as fictions:

Was die Biologie behauptet, was die Psychoanalyse behauptet, wie der Marxismus mich definiert, das ist mir mit Leib und Seele gleichgültig. Alle diese Systeme kommen mir weit fiktiver vor als eine Seite Fontane, eine Seite Gottfried Keller, Heinrich Böll, Achternbusch, wen auch immer Sie nehmen, der eine freie, rational und emotional antisystematische Literatur schreibt.⁴⁴⁶

Towards the mid-seventies, Handke seems to have switched the target of his skeptical polemic: he no longer attacks language, and instead turns his ire towards certain branches of cultural discourse—not only scientific ones, but also those involved with politics and cultural criticism—that he sees as the abusers and misusers of language. Handke resembles the “Wittgenstein II” of the *Philosophical Investigations*, who realizes that the metaphysical problems of philosophy are not due to language itself, but rather are due to the misuse of language by philosophical discourse. Handke comes to see the problem as cultural, not linguistic, and this reconciliation with language leads him to become a partisan of poetic

⁴⁴⁵Ibid., p. 52.

⁴⁴⁶Peter Handke, “Bekannte Begriffe, gemischte Gefühle”. *Die Zeit*, 2 January 1976. Partially quoted in: Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, pp. 265-6.

language and literary discourse. For Handke, both the neo-Sartreans and the *sprachkritisch* experimentalists compromise the poetic spirit of literature by attempting to fuse it with aspects of political, historical, sociological, philosophical, and linguistic discourses. Handke's protest against this is already present in *Wunschloses Unglück*, about which Schmidt-Dengler claims: "Das Gelingen des Buches [liegt] nicht in einzelnen Fortschritten, sondern darin, daß es bewußt macht, daß in der Sprache der Literatur noch etwas zu sagen ist, was in der Sprache der Wissenschaft nicht möglich ist [. . .]."⁴⁴⁷ In his letter to Zimmer Handke also speaks of "die Tyranie eines Marx, eines Freud, die mir dem Leben und der Literatur gegenüber als Staatsanwälte erscheinen," and sees literature as an expression of individual truth: "Sobald ich aber Literatur lese, Literatur mache, fühle ich, daß jetzt endlich der Angeklagte spricht, der freie Angeklagte, und das interessiert mich, berührt mich, bewegt mich, belebt mich unendlich mehr."⁴⁴⁸ Schmidt-Dengler situates Handke's position within the tense historical relationship between literature and science

Dieser Traditionszusammenhang, der ja zu Beginn des Jahrhunderts zu einer intensiven Beschäftigung mit der Wissenschaft geführt hat—Musil, Broch—, hat in jedem Falle auch zu einer Rückkehr zur Literatur [. . .] geführt, daß mit der Literatur etwas mitteilbar sei, was sonst nicht gesagt werden könnte, weil es dafür keine Sprache, kein Organ gebe. Diese Leistung Handkes hat der Literatur einiges an Möglichkeiten und Prestige im öffentlichen Leben zurückgewonnen, und es erhellt daraus auch, daß das Schreiben und Lesen von Literatur in den Lebenszusammenhang einzubringen sei, daß durch Literatur etwas sprechend gemacht werden kann, was in der Sprache der Medien keine Sprache hat.⁴⁴⁹

With *Wunschloses Unglück*, literature becomes for Handke a forum for the redemption of language: freed from the "tyranny" of cultural discourse, language is returned to its roots in

⁴⁴⁷Ibid., p. 265.

⁴⁴⁸Handke, "Bekannte Begriffe, gemischte Gefühle".

⁴⁴⁹Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 266.

the *Umgangssprache*—thereby reunited with the world from which it had become estranged and allowed to speak once more, banishing *Sprachlosigkeit*.

The Esoteric Arts of Language, 1975-1986

Over the first two decades of his writing career, Handke tends to follow a contrarian path, constantly courting and then contradicting specific critical readings of his work. If in 1966 Handke presents his own work as a linguistically enlightened rebuttal of the *Gruppe 47*'s aesthetics, in the mid-seventies he distances himself from this earlier skeptical orientation—perhaps seeing it as simply another type of technocratic hegemonic discourse, perhaps dismayed by the way in which this skeptical element provided critics with an easy hermeneutic to explain Handke's texts without much original thought. Hermann Lenz recalls an incident when Handke was approached by a young reader and asked to explain the message of *Kaspar*; instead of saying something about the role of language and the symbolic structure of society in the formation of the individual subject, Handke's reply was simply: "Daß das Leben schwer ist."⁴⁵⁰ At least partly in reaction to the critical reception of his work, Handke gradually develops a defensive, almost obscurantist literary discourse, vaguely neo-romantic in character, based on a pseudo-mystical model of language, reading, and writing. While this new orientation won Handke a certain amount of creative liberty—enabling him to approach writing on his own terms, with minimal intrusion of contemporary literary trends—it also alienated many of the critics and readers who had responded positively to his

⁴⁵⁰The incident occurred during a visit to Handke's house in Kronberg in the early seventies. See: Hermann Lenz, "Schreiben geht manchmal leichter als reden. Begegnungen mit Peter Handke", in: Peter Handke and Hermann Lenz; Helmut Böttiger, Charlotte Brombach and Ulrich Rüdener, editors, *Berichtstatter des Tages : Briefwechsel*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 2006, p. 411.

earlier works, but were put off by Handke's increasing resemblance to the "Prototyp des Dichter-Priesters."⁴⁵¹ Handke also became the target of satire for many of his fellow writers, who mocked what they saw as Handke's self-importance, inwardness, and solipsism, such as in the following poem by Reinhard Lettau:

Der Dramatiker Peter Handke,
unterwegs nach einem Interesse
begegnet
der Sprache,
dann dem Senator Franz Burda aus
Offenburg,⁴⁵² endlich
sich selbst,
"Nach innen", seufzt er, "geht
der geheimnisvolle Weg."⁴⁵³

In an essay on Handke's *Die Wiederholung*, W.G. Sebald points out the concurrence of Handke's turn towards a more mystical conception of language and the falling off of critical and academic attention to his work. Sebald situates this around the period of the *Langsame Heimkehr* tetralogy (1979-1981), and even conjectures that these works may have been purposefully written in order to frustrate the easy critical analyses used to interpret his earlier work: "Weit verschlossener, weit schwerer beschreibbar, scheinen mir diese auf eine andere Art in der Welt sich umsehenden Arbeiten fast konzipiert, um der Kritik und der Wissenschaft das Handwerk zu legen."⁴⁵⁴ Sebald sees Handke as paying a dear price for this challenge, which few scholars or critics were willing to take up with much seriousness:

⁴⁵¹ See: Christoph Bartmann, "'Das Gewicht der Welt' — revisited". *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 24, 5th ed., 1989, p. 40.

⁴⁵² Franz Burda was a German publisher who had been a member of the Nazi party.

⁴⁵³ Quoted in: Scharang, *Über Peter Handke*, p. 308.

⁴⁵⁴ W.G. Sebald, *Unheimliche Heimat: Essays zur österreichischen Literatur*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995, pp. 162-3.

Bereits zu den vielen wirklich wundervoll gebauten Textbogen in der *Kinder-geschichte* oder in der *Lehre der Sainte-Victoire* ist weder der Kritik noch der Wissenschaft viel mehr eingefallen, als sie zu deklarieren als Beispiele der dem Normalverständnis weitgehend sich entziehenden Extravaganz Handkes in seiner bislang letzten Schaffensphase. Inzwischen haben die Leser, wenn es denn um solche sich handelte, sich verzogen, die Wissenschaft hat, wenn ich recht sehe, ihre Interessen größtenteils liquidiert, und von den Kritikern, die, naturgemäß, am exponiertesten waren, fühlten sich einige sogar genötigt, in der Öffentlichkeit Handke das Vertrauen aufzukündigen. In den letzten Jahren ist es vollends auf den Punkt gekommen, wo neue von Handke erscheinende Werke wohl zwar noch rezensiert werden, die Rezensionen in der Regel aber bestimmt sind von offener oder verhohlener Feindseligkeit und wo selbst die wenigen positiven Verlautbarungen einer seltsamen Ratlosigkeit und eines durchaus spürbaren Unbehagens nicht entbehren. Unerörtert geblieben ist bei alledem die in den neueren Büchern Handkes entwickelte Metaphysik, die das Gesehene und Wahrgenommene übertragen will in die Schrift.⁴⁵⁵

For Sebald, Handke's willful complication of his earlier interest in language leaves a breadcrumb trail that critics were either unwilling or unable to follow. It is important to note that Handke does not give up or recant his younger statements about language, but simply explores different aspects of the same issues—for example, as Sebald states, the project of translating images and perceptions into writing. During the eighties, having chosen to pursue these expanded aspects of his original linguistic focus, Handke's literary isolation only increased, allowing disparate sections of the literary-critical spectrum to finally agree in their assessment of Handke: as a pretentious and "priestlich" navel-gazer, out of touch with the pressing literary issues of the day.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵⁵Ibid., p. 163.

⁴⁵⁶Compare with the following assessment of Handke's perceived mysticism: "During the last decade [the eighties], Handke has drifted further and further in the direction of mysticism, which has become the ultimate consequence of his rejection of current nonliterary discourse. [...] His attempts to reach out beyond the thoughtless superficiality of everyday language and the stale realism of the stories dominating modern fiction to a deeper or greater reality by means of a priestly, ecstatic, and often hermetic language have led to rather harsh criticism by those unwilling or unable to duplicate his efforts to rid himself of the shackles of rationalistic discourses." Eva-Maria Metcalf, "Challenging the Arrogance of Power with the Arrogance of Impotence: Peter Handke's Somnambulistic Energy". *Modern Fiction Studies*, 36.3, 1990, p. 369.

The roots of this ‘mystical turn’ can be traced back to 1975, following Handke’s completion of the long-form novelistic prose work *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*, which recounts the personal crisis of an attaché to the Austrian embassy in Paris. Similar to *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*, the book draws heavily from Handke’s personal experience without actually approaching the realm of autobiographical fiction. In a 1975 interview, Handke responds to a question regarding the autobiographical tendency of his writing since *Der kurze Brief*, and speaks of the process of collecting isolated elements from his own experience, which then may be fused together into a cohesive narrative:

Ich sammle ganz stumpfsinnig Einzelheiten, aus denen ich bestehe, [. . .] und die fingiere ich zu einer Art Erzählung, zu einer Art Geschichte, die ich selber nicht erlebt habe; wohl aber habe ich viele einzelne Sachen erlebt. Und ich versuche, aus diesen realen Einzelheiten meines Lebens einen Entwurf herzustellen. [. . .] Wenn sich aber aus den Einzelheiten, mit denen ich schreibe, schreibend mich auf die Reise mache, plötzlich Perspektiven, Auswege aus meinem Leben ergeben, dann denke ich immer: Jetzt hat das Schreiben einen Sinn, jetzt hat die Arbeit, die ich mache, auch Perspektiven und wird verbindlich.⁴⁵⁷

Handke describes here a method of writing from experience without writing autobiographically; yet in reorganizing these isolated elements into a narrative, Handke claims that he is not completely in control of the form the final product takes, as if the narrative conforms to some higher order. In other interviews and commentaries from this period, Handke describes his writing process as something reactive: not only does he use language to react to his personal experience of the world, he also reacts to the natural form his own writing takes. Part of Handke’s literary mysticism involves a kind of extrasensory perception of beauty, which materializes almost miraculously within the network of connections between

⁴⁵⁷Heinz Ludwig Arnold, *Als Schriftsteller leben : Gespräche mit Peter Handke, Franz Xaver Kroetz, Gerhard Zwerenz, Walter Jens, Peter Rühmkorf, Günter Grass*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1979, p. 17.

language and the world. Handke assumes the role of an elevated poetic subject, for whom perception is something transcendent, and for whom the act of writing becomes an almost supernatural discovery of the unifying threads connecting word and world. For his next work, the partly accidental literary experiment *Das Gewicht der Welt*, Handke's attempts to identify these moments of transcendent language leads him away from novelistic form, and towards something resembling the Japanese haiku or the aphoristic fragments of G.C. Lichtenberg and Friedrich Schlegel.

Following the completion of *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*, Handke spoke of feeling a newfound sense of freedom and openness to experience:

Ich hatte nach dem letzten Buch [...] das Gefühl, völlig frei zu sein und das Gefühl, es könne mir jetzt nichts mehr passieren, nicht als Schriftsteller, sondern einfach als Existenz: Jetzt wäre ich völlig frei, jetzt könnte ich wie ein Meister, wie jemand, der alles durchgemacht hat, die Menschen, die es gibt, und die Ereignisse wirklich durchschauen, alles sehen, alles verstehen und müsste nichts mehr mit mir zu tun haben.⁴⁵⁸

This sense of creative freedom and perceptual empowerment predisposed Handke to a subjective state of heightened observation, which resulted in an increasingly observational method of writing. In November 1975 Handke began noting down various thoughts and perceptions from his daily life, originally intending these notes to be collected together as material for a prose work—following the same process he used when writing *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*—or as inspiration for a wordless play.⁴⁵⁹ In the initial phase of the experiment, Handke found that he only documented what would be useful for later repurposing. However, he was bothered by the idea that other perceptions were

⁴⁵⁸Ibid., p. 16.

⁴⁵⁹Handke explains the genesis of the work in the book's "Vornotiz." See: Peter Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*. Salzburg: Residenz, 1977, pp. 5-6.

useless, and could simply be forgotten, and so he made the decision to also document the “nicht-projektdienlichen Bewußtseins-Ereignisse.” At this point the project became autonomous, and Handke began to work more purposefully on this collection of fragmentary notes, the product of “die spontane Aufzeichnung zweckfreier Wahrnehmungen.” This activity dovetailed with the freedom he felt after the publication of *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*, driving Handke not only towards a surprising willingness to write candidly of the personal details of his life,⁴⁶⁰ but also towards a formal flexibility that had been absent from his recent prose works: “Je länger und intensiver ich damit fortfuhr, desto stärker wurde das Erlebnis der Befreiung von gegebenen literarischen Formen und zugleich der Freiheit in einer mir bis dahin unbekanntem literarischen Möglichkeit.”⁴⁶¹ Handke’s self-commentary reveals the properly experimental (in the literal sense) origin of *Das Gewicht der Welt*, which develops into a turn towards unconventional, almost anti-literary formal innovation.

The experiment also leads to a further progression in Handke’s conception of linguistic function: Handke now attempts to use language not to narrate, nor to describe, but rather to react to the mental stimuli of everyday life. Though the book’s project seems intent on bringing Handke closer to the ephemeral details of his everyday experience, the primary result of the writing process, according to Handke, had less to do with his perceptions of the world, and more to do with language itself, which was revitalized through the activity:

Ich übte mich nun darin, auf alles, was mir zustieß, sofort mit Sprache zu reagieren, und merkte, wie im Moment des Erlebnisses gerade diesen Zeitsprung

⁴⁶⁰In a 1988 interview, Handke claims that *Das Gewicht der Welt* is the only of his works to relate something truly personal: “Etwas wirklich Persönliches von mir wird man nicht finden, und was ich veröffentlicht habe, ist die totale Verkleidung, abgesehen vielleicht von einem Buch, *Das Gewicht der Welt*. Das ist noch am ehesten unverkleidet, also das nackte Ich.” See: André Müller, . . . *über die Fragen hinaus : Gesprächen mit Schriftstellern*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁶¹Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*, p. 5.

lang auch die Sprache sich belebte und mitteilbar wurde; einen Moment später wäre es schon wieder die täglich gehörte, vor Vertrautheit nichtssagende, hilflose “Du weißt schon, was ich meine”-Sprache des Kommunikations-Zeitalters gewesen. Einen Zeitsprung lang wurde der Wortschatz, welcher mich Tag und Nacht durchquerte, gegenständlich.⁴⁶²

Through a heightened perceptual awareness and a sustained attempt to verbalize this perception, language becomes transcendent. As opposed to *Wunschloses Unglück*, in which Handke purported to look for the prefabricated linguistic formulations—plucked from the reserves of the modern “Kommunikations-Zeitalter,” as it were—that fit to the facts of a true story, Handke does the opposite here: beginning with the minute, individual event, and then forming the custom-tailored, almost supernatural language that is able to provide an immediate and accurate reflection thereof. The purported end result of the literary process is also reversed: whereas in *Der kurze Brief* Handke spoke of language (and description in particular) as a tool to fill the epistemic lack of sensory perception, here the act of perception becomes a process by which meaning is restored to language.

On first glance, Handke appears here to recant his forays into narrative prose: he renounces the pragmatist model of language as a functional tool, and devotes himself to the esoteric art of finding the instants where perception allows language to blossom into a moment of transcendent representation. Indeed, Handke speaks of the obsession he develops for these moments, which link together and mature into an extended linguistic epiphany: “Mit immer größerer Lust konzentrierte ich mich also auf solche Momente der Sprachlebendigkeit, die dann auch immer häufiger sich ereigneten, schließlich das Momentenhafte verloren und zu einem ruhigen, auch heftigen, jedenfalls ständigen Ereignis

⁴⁶²Ibid., p. 6.

wurden.”⁴⁶³ In its journal-like form (the fragments organized first by month, then later by individual day), *Das Gewicht der Welt* evokes a process of apprenticeship by which Handke learns a new writerly art: that of turning days into trails of evocative mini-moments of linguistic transcendence, exploring the secret bond between language and consciousness that goes missing in everyday discourse. Though Schmidt-Dengler sees the persistent presence of Wittgenstein in Handke’s journal writing, he considers the project as a relapse away from the pragmatism of the late Wittgenstein, back to the innate mysticism of the *Tractatus*: “Handkes Tagebucheintragen kopieren die Frageformen der *Philosophischen Untersuchungen*. Es hat jedoch den Anschein, als würde das, was diesseits der Grenze, die unsere Sprache bedeutet, ist, zusehends uninteressant: Handke wendet sich mehr und mehr jenen Partien zu, in denen Wittgenstein das zu berühren scheint, wovon er nicht reden möchte.”⁴⁶⁴

However, clashing with a purported mystical orientation, Handke also refers to his work more humbly as “reportage,” describing *Das Gewicht* as “keine Erzählung von einem Bewußtsein, sondern die unmittelbare, simultan festgehaltene Reportage davon.” The external events of his life are not described in this work, but instead are represented negatively by his “Reportage der Sprachreflexe auf solche Ereignisse.”⁴⁶⁵ The supernatural implications are exchanged for a more corporeal model, with Handke comparing his jottings to an unthinking reflex reaction. Effectively, the book hangs between these two extremes, grounded in the humble minutiae of daily experience while striving for a transcendent evocation of timelessness. The reader is presented with the debris of Handke’s “alltäglichen Wörterkampf,” a

⁴⁶³Ibid.

⁴⁶⁴Schmidt-Dengler, “Wittgenstein, komm wieder!”, p. 188.

⁴⁶⁵Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*, p. 6.

linguistic printout of an attempted “Seismographie von Gefühlen in Augenblicken,”⁴⁶⁶ as Christoph Bartmann puts it. There is an openness to the work, and almost a willingness to fail in his attempts to access the humblest levels of the sublime; perhaps as a result of this, Handke decided to have the book published by his Austrian publisher, Residenz, instead of by the more prestigious Suhrkamp—allowing the book to have a somewhat ‘quieter’ release: “Ich bin auch ganz froh, dass die Aufzeichnungen in meinem ‘kleinen Verlag’ erscheinen (statt in meinem ‘grossen’): das entspricht der Unauffälligkeit, die sie auch als Erscheinung haben sollen (als Wesen hoffentlich mehr).”⁴⁶⁷ This hesitance perhaps betrays Handke’s lingering doubts as to the project’s success, or his fears that it would be torn apart by critics.

Turning to the actual text of the book, the fragments range from a few words to over a page in length, vary in style and voice, and demonstrate numerous different linguistic functions—from imagistic description to confession to social commentary. One unifying trait is a tendency towards a certain aimlessness: a monadic unwillingness to contribute to a larger thesis that would transcend the self-contained reflections of each individual fragment. Handke hints at this aspect of the book in his foreword to the paperback edition, where he mentions that he would have liked to rename the book “Phantasie durch Ziellosigkeit.”⁴⁶⁸ The alternate title refers to one of the book’s entries, which also speaks to the general project of Handke’s journal writing: “Ich beschloß, das Ziel aufzugeben, das mich nur noch

⁴⁶⁶Bartmann, “‘Das Gewicht der Welt’ — revisited”, p. 38.

⁴⁶⁷Handke and Unseld, *Der Briefwechsel*, p. 316.

Siegfried Unseld was upset by this decision, and noted in his personal *Chronik* that he regretted not having been able to have any editorial input on the work’s eventual form: “[*Das Gewicht der Welt*] ist ein Buch mit vielen Schwächen, aber doch mit vielen faszinierenden Aufzeichnungen. Wie wäre der Lektoratsgang bei uns verlaufen? Hätte ich ihn überzeugen können, zu ändern, wegzulassen? War dies vielleicht auch mit ein Grund, weswegen er es an Residenz gab?” *ibid.*, p. 325.

⁴⁶⁸Peter Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*. 2nd edition. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, p. 9.

funktionieren ließ, und fühlte mich endlich, zum erstenmal an diesem Tag, existieren.”⁴⁶⁹

Similarly, in writing *Das Gewicht der Welt*, Handke gives up the aesthetic aim of producing a literary product, allowing his writing to become something that freely engages with everyday existence.

Many of the fragments approach the everyday by replicating the simplicity, linguistic economy, and imagistic evocativeness of the haiku:

Die große Tasse mit dem rauchenden Tee, die in meinem Schoß lag wie eine Katze ⁴⁷⁰

Vögel flattern am Abend unsichtbar in den Büschen, ohne wegzufiegen ⁴⁷¹

Flüstern in stehenden Zügen ⁴⁷²

Some of these haiku-like fragments exhibit an acute concentration on sensory input, which becomes amplified through description (resembling the use of description in *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* to compensate for the shortcomings of perception):

Die Nacht wurde kühl, nur mit dem Duft der Strauchblüten kam noch, als Duft, eine letzte Tageswärme hergeweht ⁴⁷³

Die Frau, in dem Moment, da sie das Fenster aufmacht, stößt, nur für diesen Moment, einen Bruchteil des Lieds mit aus, das gerade auf ihrem Plattenspieler läuft ⁴⁷⁴

Other fragments go beyond the level of the visual or sensory, and touch upon deeper psychological detail:

⁴⁶⁹Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*, p. 267.

⁴⁷⁰Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁷¹Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁷²Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁷³Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁷⁴Ibid., p. 134.

Übereinstimmung ihres Gangs und ihrer Sprechart: sie geht immer mit dem vorderen Teil ihrer Füße und spricht nur ganz vorn im Mund ⁴⁷⁵

Im Schmerz gehen dem Mann wie unwillkürlich die Augen auf und zu ⁴⁷⁶

Or attempt to relate something visual by way of a personal or poetic reflection:

Das Grün eines Feldes, so stark, daß es sogleich “mein” Grün wurde: die grüne Landschaft fing vor meinen Augen erst zu grünen an ⁴⁷⁷

Der Park und die Kastanienbäume: neben jedem Baum sitzt ein Mensch, als ob er dem Baum gehöre ⁴⁷⁸

In other fragments, Handke describes his fleeting personal feelings and sensations, often by focusing on the sublime kernel of something mundane:

Unbehagen, unter die Erde zu gehen (in die Métro) und zu fliegen — als wollte ich immer in Berührung mit dem Erdboden bleiben ⁴⁷⁹

Heute hatte ich es bis jetzt noch nicht nötig, aus dem Fenster zu schauen ⁴⁸⁰

Die Sonne scheint mir auf die schreibende Hand und stärkt sie ⁴⁸¹

Not all the fragments are observational, however. Several present Kafkaesque products of Handke’s imagination, often concerned with language or writing:

Ein Beamter, der alles, was er mit der Hand schreibt, zwanghaft in einer Verdoppelung nachzieht ⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁵Ibid., p. 178.

⁴⁷⁶Ibid., p. 98.

⁴⁷⁷Ibid., p. 198.

⁴⁷⁸Ibid., p. 158.

⁴⁷⁹Ibid., p. 134.

⁴⁸⁰Ibid., p. 94.

⁴⁸¹Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁸²Ibid., p. 103.

Eine Maschine erfinden, damit man nicht zu reden braucht (eine Maschine, die man, angesprochen, bedient und die für einen antwortet) ⁴⁸³

In another note, one of the few that resemble an actual “note to self,” we can see the survival of Handke’s general policy of careful and self-critical use of language:

Aufpassen, keine Lieblingswendungen zu kriegen ⁴⁸⁴

Still other fragments approach something resembling the literary-philosophical aphorisms of Lichtenberg or Schlegel, but usually with a more ambiguous, poetic character:

Was für ein schöner Satz: “Ich weiß nicht mehr!” ⁴⁸⁵

Fortschritt in der Kunst: das Unheimliche nicht mehr zu brauchen ⁴⁸⁶

Wenn im Lauf des Tages Sprache entsteht, wird, zu Bewußtsein kommt, gefunden wird: Belebung der toten Natur ⁴⁸⁷

Some of these latter fragments offer glimpses of Handke’s attempts to refine his personal literary, writerly vision—not on the basis of critical discourse or theoretical concerns, but in reaction to his own private experiences. As noted earlier, part of the critical reception that saw Handke as solipsistic is related to his aloofness to the prevailing themes of contemporary literary debates. The literary commentary peppered through *Das Gewicht der Welt* can be seen as part of Handke’s attempt to retreat from the critical dialogues of literary culture, into a personal, reflective space—a space that would provide him with the perspective allowing

⁴⁸³Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁸⁴Ibid., p. 275.

⁴⁸⁵Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁸⁶Ibid., p. 307.

⁴⁸⁷Ibid., p. 310.

him to reassess his own ideas of literature based on his personal experience as a mediator between language and the world.

Towards the end of the book, another short fragment seems to sum up the accumulated aesthetic reflections of the previous pages:

Literatur: die noch nicht vom Sinn besetzten Orte ausfindig machen ⁴⁸⁸

Literary writing is presented here as the potential use of language to map reality—to make its presence known, to register it and make it accessible to language—*without* reducing epistemological phenomena to a logical or rational order. This can be seen as a continuation of Handke's defense of literary discourse against that of science, psychology, and politics. It also corresponds to Handke's project with *Das Gewicht der Welt*, and seems to characterize his notebook writing as a pure literary act—which is curious, considering that the work's genesis stemmed from Handke's decision to forego his original purpose of gathering *literary* material, and choosing explicitly to document those fragments of everyday experience that had little or no literary value. Through the process of collecting these fragments, Handke seems to come to a new understanding of literature, seeing it less as a unified aesthetic creation that can exist separate from one's perceptions, and more as a set of active and animate representational connections between the linguistic order and the phenomena of lived experience. Though much was made of the neo-romantic flightiness exhibited by Handke in this phase of his career, it should be noted that his understanding of literature became less oriented around fiction and fabulation, and more grounded in the subjective perceptual data of lived experience—although, admittedly, filtered through the refracting lenses of subjective affect and private mysticism.

⁴⁸⁸Ibid., p. 276.

More than anything, *Das Gewicht der Welt* marks Handke's turn towards an impressionistic use of language, by which literature becomes the act of fitting words together to represent the pointillist, pre-rational reality of life—a practice he would continue in subsequent decades. This change also involves a diffusion of Handke's concentration on language into a general metaphysics of literature: Handke begins to explore new aspects of storytelling, images, time, and tempo—undergoing in 1979 what he called “die Erleuchtung der Langsamkeit,” by which slowness becomes for Handke “ein Lebens- und Schreibprinzip”⁴⁸⁹—leading him to a pseudo-mystical conception of the acts of reading and writing.

This metaphysical diffusion of his ideas about language did not, however, entail a weakening of his writerly commitment to linguistic issues. In a 1979 interview (published in English translation), Handke affirms that language remains “the only thing that concerns [him] as a writer,” and speaks of language as something necessary, but also as something that can easily be misused, and must be redeemed through literature—connecting back to his earlier defense of poetic language against the language of scientists and theoreticians:

Most language which presents itself as language is no longer language. There is almost no language any more. It is only when I live and have a feeling that there is a future, that language appears, not only for me as a writer. Language is the most valuable thing there is. Most people have no language at all. There is a sigh of relief through the masses when there is someone who has a language. What is this language? I believe this language is only poetic language. That is what language means. All other languages are a set of rules, routines. At its best such language is a routine of living. But normally it is something that kills and closes in; it is something aggressive, something evil. Even when I talk with psychoanalysts, or theologians, or with almost everyone, I think that what they have as language is evil. Only someone who has a design of man

⁴⁸⁹Quoted in: Georg Pichler, *Die Beschreibung des Glücks. Peter Handke : Eine Biografie*. Vienna: Ueberreuter, 2002, p. 129.

also has a friendly, an open, a precise language. There are, of course, a few theologians and philosophers who know this, who know that their language is stuck in conventions. The only thing which is valid for me, where I feel very powerful—powerful without power—is when I succeed in finding form with language. I think language for me is form, and form is permanence, because otherwise there is no permanence in human existence.⁴⁹⁰

Handke's initial linguistic skepticism from the late sixties and early seventies continues to be refined and recalibrated: here, he states that language, although normally misused, becomes something indispensable to human understanding when it is used correctly. Instead of focusing on the misuses of language in syntax or technique, Handke concentrates on identifying the extremely specific use of language that he sees as "true," or "real," and which in turn guide his writing through the late seventies and early eighties. This topic often appears in *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts* (1982)—Handke's second collection of journal fragments, following the model of *Das Gewicht der Welt*—with a particular focus on the act of writing:

Richtiges Schreiben: entweder schreibe ich gleich mit dem Erlebnis mit, oder es ist ein langes, wiederfindendes Rekapitulieren⁴⁹¹

Die poetische Sprache hält mich auf der Erde. Sie macht mich erdenschwer, nicht meteorschwer. Aber sie verhindert auch, daß ich ballonleicht werde⁴⁹²

"Nach innen gehen" (Empedokles), hieße ja: ganz ins Innere der *Sprache* gehen; und im Innersten der Sprache wären Welt und Ich eins in der Sprache⁴⁹³

⁴⁹⁰June Schlueter, "An Interview with Peter Handke". *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, 4.1, 1980, pp. 67-8.

⁴⁹¹Peter Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*. Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz, 1982, p. 121.

⁴⁹²Ibid., p. 175.

⁴⁹³Ibid., p. 182.

Das Schöne, das in der Sprache (oder sonst einer Form) Antwort findet, erhält Wirklichkeitskraft. Das Bös-Häßliche ist mit der Sprache von vornherein eins, und also ohne Wirklichkeitskraft — es übt nur seine Gewalt aus ⁴⁹⁴

Die Mühe des Schreibens: ein Wort schwirrt auf aus all dem Sprachmist und setzt sich wieder, aber an den richtigen Ort ⁴⁹⁵

Meide das Sprachdenken, bleib bei den Dingen und ihrem Schien. So *wird* die wirkliche Sprache, so wird die Sprache wirklich. ⁴⁹⁶

During the heights of Handke's so-called "mystical" period, his engagement with issues of language remains at the center of his thinking. These reflections on language are one more instance of a shift in his understanding of the external parameters that determine linguistic function: this time, towards an attempt to refine his practice of writing into a quest for linguistic authenticity.

In addition to this focus on the search for a "true" language, Handke also begins to approach language on a more personal level: as something that functions differently depending on one's personal experience of learning, hearing, seeing, speaking, reading, and writing in one or more languages. These developments can be seen across Handke's works from the late seventies and early eighties: from the narrator/Cézanne-fan's epiphanic opening to "das Reich der Wörter" during a pilgrimage to the Mont Sainte-Victoire in *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*,⁴⁹⁷ to the discussion of bilingualism as effectuating a "schmerzhaftes Gespaltenheit" in *Kindergeschichte*,⁴⁹⁸ culminating in the border-crossing linguistic quest narrated in *Die Wiederholung* (1986). In the latter book, perhaps the most mature and coherent product of

⁴⁹⁴Ibid., p. 202.

⁴⁹⁵Ibid., p. 211.

⁴⁹⁶Ibid., p. 212.

⁴⁹⁷Peter Handke, *Die Lehre der Sainte-Victoire*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980, p. 115.

⁴⁹⁸Peter Handke, *Kindergeschichte*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981, p. 115.

Handke's mystical period, language is presented as ineluctably connected to the multiple levels of personal identity: as an individual, as a member of a family, and as a member of a nation. During a voyage to Slovenia, the protagonist Filip Kobal—another stand-in for Handke, who had made a similar trip when he was a teenager—undergoes a transformative experience triggered by the conflict arising between memories of his native tongue and his experiences with Slovenian. In the early eighties, after having moved to Salzburg from Paris, Handke—whose family has Slovenian roots, and who grew up in the bilingual countryside of southern Carinthia, learning basic Slovenian in school⁴⁹⁹—began formal study of Slovenian, a language he knew only imperfectly, partly in order to translate Florjan Lipuš's *The Errors of Young Tjaz*.⁵⁰⁰ It is likely that the young Kobal's experience with Slovenian in *Die Wiederholung* is at least partly a reflection of Handke's own experience, both as a language learner and as a translator, allowing him to continue his engagement with the personal aspects of language and linguistic experience.

Carrying his deceased brother's Slovenian-German dictionary with him on his journey, Kobal studies the language, and begins to filter his experience of the country through it. Like Handke, Kobal comes from a family with Slovenian roots; however, as Kobal explains, the deep affinity he feels with the Slovenian people is not only due to ancestry, but also to the character of their language:

Wie nicht sich jenem unbekanntem Volk zuzählen wollen, das für Krieg, Obrigkeit und Triumphzüge sozusagen nur Lehnwörter hat, aber einen Namen schafft für das Unscheinbarste, ob, im Haus, den Raum unter der Fensterbank oder,

⁴⁹⁹For an overview of Handke's childhood experience with Slovenian at home and in school, see: Fabjan Hafner, *Peter Handke : Unterwegs ins Neunte Land*. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay, 2008, pp. 54-9.

⁵⁰⁰See: *Ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

Handke's translation, *Der Zögling Tjaz*, was published in 1984. See: Florjan Lipuš, *Der Zögling Tjaz*. Trans. by Peter Handke. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984.

draußen auf dem Feldweg, die vom gebremsten Wagenrad glänzende Stelle am Stein [...]”⁵⁰¹

His enthusiasm for the new language is such that each word evokes an entire history, and the dictionary appears to him as “[eine] Sammlung von Ein-Wort-Märchen, mit der Kraft von Weltbildern,”⁵⁰² which transport him to novel realms of inner experience: “Jeder Wortkreis ein Weltkreis!”⁵⁰³ Instead of the limits of language being the limits of one’s world, each word contains its own, unlimited world.

Kobal clarifies that his personal reaction is not simply a case of the novelty of the Slovenian word pitted against the detested familiarity of the German; rather, it develops as an effect of the interlingual space opening up between the two languages:

Ergriff der Lesende aber nicht Partei für die andere Sprache, gegen seine eigene? Schrieb er nur dem Slowenischen, und nicht auch seinem Deutschen, jene Ein-Wort-Zauberkraft zu? — Nein, es waren doch die beiden Sprachen zusammen, die Einwörter links und die Umschreibungen rechts, welche den Raum, Zeichen um Zeichen, krümmten, winkelten, maßen, umrissen, errichteten.⁵⁰⁴

In Kobal’s experience, the Babylonian mixing of languages becomes something clarifying instead of confusing, and his brother’s dictionary is transformed into a “Weisheitsbuch,” capable of helping him repair his fractured connection to his own land and language. Kobal’s confrontation with the language of the other has a purifying effect, as Fabjan Hafner describes it: “Durch Wörter, die linguistisch knapp definiert sind, als Lemmata im Lexikon einer unentfremdeten Weltsicht, wird die eigene [...] im Spiegel einer anderen Sprache gereinigt und erneuert.”⁵⁰⁵ This is a progression from the reverse purification of language by

⁵⁰¹ Peter Handke, *Die Wiederholung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 202.

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 205.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., p. 206.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 207.

⁵⁰⁵ Hafner, *Peter Handke : Unterwegs ins Neunte Land*, p. 173.

perception, as Handke described in his foreword to *Das Gewicht der Welt*: here, Kobal's experience in the interlingual space opened by his brother's dictionary represents a cyclical form of redemption, by which language and perception are both redeemed, mutually, by way of their reflection in the symbolic order of the foreign.

In contrast to his euphoric experience of the Slovenian language, Kobal thinks back to his doubts, as a youth, regarding the representational power of language (which seems to be an allusion to the younger Handke's linguistic skepticism): "Warum wurde der Zwanzigjährige schon müde allein bei der Vorstellung, irgendein Gegenüber könnte den Mund auf tun? Warum verbannte ihn das Sprechen, auch das eigene, so oft in eine schalltote Bürgerstube? [. . .] Warum stellten die Wörter nichts mehr da?"⁵⁰⁶ Leaving these doubts behind, Kobal's experience of Slovenian in *Die Wiederholung* resembles the discovery of a linguistic utopia, where a word exists for everything:

Ja, es gab das eine Wort für die heitere Stelle am bewölkten Himmel, das Hin- und Herrennen des Rindviehs, wenn es bei großer Hitze von der Bremse gestochen wird, das jäh aus dem Ofen hervorbrechende Feuer, das Wasser der gekochten Birnen, den Stirnfleck eines Stiers, den Mann, der sich auf allen vieren aus dem Schnee arbeitet, die Frau, die sich die Sommerkleider anlegt [. . .]. Ja, das war es, das Wort!⁵⁰⁷

Throughout *Die Wiederholung*, Filip Kobal's experience of Slovenian as a transcendent language is dependent on his own personal identity: it is a compound result of his alienation from his fellow countrymen, his yearning for his missing brother, and the thrill of strangeness. The underlying idea is not that Slovenian is a transcendent language, but that, for Kobal, it has the capability of becoming such. In *Die Wiederholung*, Handke's transcendent model of

⁵⁰⁶Handke, *Die Wiederholung*, p. 210.

⁵⁰⁷Ibid., p. 208.

language has less to do with any mystical character of words as such, but rather with the transcendent potential that certain words—in certain languages—can have in a particular situation. The book is not a celebration of language per se, but is rather an affirmation of the potential for profundity lurking beneath language's mundane surface.

Confirmation of this comes later in the book, when Kobal speaks of language's occasional dysfunction due to environmental circumstances. When trying to describe the cypresses and oleanders of southern Slovenia, Kobal remarks upon the difficulty of using words of one's native tongue that were not a part of one's upbringing: “‘Oleander’, ‘Zypresse’, ‘Lorbeer’ – nicht meine Wörter – bin nicht mit ihnen aufgewachsen – habe nie in der Umgebung des von ihnen Gemeinten gelebt – unsereiner kennt den Lorbeer höchstens als getrocknetes Blatt in der Suppe.”⁵⁰⁸ Against the earlier moments of transcendence, Handke illustrates an instance where language has the capacity to be alienating and disruptive to experience: “Möchte ich von einer Palme erzählen, die mir, als ich vor ihr stand, ein Erlebnis war, so kommt mir das Fremdwort ‘Palme’ dazwischen, mit dem der Baum selbst, samt Schuppenstamm und klatschenden Fächern, mir entschwindet.”⁵⁰⁹ For Handke, via Kobal, the function of a word, including its potential for transcendence, depends on the language user's personal history. Language devolves to a collection of empty signifiers when not grounded in personal experience—when not secured by a personal connection drawn by the language user between words and perception: “Nach wie vor ist es mir nicht geheuer, Dinge zu erwähnen, die dem Kind bloße Namen oder überhaupt unbekannt waren. Ja, auch alles Städtische will dem, dessen Kindheit auf dem Land vor sich ging, nur schwer von den Lippen und von der Hand,

⁵⁰⁸Ibid., p. 252.

⁵⁰⁹Ibid.

or der ‘Hauptplatz’, der ‘Park’ oder das ‘Hochhaus’.”⁵¹⁰ In this way, *Die Wiederholung* destabilizes Handke’s search for “die wirkliche Sprache,” localizing linguistic function in its contingent relation to personal identity.

It is perhaps this relinquishing of the conception of language as a universal symbolic order that allows Handke to achieve a deeper reconciliation with language. Through Kopal, Handke affirms not only the potential of language, but also the necessity of language as a mediating force for the individual inhabitant of the world: “Denn ohne die Wortwinkel ist die Erde, die schwarze, die rote, die begrünte eine einzige Wüste, und kein Drama, kein Geschichts-Drama will ich mehr gelten lassen als das von den Dingen und Wörtern der lieben Welt.”⁵¹¹ A world without language becomes a world without meaning, and an individual’s search for meaning becomes a quest to find the right words for things: “Ich werde einen Ausdruck finden für das dunkle Innere einer weißen Kastanienblüte, das Gelb des Lehms unter dem nassen Schnee, das Überbleibsel der Blüte am Apfel und den Laut des aufspringenden Fisches im Fluß!”⁵¹² Compared with the ambivalence Handke shows regarding language throughout the first decade of his career, *Die Wiederholung* represents a profound reconciliation. Language is no longer the veil that hides reality—“das Glas der Sprache” that must be “zerschlagen”—nor is it simply the “gesamtgesellschaftlichen Sprachfundus” that can be accessed in order to tell a communicable story. In *Die Wiederholung*, language has ceased to be an alien system of symbols, and has become something properly human, something that, in the right circumstances (as in Kopal’s experience), can become “die gültige Überlieferung, die Überlieferung des Friedens.”⁵¹³

⁵¹⁰Ibid.

⁵¹¹Ibid., pp. 219-20.

⁵¹²Ibid., p. 220.

⁵¹³Ibid., p. 215.

5. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann: ‘Ihr nennt es Sprache’

In the first pages of his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, Fritz Mauthner describes how language sets limits on human experience: “Mit dem Worte stehen die Menschen am Anfang der Welterkenntnis und sie bleiben stehen, wenn sie beim Worte bleiben.” Mauthner invites the adventurous individual to engage in a struggle against the cognitive domination of language, in order to liberate thought from the constrictions of linguistic form: “Wer weiter schreiten will, auch nur um den kleinwinzigen Schritt, um welchen die Denkarbeit eines ganzen Lebens weiter bringen kann, der muß sich vom Worte befreien und vom Wortaberglauben, der muß seine Welt von der Tyrannei der Sprache zu erlösen versuchen.”⁵¹⁴ Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, for whom Mauthner was an important theoretical influence, enacted this struggle across his short literary career—from his first volume of poetry, *Ihr nennt es Sprache*, published in 1962, to the numerous posthumous works published after his tragic death in 1975.

Brinkmann’s neo-Mauthnerian language model was not static, however, and underwent

⁵¹⁴Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache I*, p. 1.

a gradual transformation across these years: the neo-romantic language skepticism of his early poetry, reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century *Sprachkrise*, modulates into a general antagonism towards culture, with language seen as the mere transmitter of deeper cultural ills. For Brinkmann, postwar West German culture was hopelessly staid and conservative when compared with the artistic and countercultural movements taking place in America; the plain language and unpretentious attitude of certain American poets inspired him to reclaim simple speech through his poetry. This shift in thinking liberated Brinkmann from his earlier formal and linguistic constrictions, and eventually led him towards a method of direct, descriptive writing from experience. However, Brinkmann never completely escapes his doubts as to language's ultimate ability to represent experience: the Mauthnerian understanding of language's deadening domination remains a constantly unsettling specter haunting his writing. In his last writings, his various theoretical and stylistic influences find expression in a motley mix of prose, poetry, photography and collage. Sadly, apart from the poetry volume *Westwärts 1 & 2*, Brinkmann's late work would remain in an unfinished state: when, at 35, he was struck and killed by a city bus in London, he left thousands of pages of unpublished material for his widow, Maleen, to edit and publish.

Underlying the persistence of the Mauthnerian influence is Brinkmann's preoccupation with extraverbal experience. His early writing presents language as a hopelessly inadequate tool for representing the natural world, while his later writing is obsessed with the idea that sensory input can be cerebrally processed on a nonverbal level, obviating language. "Jetzt kommen die Zeiten der Gehirnerfahrungen," he prophesied in the early seventies, "Abbiegen, weg von den Wörtern."⁵¹⁵ While sharing much of Heißenbüttel's skepticism

⁵¹⁵Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten. Prosa Erzählungen Essays Hörspiele Fotos Collagen*

regarding linguistic representation, Brinkmann did not believe in the linguistic determination of the subject, and had no respect for works of language-critical demonstration; opposed to resignation in the face of linguistic abstraction, he opts instead for a Mauthnerian writing that strives forcefully against the limits of language.

Contextualizing Brinkmann is difficult due to his fiercely independent, and often arrogant self-positioning within the postwar German literary scene. In both age and aesthetic orientation he has much in common with Handke: both explicitly rejected the demands of politically engaged literature and distanced themselves from the student movement, both made a point of antagonizing the old guards of the West German literary establishment, both were open to Western pop culture, music, and film, and were influenced by contemporary American and French writers, and both were deeply concerned with issues of language. However, Brinkmann adamantly rejected any attempt to group him with a certain school or trend of writing, and preferred to be seen as an isolated figure, pursuing a radically different literary project than that of any other postwar germanophone writer:

weder gehöre ich dem westdeutschen Berliner Klan, der vorwiegend politisch orientiert ist (Delius, Born, Buch, Piwitt, Karsunke) noch gehöre ich dem Wiener Klan an (der vorwiegend formalistisch-sprachorientiert arbeitet) (Wiener, Handke, Rühm, Bayer), [...] den Trends und Themen der älteren Generation (Heißenbüttel, Becker, Enzensberger, Walser) die alle ein Gruppe 47 Klan sind, kann man das, was ich mache, schon lange nicht zuzählen [...]⁵¹⁶

Brinkmann likewise denies belonging to the Cologne-based *Neuer Realismus* movement in which he had been grouped since his first prose publications; this appellation was devised by Dieter Wellershoff, according to Brinkmann, simply as a marketing tool to promote the

1965-1974. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1982, p. 243.

⁵¹⁶Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut : 1974-1975*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1999, p. 138.

young writers he was publishing at Kiepenheuer & Witsch (including Brinkmann, Nicolas Born, Günter Herburger, Günter Steffens, Paul Pörtner, and Günter Seuren).⁵¹⁷

Apart from Gottfried Benn (and in the last few years before his death, Ludwig Tieck, Karl Philipp Moritz, and Arno Schmidt) Brinkmann expressed nothing but contempt for German literature, criticizing in particular the distanced dullness of German poetry: “Die deutsche Lyrik war mir äußerst widerwärtig und langweilig, immer Gräser, Natur, Gefühle, künstliche Metaphern, unkonkret, viehlosophisch, elend gebosselt intellektuell auf die deutsche Bosselart — was hatte das mit mir zu tun, was ich sah, fühlte, was mich einfach jeden Tag umgab?”⁵¹⁸ His antagonism was also directed at German critics, and Brinkmann soon acquired the deserved reputation of an *enfant terrible* of the German literary scene. In 1968, during a perhaps ill-advised symposium at the Berlin Akademie der Künste, wherein writers were allowed to publicly confront their critics, Brinkmann attacked Marcel Reich-Ranicki as a symbol of the worst elements of literary-critical culture, threatening him with the now legendary phrase, “Wenn dieses Buch ein Maschinengewehr wäre, würde ich Sie jetzt über den Haufen schießen!”⁵¹⁹ Reich-Ranicki was shocked by the violence of Brinkmann’s outburst, but the young writer had made his point: his intention was not to write *for* the critical apparatus, but rather *against* it—the literary establishment was the natural enemy of any writer that wanted to progress beyond the status quo.

In his attempts to develop a new, progressive German writing that would free itself

⁵¹⁷“Damals, aus Werbegründen, erfand der Lektor 1966 beim Verlag K&W den Werbeslogan vom ‘neuen Realismus’ (D. Wellershoff), und da habe ich dann seither dauernd mich mit diesem Werbeslogan auseinandersetzen müssen, bzw. habe das nicht getan, bin aber oft deswegen angesprochen worden (belästigt worden) [...]” [Ibid., p. 126.] See also: Christa Merkes, *Wahrnehmungsstrukturen in Werken des Neuen Realismus: Theorie und Praxis des Neuen Realismus und des nouveau roman – eine Gegenüberstellung*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1982, *Deutsche Sprache und Literatur* 567, pp. 14 ff.

⁵¹⁸Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, pp. 39-40.

⁵¹⁹See: Carius, *Schnitte im Atemschutz*, p. 35.

from the deadening effects of inherited literary conventions, Brinkmann saw himself as an isolated figure. While he acknowledged a certain affinity between his work and that of other contemporary Germanophone writers like Handke, Peter Chotjewitz, Nicolas Born, Hubert Fichte, Uwe Brandner, and Wolf Wondratschek,⁵²⁰ his admiration was reserved solely for his international influences: primarily, the American poets who exerted such an enormous influence on him, as well as the French writers of the *nouveau roman*. The simplicity of language in American poetry—especially that of William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara—reflected, from Brinkmann’s perspective, the openness and unpretentiousness of American culture, to which Brinkmann was strongly and idealistically attracted; this leads Brinkmann to shift the focus of his skepticism away from language, and towards the influence that culture (and specifically, West German culture) had on one’s use of language. From this point onwards, Brinkmann’s writing is involved in the attempt to bypass this cultural filter, in order to revitalize the German language by way of a simple and direct method of writing, similar to that of his American idols.

In the mid-sixties Robbe-Grillet’s influence was central to Brinkmann’s work, inspiring him towards his first experimental prose works: the short story collection *Die Umarmung* (1965) and his only novel *Keiner weiß mehr* (1968). According to Wellershof, at one point Brinkmann even declared Robbe-Grillet to be the de facto starting point for any modern writing: “Bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann ist es ganz eindeutig, daß er in seinen frühen Erzählungen dicht an Robbe-Grillet orientiert war. Er war damals der Meinung, jeder moderne Autor müsse dort anfangen, es sei die Voraussetzung für aktuelle Literatur, die Schreib-

⁵²⁰In doing so, Brinkmann also distances himself from “die Generation davor,” in which he includes Heißenbüttel, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Martin Walser, Günter Kunert, and Uwe Johnson. See: Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 145.

weise Robbe-Grillet rezipiert zu haben.”⁵²¹ Later on, however, Brinkmann repudiates his *nouveau-roman*-inspired prose works, describing them as “in einer ziemlich nervtötenden Beschreibungsart gehalten”⁵²²; based on the influence of the New York School poets, he distances himself from any theoretical programs for writing, and rejects avant-garde formalism, seeing it as a mere variation of the highbrow literary elitism he so detests. In the early seventies Brinkmann begins working on a more open, less formally determined prose, based in a journal-like documentation of everyday experience, as evidenced in the posthumously published volumes *Erkundungen für die Präzisierung des Gefühls für einen Aufstand: Träume Aufstände/Gewalt/Mode REISE ZEIT MAGAZIN (Tagebuch)* (published 1987), *Rom, Blicke* (published 1979), and *Schnitte* (published 1988).

Towards the end of the sixties, Brinkmann’s work also begins to reflect his increasing interest in visual images. He takes up photography, shoots Warhol-inspired short films,⁵²³ and introduces images—both his own photos and images cut-out from magazines and newspapers—into his written work. *Godzilla* (1968) pairs erotic poems with blown-up images of scantily clad women, while *Westwärts 1 & 2* (1975) includes twelve pages of his own photographs at the beginning and end of the volume. [See: Fig. 2] For Brinkmann, the image comes to represent the shortcomings of language, which can only offer a simulation of the visceral immediacy of visual experience: “Auf der einen Seite stehen das Wort und die negativ konnotierten Attribute, mit denen es von Brinkmann assoziiert wird: Abstraktion, Reflexion, Begrifflichkeit, Vergangenheit. Dem gegenüber sind dem Bild die positiv

⁵²¹From interview with Wellershoff, in: Merkes, *Wahrnehmungsstrukturen in Werken des Neuen Realismus: Theorie und Praxis des Neuen Realismus und des nouveau roman – eine Gegenüberstellung*, p. 243.

⁵²²Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 40.

⁵²³These strange, amateurish, and sometimes obscene films are collected in the docufiction film *Brinkmanns Zorn*: Harald Bergmann, *Brinkmanns Zorn*. Film recording, 2006.



Figure 2: Brinkmann's photography. From: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2. Gedichte*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2005.

besetzten Begriffe wie Sinnlichkeit, des konkreten Alltagsmaterials und der Gegenwart zu eigen."⁵²⁴ Brinkmann's experiments with photography and collage mark all of his late works, and present a challenge to the uncomplicated linguistic model he inherited from American writers, wherein literary writing functions as "der Film in Worten."⁵²⁵ His pairing of writing with images can be seen as a Mauthnerian attempt to push language beyond its representational boundaries. While images, photography, and film are of undoubted importance to Brinkmann's oeuvre, I will not be addressing the topic at length in this chapter.

The issue has been thoroughly covered in numerous existing scholarly works (and has

⁵²⁴Thomas von Steinaecker, *Literarische Foto-Texte. Zur Funktion der Fotografien in den Texten Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns, Alexander Kluges und W.G. Sebalds*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2007, p. 93.

⁵²⁵See: Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 229. The phrase is borrowed from Jack Kerouac's "Belief and Technique for Modern Prose": "Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form." See: Jack Kerouac, *Good Blonde & Others*. San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1993, p. 73.

especially been prevalent in recent scholarship)⁵²⁶; in focusing instead on Brinkmann's engagement with issues of language, I hope to offer an alternative hermeneutic approach to that of the numerous image-centric studies.

Apart from Wellershoff's *Neue Realisten*, Brinkmann is also grouped with the movement of *Neue Subjektivität*. Brinkmann didn't reject this characterization as vehemently as he had others, but he did question the general meaning and significance of the term. For Brinkmann, New Subjectivity had little to do with introversion and emotion, but was rather a rejection of the writer's responsibility to provide an objective, rational, universal representation of the world:

Neue Subjektivität, dieser Überbegriff meint ganz einfach: daß die Autoren, also auch ich, kein verbindliches, für alle verbindliches Weltbild mit ihren Arbeiten mehr liefern, sondern genau das Gegenteil: die einheitlichen erklärenden Weltbilder mit ihren Arbeiten (Gedichte, Romanen usw.) zersprengen [;] die einheitlichen Weltbilder waren ja nur wegen der Sprache und der Vermittlung der Sprache über Sprache vorhanden, also wegen des Glaubens an Wörter dh. Wie gehts dir: — wenn Du das sagst, ohne Rücksicht, dann ist das Neue Subjektivität.⁵²⁷

Brinkmann sees the idea of a universal literary *Weltbild* as a mere linguistic construct, and recommends writers to discard the concept and replace it with a form of direct writing, “ohne Rücksicht,” oblivious to any universal discourse. Despite his rejection of the

⁵²⁶See: Martin Grimzek, “‘Bild’ und ‘Gegenwart’ im Werk Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns : Ansätze zu einer Differenzierung”. *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 71, 1981; Hans-Thies Lehmann, “Schrift, Bild, Schnitt : Graphismus und die Erkundung der Sprachgrenzen bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann”. In Brinkmann, *Literaturmagazin 36 : Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*; Andreas Moll, *Text und Bild bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : Intermedialität im Spätwerk*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2006; Jan Röhnert, *Springende Gedanken und flackernde Bilder : Lyrik im Zeitalter der Kinematographie ; Blaise Cendrars, John Ashbery, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007; von Steinaecker, *Literarische Foto-Texte. Zur Funktion der Fotografien in den Texten Rolf Dieter Brinkmanns, Alexander Kluges und W.G. Sebalds*; Klaus Rümmele, *Zeichensprache : Text und Bild bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann und Pop-Autoren der Gegenwart*. Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2012; Stephanie Schmitt, *Intermedialität bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : Konstruktionen von Gegenwart an den Schnittstellen von Text, Bild und Musik*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2012.

⁵²⁷Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 148.

Neuer Realismus tag, Brinkmann's description of New Subjective writing echoes in part Wellershoff's program for *Neuer Realismus* from 1965, which outlines a form of writing with "keine metaphysischen Ansprüche," in which excerpts from daily life replace any universal *Weltanschauung*: "An Stelle der universellen Modelle des Daseins, überhaupt aller Allgemeinvorstellungen über den Menschen und die Welt tritt der sinnlich konkrete Erfahrungsausschnitt, das gegenwärtige alltägliche Leben in einen begrenzten Bereich."⁵²⁸ This program is played out in Brinkmann's work, in which description drawn from first-hand experience forms the foundation of literary writing.

Starting with an overview of his early poetry, I aim to show how Brinkmann's linguistic model changes through the influence of American writing. His early lamentations of language's limitations, reflecting the *Sprachkrise*-era thinking of figures like Mauthner and Hofmannsthal, gradually fall away, to be replaced by a technique of direct translation of subjective experience into casual descriptive language. In his last years, however, a fundamental skepticism regarding linguistic representation returns to complicate Brinkmann's neo-American poetics, resulting in an unruly and heterogeneous literary practice that reflects his conflicting thoughts about language.

“Die Sprache der Steine”: Early Poems

For those readers familiar only with the freewheeling openness of his later work, the restrained character of the poems in *Ihr nennt es Sprache* (1962) may come as a surprise. Employing a tight economy of word and phrase, short lines, uniform stanzas, and a spare and

⁵²⁸From "Neuer Realismus"; in: Wellershoff, *Werke 4*, p. 843.

controlled lyrical voice, these poems have more in common with Trakl and Benn than the American poets that later influenced Brinkmann. Several of the poems address the subject of language directly, expressing a neo-romantic lamentation at language's insufficiencies, and sometimes passing over into a longing for an original *Natursprache*. The volume's title hints at the antagonistic stance Brinkmann would later adopt: addressing an anonymous second-person plural, implying that what "they" call language and what Brinkmann calls language are two different things.

"Das Schweigen" presents a fairly standard, almost Gothic evocation of silence and speechlessness:

[...] die Sprache
schwärzt die Leute an die
haben keine Stimmen
mehr dem Mund
ist leer das
Ohr vernahm
ein Schweigen⁵²⁹

Another poem, "Von der Gegenständlichkeit eines Gedichtes", gets more specific about language's inadequacies, stating that grammar and syntax do not correspond to the details of nature, and that description functions through simplification:

die angewandte Grammatik enthält
nichts über Wetteraussichten
und sie mißt dem
Vogelflug nicht die geheime Formel bei
[...]

⁵²⁹Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Standphotos : Gedichte 1962-1970*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1980, p. 21.

das Blattgrün ist fehlerlos die
Bäume verbergen der
vorhandenen Sprache
die innere Wildnis⁵³⁰

The poem asserts that any poetic description of nature necessarily excludes details, presenting the world as a simplified cartoon—i.e., to say a leaf is “green” is to deny the brown and black flecks that may also be there. The poem expresses despair at ever achieving an adequate linguistic representation of the simplest of nature scenes, and also portrays humanity as cognitively estranged from nature, as Sibylle Späth points out: “Brinkmann verweist hier den Menschen aus dem Dialog mit der Natur und definiert sie als etwas Fremdes, Eigenständiges, das sich dem einführenden Verständnis wie der projizierenden Deutung entzieht.”⁵³¹ In this poem as in others, Brinkmann seems to follow Walter Benjamin’s connection of language with the Biblical fall of man, in which human language involves an alienation from both nature and the “reine Sprache des Namens.”⁵³² In presenting a hierarchy in which “der konkreten Realität eine höhere Bedeutung zugestanden wird als den literarischen,”⁵³³ the poem foreshadows Brinkmann’s later preoccupation with extraverbal cerebral processing of experience, as well as his later habit of intruding on his own literary and critical writing with immediate reportage of what he sees out his window and in his apartment.⁵³⁴

The poem that gives the volume its name, “Ihr nennt es Sprache oder Spiegel an der Wand”, addresses language in relation to German culture, and presents the image of language

⁵³⁰Ibid., p. 17.

⁵³¹Sibylle Späth, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1989, *Sammlung Metzler* 254, p. 13.

⁵³²See: Walter Benjamin, “Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen”. In *Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2/I*. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.

⁵³³Späth, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*, p. 11.

⁵³⁴See discussion of “Angriff aufs Monopol” below.

as a mirror for national self-examination:

Ihr nennt es Sprache
oder Spiegel an der Wand
wo ist des Deutschen Vaterland
und wo des Königs von Thule
Herzliebchen
der Mond

den Eichendorff besang
ging längst hinüber ins Unbekannt [. . .]⁵³⁵

In evoking the Magic Mirror from Snow White—the mirror that affirms to the Evil Queen that she is, indeed, the fairest in the land—Brinkmann suggests that language can be used to support narcissistic delusions, whether individual or cultural. The reference to the German “Vaterland” applies this to the case of German national identity—a customary theme for writers in the postwar Adenauer years of national reconstruction. The reference to Thule evokes not only the Goethe poem, “Der König in Thule” (in which the king’s “Herzliebchen” has passed away) but also the *Thule-Gesellschaft*, a group of Nazi occultists that saw the mythical island of Thule as the birthplace of the Aryan race.⁵³⁶ The reference to Eichendorff presents the spirit of Romanticism as another aspect of German identity that has died away. At the poem’s end, Brinkmann suggests that a return to this idealized image of a Germany is ultimately impossible:

ist niemand da
der wollte zurück

⁵³⁵Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 29.

⁵³⁶See: Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism and the Politics of Identity*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2002, pp. 114 ff.

dann nennt ihr es Sprache
ein Spiegel an der Wand
wer ist die Schönste
im ganzen Land

DIE SPRACHE DER STEINE
UND WIR HABEN KEINE⁵³⁷

From Goethe, to Eichendorff, to the *Thule-Gesellschaft*, German national identity has existed as stories, and as words on a page written in a language that no longer corresponds to the current state of the world.⁵³⁸ As in some of his last poems, Brinkmann presents his cultural critique in terms of language. The last two lines, separated by a line break and set in capitals, seem to pass judgment on the rest of the poem: the “SPRACHE DER STEINE” continues the nature theme from “Von der Gegenständlichkeit eines Gedichtes”, implying that nature possesses a true language that “we” can no longer understand, and that the language “we” possess functions only as a vessel to support narcissistic fantasies. The theme of the speaking silence of nature also recalls the *Sprachskepsis* expressed in Rilke’s early poem “Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort”: “Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern. / Ihr rührt sie an: sie sind starr und stumm.”⁵³⁹ The poems of *Ihr nennt es Sprache* reflect this longing for preverbal consciousness, but at the same time, as Judith Poppe points out, Brinkmann looks critically at language, and wishes to demystify its function: “Metaphysische Sehnsucht nach dem ‘wortlosen Raum’ und nach einer den Dingen inhärenten Sprache auf der einen Seite, auf der anderen Seite Demythologisierung von Sprache — die Ambivalenz die hier

⁵³⁷Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 29.

⁵³⁸Here I’m following from Agnes C. Mueller’s reading; see: Agnes C. Mueller, *Lyrik “made in USA” : Vermittlung und Rezeption in der Bundesrepublik*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999, *Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft* 36, p. 103.

⁵³⁹Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, p. 194.

aufgemacht wird, zieht sich durch Brinkmanns gesamtes Werk.”⁵⁴⁰ The poems also reflect the conflict between Brinkmann’s Mauthnerian will to smash language’s limitations and his desire to recover the true, transcendent words to communicate his experience⁵⁴¹: “Die existierende, falsche Sprache [...] muss zunächst aufgelöst, dekonstruiert werden, die Sehnsucht nach einer ‘ursprünglichen’ Sprache aber bleibt.”⁵⁴²

Brinkmann’s next poetry volume, *Le Chant du Monde* (1963), features several poems that continue to express neo-romantic lamentations of language, as in “Immer mehr Worte”, in which Brinkmann complains about the limits language sets on his expressive faculties:

[...] dann
müßte die Sprache leicht
sein wie der Tod
und so schnell: es
gibt zuvieles
was ich nicht
sagen kann.⁵⁴³

Other poems express a similar regret, but also a disdain for language, as in “Schlaf”, which presents words as cheap substitutes for real things:

[...] Hunde
die als Wörter
durch die Hände
rinnen

⁵⁴⁰Jan Röhnert and Gunter Geduldig, editors, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : seine Gedichte in Einzelinterpretationen*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012, p. 28.

⁵⁴¹This tension can also be seen in much of Peter Handke’s work.

⁵⁴²Ibid.

⁵⁴³Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 37.

Wörter, die
rosa Tiere aus Plastik.⁵⁴⁴

In the short poem “Kurzzeiliges Bild” Brinkmann adopts a more hostile tone of *Sprachnegation*, implying that language and writing are ultimately worthless:

Von früh
bis spät
ein Wort nach
dem andren
und am Ende
steht nichts.⁵⁴⁵

The majority of the poems in this volume seem resigned to the innate inferiority of linguistic representation to material reality; however, amid these negative poems, there is a short, imagistic poem entitled “Photographie” that can be seen as one of Brinkmann’s first experiments in direct, descriptive poetic writing:

Mitten
auf der Straße
die Frau
in dem
blauen
Mantel.⁵⁴⁶

While critical opinions differ as to the significance of this poem—whether it is meant as an imitation of photography and an affirmation of imagistic language, or an ironic

⁵⁴⁴Ibid., p. 47.

⁵⁴⁵Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁴⁶Ibid., p. 52.

demonstration of language's inferiority to photography⁵⁴⁷—Brinkmann would go on to produce further poems in this style, such as “Einfaches Bild” from *Was fraglich ist wofür* (1967), which Brinkmann later describes as an attempt to express feelings in an objective manner: “Worum mir damals ging, waren Empfindungen ganz dinglich-konkret zu sagen.”⁵⁴⁸ This poem repeats the basic premise of “Photographie” while increasing the visual detail and strengthening the presence of the observing subject:

Ein Mädchen
in
schwarzen
Strümpfen
schön, wie
sie
herankommt
ohne Laufmaschen.
Ihr Schatten
auf
der Straße
ihr Schatten
an
der Mauer.
Schön, wie
sie
fortgeht
in schwarzen
Strümpfen
ohne
Laufmaschen

⁵⁴⁷See: Röhnert and Geduldig, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : seine Gedichte in Einzelinterpretationen*, pp. 53-5.

⁵⁴⁸Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 41.

bis unter
den Rock.⁵⁴⁹

From the reflective rumination and alienation from language of his earlier poems, Brinkmann has progressed towards an observational poetic voice based in visual description and a clear first-person perspective; the voice has also become more prosaic, and remains casual despite being delineated into poetic form. In the above poem, this perspective is that of the flaneur, or voyeur—and indeed, Späth places “Einfaches Bild” in a tradition of observational *Großstadtlyrik*, from Baudelaire’s “À une passante” to Benn’s “Untergrundbahn” and Williams’s “The Girl”.⁵⁵⁰ In its simplicity of language, Brinkmann’s poem bears the strongest resemblance to that of Williams,⁵⁵¹ and Brinkmann explicitly credits the language of American poetry with having helped him transcend the conceptual density of the German language:

Mir hat die amerikanische Sprachhaltung, einfach und direkt etwas zu sagen, sehr gefallen und hat mich beeindruckt. Ich habe darin einen größeren Freiraum gesehen, etwa bei solch einem Programm wie bei W. C. Williams: “No ideas but in things”, selbst wenn das so direkt gar nicht in der deutschen überlasteten, mit Begriffen und weltanschaulichen Abstraktionen (unsinnlichen Begriffen) überlasteten Sprache möglich ist.⁵⁵²

Via American writing, Brinkmann comes to understand his early *Sprachkrise* not as a crisis of linguistic representation itself, but as an effect of the German language and its complex structures of conceptual abstraction.

⁵⁴⁹Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 124.

⁵⁵⁰See: Späth, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*, pp. 16-7.

⁵⁵¹Williams’s “The Girl”: “with big breasts / under a blue sweater // bareheaded— / crossing the street // reading a newspaper / stops, turns // and looks down / as though // she had seen a dime / on the pavement” In: William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. 1: 1909-1939*. New York: New Directions, 1991, p. 444.

⁵⁵²Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 40.

Brinkmann's adoption of a subjective viewpoint in his poetry, which allows him to use language more intuitively to react to personal experience, also comes as a result of Brinkmann's American influence. In 1969 Brinkmann quotes an essay by Jonathan Cott, claiming that the new American writers "have discarded the exploded mythology and the half-truthful revelation and assume the Self as starting point in making issue with themselves and the world."⁵⁵³ For Brinkmann, this subjective turn does not entail an inwardness, a *Neue Innerlichkeit*, but is rather a turn outwards, away from the introversion of literary culture and lofty intellectual discourse, assuming the humble starting point of first-hand experience.

Along with American poetry, Brinkmann also identifies the influence of film on his writing from this period—specifically pointing to the foregrounding of mundane details in American film noir and gangster movies, which he groups alongside detective fiction:

B-Movie, meist Gangsterfilmen, [...] Bud Boettichers Legs Diamond Film [...] oder Don Siegels Tod eines Killers, oder Mickey Spillanes Bücher oder Ed McBain Romane [*sic*⁵⁵⁴], und zwischen 1962 und 1966 bin ich dauernd in die Spätvorstellungen gegangen [...], um mir diese oft rohen, ungebrochen gemachten Filme anzusehen, worin so befremdliche Aufnahmen waren, die mir wegen dieser genauen Beobachtungen und seltsamen und doch alltäglichen Details (etwa eine leere Metallmülltonne rollt lange eine morgendliche leere amerikan. Vorortstrasse entlang) mehr gezeigt haben als die schicken französ. Kunstfilme.⁵⁵⁵

This comment shows how Brinkmann's shift in poetic method—which becomes oriented around the same observational focus on "alltäglichen Details" that he sees in these B-movies and crime novels—also relates to his reception of popular and "low" culture, which he begins to see as superior to highbrow art. This championing of the low—which derives

⁵⁵³Quoted in: Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 235.

⁵⁵⁴Typos and misspellings were retained in the published transcriptions of Brinkmann's letters to his friend Hartmut Schnell, and I have kept them intact when quoting them here.

⁵⁵⁵Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 41.

partly from the influence of the lowbrow cultural references in the work of certain American poets—turns Brinkmann once and for all against European cultural sophistication, and compels him towards a poetry based on the immediate reflection of the everyday.

His next poetry collection, *Die Piloten* (1968), included several pages of prefatory critical remarks (labelled as a “Notiz”), in which Brinkmann presents his personal poetic program, touching on several linguistic themes. He states that his poems result from the attempt, “alle Vorurteile, was ein Gedicht darzustellen habe und wie es aussehen müsse, so ziemlich aus mir herauszuschreiben.”⁵⁵⁶ This clarifies Brinkmann’s shift towards a focus on the constrictions of literary culture, which replaces his earlier preoccupation with language. His active resistance to these cultural norms erupts in a hostility towards the literary establishment, and he has harsh words for the “Kerle [. . .], die sich Lyriker nennen lassen”: “Da sitzen sie, irgendwo unsichtbar, und haben mal irgendwas von sich gegeben, jetzt halten sie die Kulturellen Wörter besetzt, anstatt herumzugehen und sich vieles einmal anzusehen, lebende Tote [. . .].”⁵⁵⁷ The establishment German poets are presented here as distanced, invisible, out of touch with the real world, constructing poems out of culturally sanctioned buzzwords. He adds the cutting remark, “Die Texte der Fugs sind besser. Woran liegt das?” With this reference to the legendary New York psychedelic rock group headed by Ed Sanders and Tuli Kupferberg, Brinkmann makes it clear that his primary inspiration comes from the international countercultural underground, and not from established German writers.

Brinkmann presents the poem as a form ideally suited to transmitting direct, observational “snapshots” of personal experience: “Ich denke, daß das Gedicht die geeignetste

⁵⁵⁶Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 185.

⁵⁵⁷Ibid.

Form ist, spontan erfaßte Vorgänge und Bewegungen, eine nur in einem Augenblick sich deutlich zeigende Empfindlichkeit konkret als snap-shot festzuhalten.”⁵⁵⁸ The photographic metaphor speaks to Brinkmann’s increasing interest in photography and images, but also to his move towards a more visually descriptive mode of writing; this should be seen as a move away from the influence of Mauthner, who explicitly denied the possibility of language imitating the camera: “Die Sprache kann niemals zur Photographie der Welt werden, weil im Gehirn des Menschen Zwecke wohnen und die Sprache nach Nützlichkeitsgründen geformt haben.”⁵⁵⁹ Brinkmann’s proposal of literary “snap-shots” could be connected back to statements made by Arno Schmidt in the early fifties,⁵⁶⁰ and also reflects forwards several years to Handke’s project of “die spontane Aufzeichnung zweckfreier Wahrnehmungen” in *Das Gewicht der Welt*.⁵⁶¹ Brinkmann’s binding of literature to subjective perception has much in common with Schmidt’s technique of “längeres Gedankenspiel,”⁵⁶² as well as Handke’s writing of the early seventies; however, Brinkmann’s theory of perception is more firmly fixed on visual experience than Handke’s seventies aesthetics, and his focus on the perceptive *Bild* bears more in common with Handke’s later focus on the “Inbild” in the eighties.⁵⁶³ Like Handke, Brinkmann accentuates the importance of careful and precise

⁵⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache I*, p. 48.

⁵⁶⁰“*Mein Leben ? ! : ist kein Kontinuum ! [. . .] ein Tablett voll glitzender snapshots.*” From *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns* (1953), in: Arno Schmidt, *Bargfelder Ausgabe. Werkgruppe I: Romane Erzählungen Gedichte Juvenilia. Band 1*. Zürich: Haffmans, 1987, p. 301.

“Das ‘Fotoalbum’ ermöglicht nicht nur die vom Themenkreis geforderte scharfe Einstellung einzelner Bilder, sondern es gibt auch den Prozeß des ‘Erinnerns’ präzise wieder !” From “Berechnungen” (1953), in: Schmidt, *Bargfelder Ausgabe III/3*, p. 102.

⁵⁶¹Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt*, p. 5.

⁵⁶²See “Berechnungen I” and “Berechnungen II”, in: Schmidt, *Bargfelder Ausgabe III/3*, pp. 163 ff., 275 ff.

⁵⁶³See, for example: Handke and Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen*, pp. 31 ff. For more on the comparison of Brinkmann’s and Handke’s writing methods, see also: Jens Uthoff, *Flickermaschine und Leuchtschrift. Wahrnehmung und Bewusstsein in mediatisierten Lebensräumen bei Rolf Dieter Brinkmann und im Frühwerk Peter Handkes*. Bremen: Institut für Kulturwissenschaftliche Deutschlandstudien, 2011, pp. 15 ff.

perception, which may then find direct expression in the written word:

Jeder kennt das, wenn zwischen Tür und Angel, wie man so sagt, das, was man in dem Augenblick zufällig vor sich hat, zu einem sehr präzisen, festen, zugleich aber auch sehr durchsichtigen Bild wird, hinter dem nichts steht scheinbar isolierte Schnittpunkte. Da geht es nicht mehr um die Quadratur des Kreises, da geht es um das genaue Hinsehen, die richtige Einstellung zum Kaffeerest in der Tasse, während jemand reinkommt ins Zimmer und fragt, gehen wir heute Abend in die Spätvorstellung?⁵⁶⁴

Different than Handke, however, Brinkmann describes this form of reactive writing as “skrupellos”, while also equating it with a liberation from perceived ideas of art: “Man braucht nur skrupellos zu sein, das als Gedicht aufzuschreiben. [...] Sehen Sie hin, packen Sie das mal an, was fühlen Sie? Metall? Porzellan? Eine alte Kippe zwischen Zeigefinger und Mittelfinger! Und sonst geht es Ihnen gut? Man muß vergessen, daß es so etwas wie Kunst gibt! Und einfach einfangen.”⁵⁶⁵ Brinkmann’s program of direct writing entails the removal of the cultural filter that determines what art is, how it works, and what it should resemble, in order to enable an immediate link between perception and linguistic representation. Through the influence not only of American poetry, but also of rock music and gangster films, Brinkmann reconciles himself with language by identifying linguistic dysfunction as an effect of cultural norms, whose removal allows an uncomplicated use of language to express subjective experiences. In other words, language becomes reconciled with the world through the individual’s liberation from the distorting influence of culture.

There is an element to Brinkmann’s aesthetics here that is, as Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler would put it, “gut Wittgensteinisch gedacht”⁵⁶⁶: where the late Wittgenstein accused philosophers of sowing symbolic disorder by distancing words from their concrete meanings,

⁵⁶⁴Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 185.

⁵⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 185-6.

⁵⁶⁶See: Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, p. 264.

Brinkmann criticizes writers for doing the same thing. He breaks from the rarefied, elevated realm of poetic concepts and formulations, and promotes instead a poetry that restores the common, everyday relation of word and world—not elevating the mundane to the level of poetry, but rather lowering the poetic to the level of the mundane. He denies the validity of anything other than the ordinary sensory data of everyday life as proper subject matter for writing:

Es gibt kein anderes Material als das, was allen zugänglich ist und womit jeder alltäglich umgeht, was man aufnimmt, wenn man aus dem Fenster guckt, auf der Straße steht, an einem Schaufenster vorbeigeht, Knöpfe, Knöpfe, was man gebraucht, woran man denkt und sich erinnert, alles ganz gewöhnlich, Filmbilder, Reklamebilder, Sätze aus irgendeiner Lektüre oder aus zurückliegenden Gesprächen, Meinungen, Gefasel, Gefasel, Ketchup, eine Schlagermelodie, die bestimmte Eindrücke neu in einem entstehen läßt [...]⁵⁶⁷

Brinkmann specifically credits Frank O’Hara with showing him this poetic possibility: “Dankbar bin ich [...] den Gedichten Frank O’Haras, die mir gezeigt haben, daß schlechthin alles, was man sieht und womit man sich beschäftigt, wenn man es nur genau genug sieht und direkt genug wiedergibt, ein Gedicht werden kann, auch wenn es um ein Mittagessen handelt.”⁵⁶⁸ Again, an emphasis is placed on the precision of subjective perception, and the directness of its transfer into poetic form.

Brinkmann also uses the “Notiz” to clarify the anti-theoretical, verging on anti-intellectual position he is taking with regard to literary culture, declaring a lack of interest in academic questions of style:

Formale Probleme haben mich bisher nie so stark interessiert, wie das noch immer die Konvention ist. Sie können von mir aus auch ruhig weiterhin den

⁵⁶⁷Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 186.

⁵⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 186-7.

berufsmäßigen Ästhetik und Dichterprofis, die ihre persönlichen Skrupel angesichts der Materialfülle in feinziseliertem Hokuspokus sublimieren, als Beschäftigungsgegenstand bleiben. Die Toten bewundern die Toten! Gibt es etwas, das gespenstischer wäre als dieser deutsche Kulturbetrieb mit dem fortwährenden Ruf nach Stil, etc.⁵⁶⁹

Form, style, and other conceptual complications of poetry are portrayed here as mere “Hokuspokus”: needless mystifications of the simple and intuitive act of writing from experience.

By the time of the publication of *Die Piloten*, having left behind his restrained poetic style and melancholic *Sprachskepsis*, Brinkmann had refined his poetic model by way of an antagonistic rejection of literary culture, which allowed him to approach language as an unfettered tool for representing the simple facts of subjective experience. However, Brinkmann’s preoccupations with language were far from resolved, and in the ensuing years he would develop his understanding of language across various texts. In his subsequent writings, Brinkmann claims to be able to use language, free from cultural distortion, to treat perception directly; at the same time, however, he retains not only his will to demythologize language, but also his lurking suspicion that linguistic representation fundamentally betrays the authenticity of extraverbal cerebral experience.

This ambiguity can be seen in Brinkmann’s next poetry volume, *Gras* (1970), where one find poems like “Kaffee trinken (1)” and “Kaffee trinken (2)” (both of which consist of a single extended line), which offer instances of an uncomplicated linguistic description of the everyday:

Ich nehme etwas Milch und zwei Löffel Zucker und rühre in der Tasse, die vor

⁵⁶⁹Ibid., p. 186.

mir steht. Dann nehme ich die Tasse hoch, trinke und setze sie wieder ab.⁵⁷⁰

Es ist nachts. Das Wasser kocht. Auf dem Tisch stehen 5 Tassen. Ich komme mit der Kaffeekanne ins Zimmer und sehe dich vor diesen Tassen Geige spielen.⁵⁷¹

In the same volume one also finds more conflicted poems like “Heute”, which functions as a direct “Verschriftlichung von Sinneseindrücken,”⁵⁷² but at the same time raises the issues of linguistic abstraction:

[. . .] An einem hohen Bretterzaun
klebte ein Plakat, auf dem zu

lesen war: “Die Würde des Menschen
ist unantastbar!” Das klingt gut,
doch was ist die Würde? [. . .]

[. . .] Ich
möchte keine Würde antasten,

selbst wenn es erlaubt wäre
ich möchte nur telefonieren.
Nummer 387038 bitte! [. . .]⁵⁷³

While Brinkmann hasn’t returned to the sullen *Sprachnegation* of his earlier poetry, he has not completely escaped his mistrustful attitude towards language. In this phase of his writing Brinkmann wishes to use language directly, as in “Kaffee Trinken (1) & (2)”; in poems like “Heute”, however, he also acknowledges that language can be used to confuse, complicate, and misrepresent the facts.

⁵⁷⁰Ibid., p. 306.

⁵⁷¹Ibid., p. 307.

⁵⁷²Röhnert and Geduldig, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : seine Gedichte in Einzelinterpretationen*, p. 307.

⁵⁷³Brinkmann, *Standphotos*, p. 328.

American Aesthetics, 1968-1970

In the late sixties Brinkmann published several critical pieces in which his reception of American literature can be seen leading him to a general critique of literary culture. Unlike Heißenbüttel, Brinkmann was unwilling to alter his writerly voice when shifting to the role of critic. His deep mistrust of academic and intellectual discourse constantly disrupts the polemics he voices in these pieces. Späth points to Brinkmann's use of literary elements to separate his own commentary from the system of authority inherent to critical writing:

Mit der wechselseitigen Durchdringung von Wissenschaft und Literatur erschafft sich Brinkmann ein Reflexions- und Ausdrucksmedium, das die Konkurrenz der getrennten Diskurssysteme überwindet. Wenn Brinkmann hier den literarischen Diskurs an den wissenschaftlichen anbindet, so tut er dies mit der Absicht, den Methodenzwang des wissenschaftlichen Denkens durch die Regellosigkeit des subjektiven Sprechens zu zersetzen.⁵⁷⁴

This approach to critical writing reflects his own anti-intellectual tendencies, which can be seen throughout his later work, and which are connected to his thinking about language. In the foreword to *Silver Screen*, Brinkmann references a quote from William Burroughs illustrating the superiority of simple, non-terminological language: “Wenn ich das Wort Stuhl sage, sehen Sie einen Stuhl. Wenn ich Die Gleichzeitigkeit von gesellschaftlicher Trägheit und ambivalentem Schmutz unerkannt totalitären Systems sage, sehen Sie nichts. Es ist die bloße Abfassung von Wörtern, um die Leser auf Wörtern reagieren zu lassen.”⁵⁷⁵

⁵⁷⁴Späth, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*, p. 65.

⁵⁷⁵Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 232. The original quote comes from an interview where Burroughs discusses the image-less prose and “word-conditioning” of official press outlets: “Opinion control is a technical operation extending over a period of years. First a population segment—‘segment preparation’—is conditioned to react to words rather than word referents. You will notice in the subsidized periodicals a curious prose without image. If I say the word ‘chair’ you see a chair. If I say ‘the concomitant somnolence with the ambivalent smugness of unavowed totalitarianism’ you see nothing. This is pure word-conditioning the reader to react to words. ‘Preparations’ so conditioned will then react predictably to words.” William S. Burroughs and Daniel Odier, *The Job: Interviews with William S. Burroughs*. London: Penguin, 2008, p. 138.

In the *Erkundungen* journals he cites Burroughs (probably referring to the above quotation) as someone who understood the distortions of jargon-heavy discourse: “Wie Burrous [sic] herausgefunden hat, geschieht die Abrichtung der Intellektuellen durch Blindbegriffe, komplizierte Leerformeln und Sätze. // Akademisches Gefasel, nicht nachprüfbare Behauptungen.”⁵⁷⁶ In his letters to Hartmut Schnell, who was preparing a thesis on Alfred Lichtenstein, Brinkmann advises him to forego formal interpretation and academic language, and write instead from his personal impressions: “Die verdammten Akademikker (Mickertypen) fummeln alle doof rum mit ihren Interpretationen. Dagegen setzt mal Deine Lebendigkeit, wenn Du die Arbeit über und zu AL [Lichtenstein] machst. Immer hübsch konkret, sinnlich, ohne Schwulst, ohne viel, keine! akademische Terminologie.”⁵⁷⁷ His frequently used neologisms “Viehlologie” and “Viehlosophie” sum up Brinkmann’s disdain for academic, intellectual, and scientific discourses, which eventually leads him to develop his own experimental, subjective style of critical prose writing.

One of Brinkmann’s first prominent critical interventions was the provocatively titled response piece “Angriff aufs Monopol : Ich hasse alte Dichter”, printed in 1968 in *Christ und Welt* as part of the extended critical discussion of a controversial lecture given by Leslie Fiedler. Earlier that year, at a symposium in Freiburg titled “Für und wider die zeitgenössische Literatur in Europa und Amerika”, Fiedler, at that time a relatively unknown figure in Germany, presented a paper entitled “Cross the Border, Close the Gap: The Case for Post Modernism”, which was later translated and printed in *Christ und Welt* as “Das Zeitalter

⁵⁷⁶Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Erkundungen für die Präzisierung des Gefühls für einen Aufstand: Träume Aufstände/Gewalt/Mode REISE ZEIT MAGAZIN (Tagebuch)*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1987, p. 107.

⁵⁷⁷Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 19.

der neuen Literature".⁵⁷⁸ Fiedler's essay argues for a new kind of open-ended, subjective, playful criticism, and argues against literary elitism, affirming the aesthetic value of comic books, cowboy stories, science fiction, and pornography.⁵⁷⁹ The backlash was immediate, with Martin Walser writing an especially harsh rebuke of Fiedler's ideas, "Mythen, Milch und Mut", in which Walser portrays Fiedler as a 'Pop-papst' and a "Kaputtmacher" heralding the rise of an undemocratic "Antikunst" that Walser opposes: "Die Kunst ist tot, es lebe aber nicht die Antikunst (denn das ist doch nur ein ästhetischer Trick), sondern die demokratische Literatur. [. . .] Die demokratische, mythenzerstörende, mutmachende Schreibe, in der sich der demokratische Befreiungsprozeß manifestiert."⁵⁸⁰ Walser would go on to expand his response to Fiedler in the essay "Über die neueste Stimmung in Westen" (published in Enzensberger's *Kursbuch* journal in 1970), which also addresses *ACID* (the anthology of American poetry edited by Brinkmann and Ralf-Rainer Rygulla) and an article by Peter Handke criticizing the Berlin SDS⁵⁸¹ group, classifying both of the above as representatives of a general trend of "Desengagement," which also encompasses the language games of Heißenbüttel and the introversion of *Neue Subjektivität*:

Das Desengagement führte zur Weigerung, mit Sprache Meinung herzustellen, und entwickelte eine künstlerische Methode der Reduktion des Ausdrucks auf Sprachfertigteile, auf Montage und Collage und Bloßlegung von Sprachstrukturen. Diese Bewegung reicht am sichtbarsten von Heißenbüttel bis Handke. Bloßgelegt werden die in Sprachformeln verdinglichten Meinungen. Mehr oder weniger bloßgelegt. Oft genug werden die Sprachfertigteile einfach als Spiel- und Reizmaterial verwendet. Entscheidend für den Verlauf dieser Bloß-

⁵⁷⁸The Freiburg version of the paper was slightly different from the original, which is printed in: Leslie Fiedler, *Collected Essays*. New York: Stein, 1971, vol. 2, pp. 461-85.

⁵⁷⁹See: Gregory Divers, *The Image and Influence of America in German Poetry since 1945*. Rochester: Camden House, 2002, pp. 123-5.

⁵⁸⁰Walser, *Werke 11*, pp. 282-3.

⁵⁸¹*Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund*, a central organ of the leftist, youth-oriented *Außerparlamentarische Opposition* movement.

legungs-Prozesse ist die Empfindlichkeit des einzelnen Autors oder auch sein Überdruß. Historische und streng gesellschaftliche Bedingungen werden bei diesen Bloßlegungen nicht enthüllt. Sie gehören nicht zum Arbeitsprogramm. Soziale Notwendigkeit ist überholt.⁵⁸²

For Brinkmann, Walser's reaction to Fiedler's essay was typical of the closed-minded conservatism of German writers—even those who, like Walser, often aligned themselves with progressive politics. Like Handke's *Schmährede* in Princeton, Brinkmann's "Angriff aufs Monopol" attacks the unadventurous orthodoxy of the postwar German literary scene.

The essay's incendiary subtitle, poached from a Gregory Corso poem,⁵⁸³ aligns Brinkmann with Fiedler, on the side of the young and the new, against the literary old guard. Brinkmann admits to feeling uneasy taking part in a literary debate with such impressive and "old" intellects: "Ich komme mir komisch vor unter all diesen 'alten' Leuten, die je nach individuellem Bewußtseinsvolumen mehr oder weniger differenzieren, mit dem Kopf bedenklich hin und her wackeln, abwägen [. . .] zweifellos überragende Geister, immer am Ball etc. [. . .]"⁵⁸⁴ However, he mocks their incomprehension regarding Fiedler's message, which he connects to their unwillingness to look beyond their own "Gartenzaun," towards artistic activity taking place internationally. He speaks of "eine enorme Uninformiertheit, die typisch für deutsche Autoren zu sein scheint," and mentions the lack of any German reaction upon the release of important American books like Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* or Donald Barthelme's *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*. He laments the general German ignorance of the work of Frank O'Hara, Paul Blackburn, Philip Whalen, Buckminster Fuller, Harry

⁵⁸²Ibid., p. 286.

⁵⁸³From "I am 25": "I HATE OLD POETMEN! / Especially old poetmen who retract / who consult other old poetmen / who speak their youth in whispers, / saying:—I did those then / but that was then / that was then." Gregory Corso, *Mindfield: New & Selected Poems*. New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989, p. 35.

⁵⁸⁴Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, "Angriff aufs Monopol : ich hasse alte Dichter". In *Roman oder Leben*. Edited by Uwe Wittstock. Leipzig: Reclam, 1994, p. 65.

Mathews, John Barth, Tom Veitch, Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, and Norman O. Brown,⁵⁸⁵ and recalls the unfavorable reception given to Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman* in Germany: “Wie stur und gewiß differenziert man dagegen argumentierte, wie plump man dasaß und auf etwas glotzte, das ‘Literatur’ weiter vorantrieb als vergleichsweise der hochgelobte, harmlos-einfältige Peter Bichsel [. . .]. Es herrscht eine generelle, tiefverwurzelte Ignoranz und Abneigung gegen alles ‘art-fremde’.”⁵⁸⁶ He slams the references Walser’s essay makes to Vietnam as “so eine schöne Konvention unter Literaten mit schlechtem Gewissen, die ihre eigene Impotenz umstilisieren zur Impotenz allgemeiner Art!”⁵⁸⁷

For Brinkmann, the inability or unwillingness of German writers to accept the central premise of Fiedler’s essay—“daß das europäisch-abendländische Kulturmonopol gebrochen ist”⁵⁸⁸—indicates a general European cultural myopia, hostile to foreign and progressive ideas: “Jetzt kommt jemand, verlangt Beweglichkeit, eine Reflexion auf zeitgenössisches Material, die Erweiterung bisheriger Literaturvorstellungen, er nennt Beispiele, gibt Hinweise. Sofort muß sich unser Autor bedroht fühlen.”⁵⁸⁹ Brinkmann doesn’t spare experimental writers, claiming that the European avant-garde has understood the innovations of writers like Duchamp, Benn, and Céline on a purely formal level, whereas American writers have continued forwards from the historical avant-garde with their own innovations: “Entscheidend ist, daß das, was sie [Duchamp et al.] mit ihren Arbeiten begonnen haben, heute in den USA Auswirkungen zeigt, die nicht eine bloße formale Verfeinerung ist, sondern daß deren Tendenzen ergriffen und verändert, aktualisiert worden sind, das heißt hineingetragen

⁵⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 67-8.

⁵⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 68-9.

⁵⁸⁷Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁸⁸Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁸⁹Ibid., p. 69.

wurden in gegenwärtigen Strömungen, Umwälzungen, das heißt lebendig geblieben sind, wohingegen im europäisch-abendländischen Bereich die Impulse zu puren Kunstformen erstarrten.”⁵⁹⁰ Brinkmann sees Fiedler’s postmodern program as an escape route from a stagnant European art culture that has devolved into an empty formal exercise: his “Angriff” against an obsolete cultural monopoly is also an “Angriff auf die absolute Kunst,”⁵⁹¹ regardless of whether this comes from a traditionalist or avant-gardist approach.

While calling for an end to pure, refined art, Brinkmann similarly enacts a subversion of the pure, refined critical voice of literary discourse. In numerous asides punctuating his critiques, Brinkmann gives a first-hand reportage of his immediate experience while writing—the records he’s listening to, the sounds in his apartment, his view out the window—almost as if filling space on the paper during the pauses between trains of thought:

Ich schreibe das hier, während auf meinem Dual-Plattenspieler HS11 eine Platte der DOORS abläuft, Disques Vogue, CLVLXEK 198, mit Jim Morrison – vocals, Ray Manzarek – organ, piano, bass, Robby Krieger – guitar, John Densmore – drums, und sollte ich nicht lieber die Musik um ein paar Phonstärken erhöhen und mich ihr ganz überlassen anstatt weiterzutippen . . .⁵⁹²

Und nun habe ich eine andere Platte der DOORS aufgelegt [. . .]. Das Kind zwei Zimmer weiter im abgedunkelten Raum will nicht schlafen und weint aus Langeweile vor sich hin. Es hat einen Hirnschaden, das Steuerungszentrum ist seit der Geburt ausgefallen, ein paar Zellen zertrümmert.⁵⁹³

Und jetzt ist ein anderer Tag, gegen das lichte Blau zeichnen sich streng und präzise die Fernsehantennen ab. Gestern abend erzählte mir Rolf-Rainer, daß soundso überall von der Polizei gesucht würde.⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹⁰Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁹¹Späth, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann*, p. 12.

⁵⁹²Brinkmann, “Angriff aufs Monopol”, p. 66.

⁵⁹³Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁹⁴Ibid., p. 74.

These disarming personal asides (including a mention of his infant son's brain damage) seem to sabotage the rhetorical force of Brinkmann's polemic; however, Brinkmann uses them to perform his unwillingness to be drawn into the discursive system of the literary establishment. The interruptions draw a stylistic line between his critical statements and those of Walser and the other respondents (which included Heißenbüttel and Reinhard Baumgart). Brinkmann's gesture—which he would repeat in later essays—also demonstrates the exaggerated importance he places on immediate subjective and empirical experience of the world, which he allows to intrude into not only literary, but also critical writing. In the years to come, Brinkmann's writing is overwhelmingly occupied by just such an activity: a direct writing from first-hand experience, intending to circumvent the mystifications of fictional and poetic convention.

In 1969, Brinkmann edits several important volumes of American poetry: *Lunch Poems und andere Gedichte*, a collection of poems by Frank O'Hara,⁵⁹⁵ *ACID. Neue amerikanische Szene*, an anthology of American underground writing co-edited with Ralf-Rainer Rygulla,⁵⁹⁶ and *Silver Screen*,⁵⁹⁷ an anthology of Brinkmann's translations of contemporary American

⁵⁹⁵Frank O'Hara, *Lunch Poems und andere Gedichte*. Trans. by Rolf Dieter Brinkmann. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969.

⁵⁹⁶Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and Ralf-Rainer Rygulla, editors, *ACID. Neue amerikanische Szene*. Darmstadt: März, 1969. *ACID*'s list of contributors—which features musicians, artists, filmmakers, and theorists alongside writers, and which includes some figures who are largely unknown today—shows the depth and breadth of Brinkmann and Rygulla's research into the American underground scene: Chester Anderson; Sherry Barba; Donald Barthelme; Gregory Battcock; Mary Beach; Ted Berrigan; Paul Blackburn; Douglas Blazek; Aram Boyajian; Joe Brainard; Charles Bukowski; William S. Burroughs; John Cage; Don Cauble; E. F. Cherrytree; Tom Clark; Fielding Dawson; Bill Deemer; Diane di Prima; Kenward Elmslie; Larry Fagin; Leslie A. Fiedler; Dick Gallup; John Giorno; Calvin C. Hernton; Norman J. Hoegberg; John Cleilon Holmes; Lenore Kandel; Rich Krech; Seymour Krim; Tuli Kupferberg; Gerard Malanga; Harry Mathews; Michael McClure; Marshall McLuhan; Taylor Mead; Jonas Mekas; George Montgomery; Robert Nichols; Harold Norse; Frank O'Hara; Gil Orlovitz; Ron Padgett; John Perreault; Joe Pinelli; Roxie Powell; Steve Richmond; Ed Sanders; Joel Schwartz; George Sparling; Peter Stafford; George Stanley; Robert Sward; Parker Tyler; Tom Veitch; Anne Waldman; Andy Warhol; The Willie; Douglas Woolf; Frank Zappa.

⁵⁹⁷Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, editor, *Silver screen : neue amerikanische Lyrik*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969.

poetry. All three of these volumes included essays written by Brinkmann in which he develops his aesthetic position vis-à-vis American and German literature. In his essay on O'Hara, Brinkmann speaks admiringly of the New York School's lack of a unified theoretical program—apart from sharing “eine Interesse für Malerei” and “mehr oder weniger direkte Kontakte mit der Kunstszene”—as well as the absence of any “Problematik des Sprechens.”⁵⁹⁸ Brinkmann sees the New York School as purveyors of a poetry turned outwards, away from the restrictions of language, towards the visual and extra-literary realms:

Es wurde auf neue Perspektivenveränderungen, neue Tendenzen und Impulse in außerliterarischen Bereichen geachtet, so daß die daraus sich ergebenden Einflüsse auf die literarische Entwicklung der Autoren nicht zu einer mehr und mehr spezialisierten Sprach-Thematik führte, die das von William Carlos Williams so weit geöffnete Gedicht wieder auf sich selbst zurückwarf und somit diese Gattung wieder schloß vor dauernd sich verändernder Umwelt [. . .] der Problematik des Sprechens [. . .].⁵⁹⁹

As an example of this regrettable inward closure of poetry, Brinkmann cites Robert Creeley, describing his recent poems “The Pattern”⁶⁰⁰ and “Numbers”⁶⁰¹ as “in allgemeinen Abstraktionen verloren.”⁶⁰² Earlier in the sixties, Brinkmann had placed Creeley alongside O'Hara in his pantheon of American poets⁶⁰³; by 1969, however, he may have grown uneasy with the resemblance of Creeley's proto-L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E style to the *Sprachdemonstrationen*

⁵⁹⁸Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 207.

⁵⁹⁹Ibid., pp. 207-8.

⁶⁰⁰From “The Pattern”: “As soon as / I speak, I / speaks. It // wants to / be free but / impassive lies // in the direction / of its / words. Let // x equal x, x / also / equals x. I // speak to / hear myself / speak?” Robert Creeley, *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1947-1975*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982, p. 294.

⁶⁰¹From “Numbers”: “Never write / to say more / than saying / something. / ————— / Words / are / pleasure. / All / words.” Ibid., p. 408.

⁶⁰²Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 208.

⁶⁰³See: Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 39.

of writers like Heißenbüttel. Later in the essay Brinkmann ‘quotes’ a fictional interview with Heißenbüttel and Jürgen Becker (apparently collaged together from various speeches, articles, and interviews) in order to satirize their complicated language-centric aesthetics:

Interviewer: *Herr Heißenbüttel, was sehen Sie für Schwierigkeiten?* Heißenbüttel: *Die Schwierigkeiten fangen da an, wo ich zu differenzieren versuchen und ins Detail gehe. Für uns gibt es Sachen nur noch in der Form von Wörtern. Ich kann dabei noch einmal zu dem Ausspruch Ostajens zurückkehren, der sagte, daß das schönste Gedicht über den Fisch eigentlich das Wort Fisch sei. Natürlich ist damit eine Grenze gekennzeichnet. Diese Grenze verläuft zwischen literarischem Sprechen und mystischer Versenkung.* Interviewer: *Und nun zu Ihnen, Herr Jürgen Becker, was haben Sie anzumerken?* Jürgen Becker: *In der progressiven Literatur sind die Konsequenzen längst gezogen worden, indem sie sich auf ihr erstes Material, die Sprache, besonnen hat. Der Fortschritt der Künste bleibt davon, daß sie als Handels- und Kulturobjekte fungibel sind, unberührt; ihr Fortschritt ist bestimmt von einem Prozeß, der zwischen dem Grad der Erkenntnis und dem Zustand des künstlerischen Materials vermittelt, zwischen der Einsicht in historische Gegebenheiten und den Konsequenzen, die diese Gegebenheiten verlangen.*⁶⁰⁴

Brinkmann sees this kind of intellectual discourse as a “Mystifizierung des Schreibens,” designed to preserve literature’s elitist status: “Leute, packt Eure Schreibmaschinen ein, [...] denn was sich in solchen Abstrakta ausspricht, ist ein Elitebewußtsein, das längst unbewußt geworden ist und trotz aller scheinbaren Aufklärung eine ästhetische Schablone weitertransportiert, die außer für ‘Literatur’ nirgendwo mehr passen will.”⁶⁰⁵ This theoretical obscurantism results in a writing that responds more to the inner customs of literary culture rather than to the stimuli of the real world. Brinkmann presents this orientation as a kind of unseeing delirium, where writing consists of the mimetic reproduction of stock phrases, in the pursuit of literariness instead of an accurate representation of reality: “Es ist, als ob in der Literatur das Bewußtsein noch in einem Taumel irrationaler Hochachtung vor sich

⁶⁰⁴Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 214.

⁶⁰⁵Ibid.

selbst verharrte, einem schwerfälligen, halbschlafähnlichen benommenen Zustand, in dem Verschleierung gleichsam ‘natürlich’ ist, so daß immer weiter ein Leben bei ‘verschleiertem’ Licht ausgedrückt wird [...].”⁶⁰⁶ O’Hara and the New York School represent for Brinkmann the possibility of a new form of writing that has managed to liberate itself from the blinkered discourse of literary culture,⁶⁰⁷ and is consequently able to respond to “dem wachsenden Appetit nach mehr konkretem Leben” with a poetry of the everyday that makes space for the real world of “Light clarity avocado salad in the morning.”⁶⁰⁸

In “Der Film in Worten”, his preface to the *ACID* anthology, Brinkmann continues his championing of American writers and his attacks on German literary discourse. He also broaches the topic of language, referring to the “Rückkopplungssystem der Wörter,” which no longer corresponds to “tagtäglich zu machender sinnlicher Erfahrung.”⁶⁰⁹ Literary critics remain trapped in this system, oblivious to the unrestrained formal fluidity practiced by underground writers: “Während die theoretischen Kritiker im Kreise gehen und ihre Gedanken von Satz zu Satz fortschreiten, drückt sich das ‘andere’ Denken real in der Benutzung des ungeheuren Formenreichtums aus, der heute zur Verfügung steht und entstanden ist aus der Vermischung verschiedener Gebiete und Gattungen.”⁶¹⁰ The Americans, due to their lack of a cumbersome literary tradition, are able to take full advantage of this wealth of formal, stylistic, and generic possibilities:

Das Fehlen eines ausgeprägten “kulturhistorischen Hintergrunds” erweist sich

⁶⁰⁶Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷Like Brinkmann, O’Hara intentionally distanced himself from the intellectual and programmatic institutionalization of American poetry in the fifties; see: Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 9 ff.

⁶⁰⁸From “Poem”, in: Frank O’Hara; Donald Allen, editor, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*. Oakland: University of California Press, 1995, p. 350.

⁶⁰⁹Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 223.

⁶¹⁰Ibid., p. 232.

als Vorteil, eine Formen-Verbindlichkeit aus bloßer Tradition heraus gibt es nicht—alle Formen stehen jedem jederzeit zur Verfügung und können jederzeit beliebig abgewandelt werden oder “verletzt”, ohne daß der Autor gegen seine vermittelten intellektuellen Skrupel, die ihm vom gesellschaftlichen Verständnis “Literatur” aufgedrängt werden, angehen müßte . . .⁶¹¹

For Brinkmann, new American writing exercises a formal liberty that corresponds to a freedom from an established cultural definition of what literature should be. He instructs his German colleagues to rise above the postulated death of literature by pursuing a form of writing that doesn't consider itself properly literary: “Also: aufhören über ‘Literatur’ zu reden . . . Literatur, Literatur . . . als ob es noch darum ginge.”⁶¹² Only by rejecting the cultural concept of literature, Brinkmann implies, can contemporary authors break away from the formal, stylistic, and linguistic conventionalism that alienates literature from life.⁶¹³

Brinkmann continues this polemic in his foreword to *Silver Screen*, an anthology containing his translations of work by American poets such as Michael McClure, Ted Berrigan, Charles Bukowski, Larry Fagin, Kenward Elmslie, and Robert Sward.⁶¹⁴ Brinkmann connects his reading of O'Hara and American writing back to Fiedler and the concept of postmodernism, which he sees as involving a demystification of the author's role: “Die Charakterisierung ‘Post-Moderne’ bezeichnet zugleich aber auch sehr gut den *seit langem überfälligen, notwendigen Trend*, die in ‘hohen kulturellen Ansprüchen’ festgehaltene Mystifikation ‘Dichter’ (als blinden Seher, dumpfen Rhapsoden usw.) abzuschaffen und damit die in dieser Figur vermittelte ‘Autorität’ fallenzulassen.”⁶¹⁵ Unlike in Germany, the American

⁶¹¹Ibid., p. 230.

⁶¹²Ibid., p. 237.

⁶¹³See also: Gerd Gemünden, “The Depth of the Surface, or, What Rolf Dieter Brinkmann Learned from Andy Warhol”. *German Quarterly*, 68.3, 1995, pp. 239-40.

⁶¹⁴See: Brinkmann, *Silver screen : neue amerikanische Lyrik*.

⁶¹⁵Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 254. (All italics Brinkmann's own.)

scene is marked by a progressive “*Individualisierung* des Schreibens” connected to the “*Abbau der kulturellen Definition ‘Autor’ und ‘Leser’*.”⁶¹⁶ Brinkmann speaks admiringly of the “*anti-theoretische Zug, der in der gegenwärtigen amerikanischen Lyrik herrscht*,”⁶¹⁷ which he also mentions in his O’Hara essay: “Das auffälligste Merkmal der O’Haraschen Gedichte ist ihre unmittelbare Präsenz. Jedes Gedicht ist sofort ganz da. Weder enthalten sie, bereits gesagt, ein literar-theoretisches Programm, noch besitzen sie eine ausdrücklich soziologische oder plakativ verwendbare politische Ambition [...]”⁶¹⁸ The American poets have declared the absolute freedom of poetry from theoretical, intellectual, and scientific discourse, having realized “daß ein Gedicht alles sein kann und es keinerlei philosophische, soziologische, psychologische oder sonstige -logische Beiträge leisten *muß*, schon gar nicht Sprachwissenschaft zu sein hat.”⁶¹⁹ Brinkmann’s arguments here resemble certain statements Peter Handke would make in the mid-seventies (again, Brinkmann predates his Austrian colleague by several years) regarding the hierarchical relation between literary and scientific language. Like Handke, Brinkmann argues—against the politically engaged writers as well as *sprachkritisch* poets like Heißenbüttel and Becker—for the liberation of literary writing from all theoretical subjugation, in order to allow literature to function as a mouthpiece for individual subjective experience—a program he sees enacted in the poetry of O’Hara: “Die ‘Auflösung’ des Gedichts als totales Kunstwerk mit anspruchsvollem Bild- und Vorstellungsmaterial zu einer *subjektiven und beiläufigen* Ausdrucksart geschah über die Gedichte Frank O’Haras.”⁶²⁰ Via O’Hara, Brinkmann reconciles himself with

⁶¹⁶Ibid., p. 255.

⁶¹⁷Ibid., p. 254.

⁶¹⁸Ibid., p. 215.

⁶¹⁹Ibid., p. 255.

⁶²⁰Ibid., p. 257.

poetic language by rejecting the cultural mythology of poetry, transforming literature into something casual and informal—the writerly equivalent of Wittgenstein’s turn towards *Umgangssprache*.

“Über die Sprachbegrenzung hinaus”: Brinkmann’s Late Sprachkritik

The early seventies were a period of creative crisis for Brinkmann. He was surprised by the commercial and critical success of the *Silver Screen* and *ACID* anthologies,⁶²¹ and it bruised his ego that his own writing had not been as favorably received as his translations. It is also possible that he began to feel the anxiety of his American influence: his writing in the late sixties, especially in *Gras*, became increasingly derivative of American poetry, and in the early seventies Brinkmann struggled to develop his own literary innovations independent from this influence. He broke with his publisher Kiepenheuer & Witsch (eventually moving to Rowohlt), distanced himself from his editor Wellershoff, and generally increased his isolation from the literary community.⁶²² He became more involved with photography and film, and ultimately decided to take an extended break from publishing any writing, which, apart from a few scattered pieces in literary journals, would last from 1970 until the publication of *Westwärts 1 & 2* shortly after his death in 1975. During these years of non-

⁶²¹He also expressed disappointment at the misappropriations he saw underlying the anthology’s success: “Mich hat schon ganz schön fertig gemacht und erschreckt und vor allem mit Ekel erfüllt, als ich sah, wie die—zugegeben—einigermaßen euphorische Anthologie damals in die falschen Kanäle gelaufen ist!” Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Rom, Blicke*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1979, p. 93.

⁶²²See also Wellershoff’s commentary on this period: Dieter Wellershoff, “Destruktion als Befreiungsversuch : Über Rolf Dieter Brinkmann”. In *Das Verschwinden im Bild : Essays*. Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1980, pp. 157 ff.; and Dieter Wellershoff, “In der Arena der Literatur: Über Rolf Dieter Brinkmann”. In Carius, *Schnitte im Atemschutz*.

publication, Brinkmann worked on a long, experimental, non-fiction ‘novel,’ documenting his daily life and his subjective experience of postwar West German society. This project never resulted in a final product—at least not by the time of Brinkmann’s death—and although little is known about the ultimate form Brinkmann intended the novel to take, the various fragments collected in *Erkundungen für die Präzisierung des Gefühls für einen Aufstand* and *Schnitte* are presumed to have been written for this novel.⁶²³

In his essay “Notizen und Beobachtungen vor dem Schreiben eines zweiten Romans”—first written in 1970, then revised in 1973 and 1974⁶²⁴—Brinkmann addresses certain aesthetic issues relevant to his experimental prose project, and discusses the difficulties facing the innovative author in the early seventies. Compared with his essays from the late sixties, “Notizen und Beobachtungen” features a heightened concentration on issues of language, perception, and cognition; against the casual, open language of his American-influenced poems, Brinkmann speaks here of feeling trapped, “hier in dem Gefängnis der Sprache.”⁶²⁵ He discusses the role of language in childhood development, and presents a Mauthnerian vision of the individual’s struggle against language: “Der spätere Kampf um das eigene Bewußtsein geht darum, inwieweit die Barrieren der Wörter durchbrochen werden können, und damit die in Sprache fixierten Sinnzusammenhänge, bis in die eigene Vergangenheit zurück.”⁶²⁶ Perhaps as a result of his struggles to develop a new form of writing, in an attempt to escape his American influences and form his own voice, Brinkmann

⁶²³See Maleen Brinkmann’s “Editorische Notiz” in: Brinkmann, *Erkundungen für die Präzisierung des Gefühls für einen Aufstand. Rom, Blicke* was written in the same style, but was conceived as a separate work, documenting his stay at the Villa Massimo in Rome from late 1972 to early 1973.

⁶²⁴Brinkmann presented the paper several times, in Duisburg, Rome, and Austin. See the “Editorische Notiz” in: Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*.

⁶²⁵Ibid., p. 275.

⁶²⁶Ibid., p. 276.

returns to an antagonistic relationship with language. He states his belief in the essentially nonverbal nature of perception: “Jeder Vorgang passiert auf einer nicht-verbalen Ebene und wird auf einer nicht-verbalen Ebene aufgenommen.”⁶²⁷ The limits of language here are not the limits of one’s world, but are rather a reduction of the sensory richness of extraverbal experience: “Jede Einzelheit ist stark & intensiv vorhanden jenseits der Sprachebene. [...] Sprache verkleinert.”⁶²⁸ Brinkmann returns to a Mauthnerian understanding of language as a fundamentally limiting force; he represents this linguistic barrier to perception as “der neue Westen,” and refers to the drug experience as a way to explore this ‘unfiltered’ cognitive territory: “Jeder, der auch nur über geringfügige Rauscherfahrungen verfügt, insbesondere halluzinogene Drogen, weiß um den Moment des totalen Stammelns. Die elende Häßlichkeit der Gegenwart wird um so häßlicher, nämlich nicht mehr durch Wörter, Begriffe gefiltert, erfahren, desgleichen das Angenehme.”⁶²⁹ Here, Brinkmann fuses his earlier interest in Mauthner with his later interest in counterculture—a neo-*Sprachkrise* interpretation of psychedelic enlightenment.

However, while Brinkmann reinstates some of his early linguistic skepticism, he does not retract any of his previous attacks on literary culture. He restates his aversion to the cultural apparatus of literature, and borrows Alfred North Whitehead’s concept of “abstraction” to clarify his stance, describing literature as an abstraction that leads writers away from their primary inspiration, conforming to a certain literary ideology:

Whitehead hat daraufhingewiesen, daß eine Zivilisation, die nicht in der Lage ist, ihre geläufigen Abstraktionen zu durchbrechen, nach einer sehr kurzen Zeit des Fortschreitens zur Sterilität verurteilt sei. Eine der herrschenden Abstraktio-

⁶²⁷Ibid., p. 277.

⁶²⁸Ibid., p. 280.

⁶²⁹Ibid., p. 276

nen ist gewiß Literatur, das Fabrizieren von Literatur, das Reden über Literatur. Zu untersuchen wäre, was bei einem Schriftsteller übrigbliebe, entzöge man seinem Bewußtsein die Abstraktion Literatur und die damit zusammenhängenden ideologischen Programme & Funktionen, egal welcher Richtung, welcher Zielsetzung, die ihn, mit dem Schreiben zugleich, zwingt, auch immer einen Beitrag zur Literatur zu leisten.⁶³⁰

The limits of literature, and the compulsions of literary culture—like those of language and linguistic structure in Mauthner’s *Sprachkritik*—oppress the modern writer and distance him from his subject matter. Brinkmann goes so far as to identify the mere word “literature” as the instigator of meaningless theoretical discourse, barring the writing subject from direct perception:

Eine Gruppe von Leuten hat sich versammelt. Sie sprechen, erregen sich, wehren ab, korrigieren, widerlegen sich gegenseitig, sie beugen sich vor, lehnen sich auf dem Stuhl zurück, sie verziehen das Gesicht, [...] und all das wird ausgelöst und gesteuert durch ein Abstraktes, ein Wort, dem tatsächlich nichts entspricht, Literatur. Das Wort Literatur ist in das Bewußtsein eingebaut, es saugt Energie, Lebendigkeit aus dem Körper, es ist ein künstliches Erzeugnis, das sich vor die wahrzunehmende Einzelheit schiebt. Es bestimmt beim Schriftsteller die Wahrnehmungen und beim Leser das Erfassen des Wahrgenommenen, denn was treibt heute jemanden dazu, ein Buch zu schreiben, und was treibt jemanden dazu, ein Buch in die Hand zu nehmen? Es ist eine kulturelle Gewohnheit geworden wie abends zum Essen ausgehen.⁶³¹

⁶³⁰Ibid., p. 281.

The paraphrased citation from Whitehead is from *Science and the Modern World*. According to Whitehead, the human worldview is based on a series of generalizations/abstractions made in the human mind from the primary data of nature. While Whitehead accepts that these abstractions make scientific thinking possible, he affirms that they are essentially artificial: “This conception of the universe is surely framed in terms of high abstractions, and the paradox only arises because we have mistaken our abstraction for concrete realities.” Whitehead demands a vigilant critical revision of the set of accepted cultural abstractions, which he identifies as philosophy’s responsibility: “The disadvantage of exclusive attention to a group of abstractions, however well-founded, is that, by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. [...] You cannot think without abstractions; accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to be vigilant in critically revising your *modes* of abstraction. It is here that philosophy finds its niche as essential to the healthy progress of society. It is the critic of abstractions. A civilisation which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.” See: Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 73, pp. 86 ff.

⁶³¹Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 277.

Again we see a synthesis of Brinkmann's previous positions, wherein his belief in the detrimental influence of cultural notions of literature is redefined within a language-centered worldview; language comes to be seen as the fundamental support sustaining deleterious cultural abstractions. He also speaks of the importance of language to ideological thinking, and describes the possession, as by evil spirits, of an individual's body by the vocabulary of dialectical political thinking⁶³²:

Ich achte auf die Haltung, die jemand einnimmt, während er dialektisch denkt. Der unaufhörliche Redefluß fällt auf. Starr reihen die Argumente aneinander. Die Beobachtungen sind im voraus erledigt. Der starren Automatik der Argumentation entspricht die körperliche Starre des Sprechers. In einer wüsten schlammigen Flut steigen Wörter an die Oberfläche des Gesichts & zerplatzen wie Blasen auf dem fauligen Traumgelände des Körpers. [...] Wörter wie Gesellschaft, Repression, Anpassung, System beherrschen einen lebenden Organismus. Das ist erstaunlich.⁶³³

Again, we can see how Brinkmann begins to merge his cultural critique with a language-skeptical discourse, illustrating here how linguistic structure sets the foundation for the cultural programming he condemns.

While in these late writings Brinkmann shares certain language-critical ideas with writers like Heißenbüttel, he arrives at the opposite conclusions; and indeed, elsewhere in "Notizen und Beobachtungen" he takes linguistically focused literature to task for failing to acknowledge the presence of extraverbal experience. From the point of view of such writers, Brinkmann claims, "der Raum hinter den Wörtern, der Sprache [...] zu nichts anderem dient als zur Hervorbringung von Literatur über dem Umweg des Stils, des Ausdrucks, der

⁶³²For more on Brinkmann's complicated relation to German radical political movements, see: Andrew Plowman, *The Radical Subject: Social Change and the Self in Recent German Autobiography*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1998, pp. 84 ff.

⁶³³Brinkmann, *Der Film in Worten*, p. 282.

Strukturierung einer Prosapassage. Der Schmerz wird Anlaß zur Reflexion über Sprache.”⁶³⁴

Instead of attempting to develop new literary representations of the extraverbal, these authors remain fixated on the linguistic barrier, which Brinkmann sees as an effect of their entrapment by the Whiteheadian abstraction of literature: “Die Sprache ist zum Hauptbeschäftigungsgegenstand des Schriftstellers geworden,” leading these writers to believe “daß in der Hinwendung zur Sprachproblematik [...] die gegenwärtig einzige Legitimation für die Tätigkeit des Schreibens liege. Gefangen in der Abstraktion Literatur, ist diese Hinwendung nur allzu logisch.”⁶³⁵ Brinkmann’s antipathy to any literature of *Sprachdemonstration* remains firm, as can be seen in this derisory description that could apply to most works of Heißenbüttel:

Es scheint ganz so, daß jemand seine Instrumente prüft, ohne zu wissen, was er damit anfangen soll, wozu er sie benützen will. Ich sehe ein Buch, das mich auf die verwendeten Sprachstrukturen hinweist, es bietet mir Experimente mit der Sprache an, und ich sehe nichts als ein Blatt Papier mit einem Haufen so oder so arrangierten Wörter und Sätze. Frage ich nach der Zielrichtung dieser so und so arrangierten Wörter und Sätze, werde ich zurückverwiesen auf das Blatt Papier, die aufgeschlagene Seite des Buches.⁶³⁶

For Brinkmann, language games that explore the internal mechanics of grammar are not valid literature, since they don’t engage with what he sees as crucial: the development of new methods to express the extraverbal experience of reality in language.

In his last critical works, Brinkmann develops his own take on ‘linguistic engagement,’ illustrating how language is implicated in oppressive cultural structures, and offering suggestions for how to escape the hegemonic system of language. In “Ein Unkontrolliertes

⁶³⁴Ibid., p. 277.

⁶³⁵Ibid., pp. 277-8.

⁶³⁶Ibid., p. 278.

Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten”—written in late 1974, unpublished until after Brinkmann’s death, in 1976⁶³⁷—Brinkmann characterizes the German “Sprachbezirk” as a ghost town containing “Gespensterstraßen und Gespenstermenschen,” where “keine Möglichkeit zu sprechen mehr vorhanden ist” and “keine Fantasieimpulse und kein mehr oder weniger freies Sprechen und Artikulieren erlaubt ist.”⁶³⁸ Here, Brinkmann directs his ire at mass media: “Jeder Ansatz eines poetischen Empfindens verfolgt, ‘fertig gemacht’, ausgerottet wird durch Massenmedien und ihre Angestellten [...]”⁶³⁹; “Die Sprache heute wird von den Massenmedien bestimmt, von Verwaltungen, Ämtern, den sogenannten Kulturinstituten wie Schulen und dem Geschäft.”⁶⁴⁰ As before, he expresses his disdain for the linguistic formulations of scientific discourses, denouncing the “arrogance” of their conceptual generalizations: “Und dann die Formulierungen in den wissenschaftlichen Büchern, durch die ich schaue, worum gehts da? Erkenntnis? Die schamanistische Arroganz der Ausdrücke, der Formulierungen, der Büros und der Schreibassistenten, die Menschen, alltägliches Leben, zu Material machen, zu Fällen.”⁶⁴¹ The anemic literature of the German mainstream is presented as an effect of the pernicious influence of intellectual and mass-media discourses, which lead writers to betray literature by attempting to merge it with other scholarly and journalistic pursuits: “Erst machen sie in Literatur, dann machen sie in Viehphilosophie, Soziologie, dann in Erkenntnistheorie, dann Sprachspiele, Psycholinguistische Turnerei, dann in Politik, dann

⁶³⁷The full text of the essay remained unpublished until 2005, when it was included in the expanded edition of *Westwärts 1 & 2*: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2. Gedichte*. New expanded edition. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2005, pp. 256-330. The 1976 publication was heavily abridged, including less than half of the complete text: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, “Ein unkontrolliertes Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten”. In *Literaturmagazin 5 : Das Vergehen von Hören und Sehen. Aspekte der Kulturvernichtung*. Edited by Hermann Peter Piwitt and Peter Rühmkorf. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1976.

⁶³⁸Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2* (2005), p. 258.

⁶³⁹Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 263-4.

⁶⁴¹Ibid., p. 264.

Arbeiter und Arbeiterdichtung, dann machen sie Kinderbücher, dann machen sie alle wieder Feuilletons, dann wieder Literatur.”⁶⁴² Brinkmann wants writers to assert the authority of their subjective, casual, non-scientific, non-academic literary pursuits, in order to resist the adulteration of literary language by the discursive trends of intellectual culture.

While deploring this betrayal of literature via cultural discourse, Brinkmann simultaneously asserts the fundamental alienation of language from subjective perception, making direct reference to Mauthner:

Während ich dem Geräusch des Regens durch das offene Fenster zuhöre, die Geräusche der Regentropfen auf dem Fenstersims und in dem engen, kleinen Lichtschacht höre [. . .] begreife ich, daß die einfachsten Wahrnehmungen taub geschlagen werden durch literarische Tabuisierungen, und ich erinnere, sehr befriedigt, während ich dem Regengeräusch lausche, daß in der Sprache, daß in der Sprache keine Erkenntnisse zu machen sind (F. Mauthner).⁶⁴³

Brinkmann’s conditional *Kulturkritik* begins to merge uneasily with an absolute *Sprachkritik*. Through Mauthner, he reinforces his fundamental belief in the nonverbal nature of reality—in Mauthner’s words, “daß die Wirklichkeit etwas sei, und die Sprache etwas anderes”⁶⁴⁴—upon which he bases his demand for a new form of empirical writing, which begins in the extraverbal levels of sensory perception and progresses towards language, avoiding theoretical and cultural “Tabuisierungen.” Brinkmann foresees a turn away from language, with poetry dissolving into direct cerebral experience: “Jetzt kommen die Zeiten der Gehirnerfahrungen, Abbiegen, weg von den Wörtern. [. . .] Poesie löst sich auf in Wortlosigkeit.”⁶⁴⁵ He quotes the South African psychiatrist David Cooper (a sixties coun-

⁶⁴²Ibid., pp. 264-5.

⁶⁴³Ibid., p. 267.

⁶⁴⁴Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache I*, p. 175.

⁶⁴⁵Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2 (2005)*, pp. 272-3. N.B.: the 2005 publication prints this last word as “Wertlosigkeit”, while the 1976 publication has it as “Wortlosigkeit.” [See: Brinkmann, “Ein unkontrolliertes

terculture figure associated with the anti-psychiatry movement), who writes that “Dichter sind die Athleten des Extraverbalen,”⁶⁴⁶ and describes poetry as the setting for an epistemic showdown between the external world of language and the internal world of nonverbal experience: “Da [in a poem] ist immer wieder das Außen, was aufgebaut, geplant geworden ist, gegen das Innere, das wortlos ist, über die Sprachbegrenzung hinaus ist.”⁶⁴⁷ He returns to the hatred of language that marks his earlier poetry—“Wie hasse ich die scheinbare Klarheit der Sprache”⁶⁴⁸; “Wortviren, die seit Ende des Krieges hier in Westdeutschland losgelassen wurden, haben das Land, die Körper, ausgeplündert”⁶⁴⁹; “Das Gehirn wird sprachlich vom Körper getrennt.”⁶⁵⁰; “‘Die Wörter führen dich ab’, wohin? auf welche Müllkippe der Gefühle?”⁶⁵¹—and calls on writers to resist the linguistic hegemony that orders their cultural landscape: “Ich denke, daß es jeder Zeit notwendig ist, daß Dichter gegen Formulierungen schreiben, daß sie den angestellten Sprechautomaten der Massenmedien mit einfachem Hohn begegnen, sollten sie ihnen begegnen, denen, die glauben, wahnhaft, sie hätten die Formulierungen und die Sprache restlos begriffen.”⁶⁵²

Parallel to his rallying call for a counterlinguistic-countercultural movement, however, *Nachwort zu meinen Gedichten*, p. 244.] From the context, I am inclined to see “Wortlosigkeit” as the correct version, with the 2005 variation merely a typographical error.

⁶⁴⁶Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2 (2005)*, p. 288.

The quote comes from Cooper’s essay “The Love and Madness Revolution”: “The true poet knows that words on the deepest level are irrelevant to his experience that is the recollecting of himself, so that in fact he generates a violence against language that tweaks the nose of words and then inserts a pig ring into them and leads them by it into the reality of his recollected experience. If poets are athletes of the extra-verbal, so are many people called schizophrenic.” [David Cooper, *The Death of the Family*. London: Penguin, 1971, p. 120.]

⁶⁴⁷Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2 (2005)*, p. 283.

⁶⁴⁸Ibid., p. 277.

⁶⁴⁹Ibid., p. 293. “Wortviren” is a clear (yet uncited) reference to Burroughs, who presents language as a virus in *The Ticket That Exploded*. See: William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*. New York: Grove, 1967, pp. 49 ff.

⁶⁵⁰Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2 (2005)*, p. 309.

⁶⁵¹Ibid., p. 310.

⁶⁵²Ibid., p. 275.

Brinkmann also questions the ultimate importance of language, suggesting that the issue should not be taken so seriously—“Sind Wörter wirklich so wichtig?,”⁶⁵³ he asks, implying that language’s chokehold on individual experience is not so ineluctable as some theoreticians make it out to be: “Ein Schriftsteller, irgendeine einzelne Person in dieser Gesellschaft, dessen Mittel die gegebene Sprache ist, kann gar nicht anders, ist er heute sich selber ernsthaft genug, als immer wieder darauf hinzuweisen, daß Sprache gar nicht so wichtig ist.”⁶⁵⁴ This simultaneous incitement and relaxation of the literary engagement with language reflects the somewhat contradictory balance that Brinkmann’s *Sprachkritik* had arrived at just before his death.

Brinkmann’s commentary in a letter to Hartmut Schnell from 1974 elucidates this development. He writes of how, through poetry, he comes to view language as a simple and functional tool for expression, but an inadequate medium for conceptual organization: “Zweck und Zieldenken mittels Sprache ist wohl unsinnig wie ein Denken in Zusammenhängen mittels Sprache, Sprache ist wohl viel mehr Unterhaltung, und so die Gedichte, Lust etwas zu sagen, zu sprechen, Sprache gesehen als ein simpler Vorgang der Äußerung, die nicht zu wichtig genommen wird.”⁶⁵⁵ Brinkmann accepts that language fails as an absolute form of symbolic representation, but functions unproblematically as casual communication; literature thus needs to take place on this simple level of linguistic communication.⁶⁵⁶ At the same time, Brinkmann describes how language can render reality ridiculous: “Sogenannte Wirklichkeit ist oft ja nur ein Gerede, und das macht die Wirklichkeit, so wie sie besteht

⁶⁵³Ibid., p. 267.

⁶⁵⁴Ibid., p. 260.

⁶⁵⁵Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 72.

⁶⁵⁶This can be compared with Handke’s decision to do what is linguistically “wrong” in turning towards narrative prose. [See: ch. 4].

und uns umgibt, lächerlich. Ist Wirklichkeit, die Ansicht der Wirklichkeit, eine Verordnung durch Sprache?“⁶⁵⁷ What Brinkmann is trying to say here is not that language necessarily structures reality, but rather that people are driven, under the influence of cultural abstractions, to make the choice to let language structure their reality, as he describes in another letter to Schnell: “Zu viele sprechen ohne Lust, zu viele sind in den Wörtern, die Sprache ist ein Gefängnis, dh. ein Ordnungsraster, etwas so oder so zu sehen, und die tatsächlichen Erfahrungen bleiben außerhalb.”⁶⁵⁸ Language is a prison only for those who choose to let it function as one; Brinkmann’s turn towards casual language, along with his denial of language’s importance, entails a rejection of language as an absolute organizational model for subjective experience. The transgression of linguistic barriers, which allows the poet to explore the visceral surface of the extraverbal world, requires an active resistance to the “Verständniswörter” and “Überbegriffe” that try to force their conceptual structures onto the subject’s personal perceptual impressions: “Das Eintauchen in die Oberfläche der Welt ist immer noch schwierig, die Verständniswörter müssen abgestoßen werden, und das ist eine schwierige Arbeit.”⁶⁵⁹

In this late linguistic model, the influence of international countercultural movements—with their calls to “free your mind” through drugs, art, music, spirituality, and a general skepticism towards “straight” culture—leads Brinkmann back to his original Mauthnerian revolt against language, understood now as a tool for cultural programming. Though he retains his belief in the value of casual language, he also returns somewhat to his initial longing for the extraverbal—the “Sprache der Steine” and the “utopia” of wordless

⁶⁵⁷Ibid., p. 73.

⁶⁵⁸Ibid., p. 190.

⁶⁵⁹Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2* (2005), p. 287.

experience: “Wahrnehmen als ein wortloser Zustand, ohne Sprache wahrnehmen (eine schöne Utopie!) Schöne Utopie: wahrnehmen, sehen, aufnehmen, erleben ohne durch Wörter, Verstehen, vorprogrammiert zu sein – direkt.”⁶⁶⁰ In this late phase, Brinkmann diverges from Handke’s linguistic thinking in the seventies and early eighties, with its pseudo-sacralization of language. In his striving for direct experience beyond the limits of cultural conditioning, and thus beyond the limits of language, Brinkmann more closely resembles Konrad Bayer and his quest for a “bargeldloses Verstehen.”

Flickwort Poetics

In *Westwärts 1 & 2* (1975)—Brinkmann’s last collection of poems, published just months after his death—Brinkmann’s late-period linguistic model finds expression in a heterogeneous collection of poems and photographs. The volume exercises the formal and stylistic caprice that Brinkmann admired in American writing, with each poem adopting a different form, different voice, and different appearance on the page. Brinkmann’s use of language also varies from poem to poem, expressing the somewhat conflicted linguistic model of Brinkmann’s late *Sprachkritik*. To illustrate this, we can compare two of the volume’s poems, “Westwärts, Teil 2” and “O, friedlicher Mittag”. The former has a fragmented, striated visual form, and the poetic voice often splits into multiple simultaneous threads. The poem directly addresses the themes of language and wordlessness, portraying words as barriers to experience. The poem recounts Brinkmann’s melancholic return to Germany after a stay as visiting professor at the University of Texas at Austin—“Zurückgekehrt in

⁶⁶⁰Brinkmann, *Briefe an Hartmut*, p. 78.

diese / traurige, alte Europa.” While his sadness at leaving the American city he had grown to love⁶⁶¹ was probably an effect of the cultural differences between the two countries, the poem presents his alienation as an effect of language:

Ich möchte Wörter benutzen, die
nicht zu benutzen sind, dachte ich. Ich möchte sprechen zu denen, die ich
liebe,

sollte ich mir
ich möchte das Gehirn aufbrechen und
nur wieder einmal zeigen, was darin ist?
über einen Tanzboden schwofen,
ohne Girlanden, ich möchte einfach
nur einfach nur ohne Erklärung sein.⁶⁶²

Lautsprecher an der Straßen
Bahn: “Einsteigen bitte!” 1 Befehlston

in Deutsch. War das einmal
meine Sprache? Das ist noch nie
meine Sprache gewesen! Die
Sprache hat immer anderen gehört.⁶⁶³

The fundamental dissatisfaction with language expressed in the first lines—according to which language is insufficient even for communication with loved ones—leads directly into a prioritizing of cerebral experience (“das Gehirn aufbrechen . . .”), which merges into a presentation of language as a culturally alienating force: “Brinkmann [betrachtet] hier

⁶⁶¹“Austin war für Brinkmann Arkadien. Ihm widerfuhr dort etwas, was er weder in Vechta noch in Köln, Rom oder Graz erlebt hatte: Er fühlte sich pudelwohl und war mit fast allem, was er sah und hörte, einverstanden. Auch mit sich.” [Ursula Maerz, “Köln, Rom, Austin”. *Die Zeit*, 11 February 1999]

⁶⁶²Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2. Gedichte*. Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1975, p. 50.

⁶⁶³Ibid., p. 53.

Sprache, Wörter, Bedeutungen als ein Teil des allumfassenden Zivilisationsprozesses, der das Ich verstümmelt und das Leben einer zweckrationalen Auffassung unterwirft.”⁶⁶⁴ Like in his early poetry, language is presented as the primary locus of individual alienation and constriction; the line about language belonging to “anderen” even appears to echo the title of his first poetry volume, “Ihr nennt es Sprache.”

In “Oh, friedlicher Mittag”, on the other hand, the formal fragmentation is replaced by a fluid prose voice adopting a fairly standard quatrain form, and the estranged spleen of “Westwärts, Teil 2” is replaced by a calm, descriptive serenity. Anxieties regarding language, representation, and truth have vanished, and the poem transmits an evocative still life of a passing moment of everyday working-class peace—an “Epiphanie im Alltag.”⁶⁶⁵ The ephemeral becomes transcendent through the clear descriptive language, and the purity and innocence of the lyrical voice is disarming compared to the truculence of Brinkmann’s other poems:

mitten in der Stadt, mit den verschiedenen
Mittagessengerüchen im Treppenhaus. Die Fahrräder
stehen im Hausflur, abgeschlossen, neben
dem Kinderwagen, kein Laut ist zu hören.

Die Prospekte sind aus den Briefkästen
genommen und weggeworfen worden. Die Briefkästen
sind leer. Sogar das Fernsehen hat die türkische
Familie abgestellt, deren Küchenfenster

zum Lichtschacht hin aufgeht. Ich höre

⁶⁶⁴Röhnert and Geduldig, *Rolf Dieter Brinkmann : seine Gedichte in Einzelinterpretationen*, p. 841.

⁶⁶⁵Ibid., p. 664.

Porzellan, Teller und Bestecke, dahinter
liegen Gärten, klar und kühl, in einem blassen
Frühlingslicht. Es sind überall die seltsamen

Erzählungen von einem gewöhnlichen Leben ohne
Schrecken am Mittwoch, genau wie heute. Der Tag
ist, regenhell, verwehte Laute: oh, friedlicher
Mittwoch mit Zwiebeln, auf dem Tisch,

mit Tomaten und Salat.
Die Vorhaben und Schindereien sind
zerfallen, und man denkt, wie friedlich
der Mittwoch ist

Wolken über dem Dach, blau, und
Stille in den Zimmern, friedlich und still und
genauso offen wie Porree, wie Petersilie grün ist
und die Erbsen heiß sind.⁶⁶⁶

In this loose, descriptive poetic style (less mannered than his O'Hara-influenced poetry, and more human than the over-descriptive prose of *Keiner weiß mehr*), Brinkmann seems liberated from his nagging *Sprachproblematik*, following an unimpeded path from sensory perception to poetic expression. However, Brinkmann places the poem among several others that, like "Westwärts, Teil 2", return to the linguistic skepticism and yearning for the nonverbal that featured in his earliest poems. In the *Westwärts* collection, as well as in much of his other late writing (including *Erkundungen*, *Rom*, *Blicke*, and *Schnitte*), Brinkmann seems to have expanded the formal picking-and-choosing, originally adopted from the American poets, to encompass his conflicting linguistic models. He no longer constrains himself to a

⁶⁶⁶Brinkmann, *Westwärts 1 & 2*, p. 105.

single, consistent theoretical orientation, and allows himself to choose between negation and affirmation of linguistic form—between a distanced *Sprachskepsis* and an unproblematic descriptive lucidity—depending on his aesthetic whim. Language’s inconsistencies become less of a philosophical problem for Brinkmann, and more an opportunity for poetic inspiration.

Nicolas Born, in his laudatio for the 1976 Petrarca-Preis (which was posthumously awarded to Brinkmann), refers to this linguistic ambiguity, specifically in the poems of *Westwärts*: “Die Sprache, für die er vergeblich nach einem besseren Ersatz suchte, erweist sich hier als verblüffend intakt.”⁶⁶⁷ Born ascribes this perseverance not to any naivety on the part of Brinkmann, but rather to his meticulous understanding of linguistic function—more specifically, the function of *Flickwörter*, or filler words (also referred to as discourse markers or modal particles in anglophone linguistics⁶⁶⁸):

Es ist ja keine besonders exzentrische Einsicht, daß die Sprache mehr und mehr herunterkommt auf ein Arsenal von Imperativen und auf Signalfunktionen im täglichen Abtausch der Informationen. Also, unter diesem Aspekt nennt Brinkmann Wörter prinzipiell “Flickwörter”. Und so ist seine Sprache ein Beleg für diese Annahme. Sie ist verstümmelt und verheert von all den Bedeutungen, die durch die Wörter gegangen sind. Aber tot und geisterhaft ist sie insofern nicht, als sie das Tote und Geisterhafte in dieser Komprimierung noch vermittelt.⁶⁶⁹

Properly understood, a *Flickwort* is meaningless; yet in its functional context it transmits a meaning, or at least fulfills a communicative purpose. Brinkmann’s late writing reflects

⁶⁶⁷Nicolas Born, “Stilleben einer Horrorwelt”. In *Petrarca-Preis 1975-1979: Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Sarah Kirsch, Ernst Meister, Herbert Achternbusch, Alfred Kolleritsch, Zbigniew Herbert*. Edited by Joachim Heimannsberg. Munich: Autorenbuchhandlung, 1980, p. 126.

⁶⁶⁸The function of modal particles in German is more complex and varied than in English, including words like: *aber, auch, bloß, denn, doch, eben, eigentlich, einfach, erst, etwa, fein, ganz, gerade, gleich, halt, ja, mal, nur, ruhig, schon, vielleicht* and *wohl*. See: Fabian Bross, “German Modal Particles and Common Ground”. *Helikon. A Multidisciplinary Online Journal*, 2, 2012, p. 183.

⁶⁶⁹Born, “Stilleben einer Horrorwelt”, p. 126.

this duality, which, according to Born, he extends to all words. A *Flickwort* can be called into question, analyzed critically, and exposed as “[die] Hülle von etwas das nicht ‘ist’,”⁶⁷⁰ but at the same time it can be left alone, its functional purpose undisturbed. In these late works, Brinkmann accepts the ultimate emptiness of linguistic signifiers, but recognizes and exploits the communicative function they nonetheless fulfill.

Although Brinkmann largely deserves his reputation as a “lone wolf” in the German literary scene, he was not without his colleagues and admirers. Along with Born and Handke (who also delivered a *laudatio* at the Petrarca-Preis ceremony), Brinkmann could count the likes of Rygulla, Wolf Wondratschek, Peter O. Chotjewitz, Hermann Peter Piwitt, and Jürgen Theobaldy among the authors influenced by his work. Throughout the seventies, Theobaldy, a close friend of Brinkmann who was in London with him at the time of his death, developed an aesthetic program for a new German poetry heavily influenced by his friend’s work.⁶⁷¹ In the afterword to his third poetry volume, *Zweiter Klasse* (1976), Theobaldy presents a short theoretical statement that echoes all of the main themes of Brinkmann’s critical writings. He describes his poems as reflex reactions to subjective perception based in ordinary language: “Ich benütze die gewöhnlichen Wörter, wie sie in den Pausen gesprochen werden, in Kneipen, in möblierten Zimmern und zu engen Wohnungen. Die Wörter sind vorgegeben, ich war nicht vor ihnen da. Die Beziehungen, in die ich sie bringe, sind Reflexe der Beziehungen, die ich wahrnehme. Es sind Antworten darauf.” At the same time, he laments the distance between reality and language, yet states his determination to breach

⁶⁷⁰Genia Schulz, “Nachwort”. In *Künstliches Licht. Lyrik und Prosa*. Edited by Genia Schulz. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995, p. 165.

⁶⁷¹A good overview of the development of Theobaldy’s theories, including the influence of Walter Höllerer, can be found in: Harry Louis Roddy, *Germany’s Poetic Miscreants on the Road: From Beat Poetics to Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, Nicolas Born and Jürgen Theobaldy*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2004, pp. 146-64.

this gap: “Wie fremd sind uns die Dinge. [...] Sie existieren außerhalb der Sprache, deshalb schreibe ich darüber. Ich möchte sie verfügbar machen, indem ich sie zu begreifen suche im Gedicht.”⁶⁷² He also criticizes the ideologized jargon of public discourse, and sees poetry’s *raison d’être* as a resistance to linguistic coercion:

Inzwischen polieren Minister und sogenannte Persönlichkeiten des öffentlichen Lebens ungewöhnliche Wörter auf, wie beispielsweise die ‘freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung’; sie versuchen vorzuschreiben, welche Wörter der einzelne zu benutzen, welche er zu lassen hat, wann er ‘Bande’, wann er ‘Gruppe’ und wann er überhaupt nichts sagen darf. Gedichte, die mir wichtig sind, enthalten die Weigerung, hier mitzumachen. Sie bezeugen Gegenwehr, die sich in der Sprache organisiert, ohne damit den direkten Widerstand gegen den täglichen Druck, gegen Hierarchien und Anmaßungen ersetzen zu wollen.⁶⁷³

Brinkmann’s influence is clear to see in this program, which Theobaldy and others would propagate well into the following decade as a testament to the aesthetic efficacy of Brinkmann’s linguistic thinking.

⁶⁷²Jürgen Theobaldy, *Zweiter Klasse*. Berlin: Rotbuch, 1976, pp. 75-6.

⁶⁷³Ibid., p. 76.

6. Conclusion: The Linguistic Leap of Faith

In the previous four chapters, I have attempted to show how the postwar return of germanophone experimental writing was accompanied by an aesthetic program of linguistic skepticism that justified its contradictions of the dominant literary model, which promoted an engaged realist writing. In the “first wave” of this language-oriented avant-garde, these linguistic aesthetics led to a writing that actively questioned the representative capacity of language and attempted to either demonstrate, deconstruct, or destroy the artificial constrictions that language placed on thought, writing, communication, and experience. The internal contradictions of linguistic convention were highlighted in an attempt to destabilize the social integration of literature that had been the prerequisite for post-fascist German and Austrian writing; this created a space for experimentation with language and literary form, legitimizing such activity by way of a progressive program of *Sprachkritik*.

However, in providing the antithesis to the literary model of engaged realism, this language-skeptical literature mimicked the objective critical perspective of its opposition, resulting in a pseudo-scientific fundamentalism that denied the basic functionality of lan-

guage. This viewpoint inspired an ideological adherence to non-representational writing that some writers, such as Wellershoff and Handke, felt was an unnecessary and unhelpful constriction; other writers, like Brinkmann, also saw it as a replication of the elitist myopia of an introverted, high-brow literary culture. The fundamental skepticism voiced by writers like Heißenbüttel had served its purpose in legitimizing formal experimentation, but by the end of the sixties it had become an impediment to further literary innovation. In moving beyond this focus on language's inconsistencies and developing a more pragmatically critical language model, writers like Handke and Brinkmann do not return to a traditional mode of writing, but develop new ways to probe the ambiguous representative connection between language and the world.

These works of post-skeptical experimental writing are often grouped with the movement of New Subjectivity, which is characterized by critics as reflecting a solipsistic turn away from reality, towards an inner world of emotion and introspection. I would like to offer a different take on this writing by presenting Handke and Brinkmann's turn away from skepticism as a linguistic "leap of faith." Kierkegaard speaks of anxiety as the dizziness caused by looking down "into the yawning abyss"⁶⁷⁴; the doubt of writers like Heißenbüttel and Bayer can be compared with this state of anxiety, fixated on the internal aporia of linguistic representation. Kierkegaard sees faith, on the other hand, as the assertion of a subjective truth in the face of such aporia, which also entails a negation of the claims of objective truth: "When subjectivity is truth, the definition of truth must also contain in itself an expression of the antithesis to objectivity [. . .]."⁶⁷⁵ The turn towards a subjective

⁶⁷⁴See: Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*. Trans. by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 61.

⁶⁷⁵Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong.

“truth” in the early-seventies writing of Handke and Brinkmann thus implies the negation of an objective *Weltanschauung*—whether espoused by the politically engaged realists or the fundamentally skeptical experimentalists. Kierkegaard defines truth in terms of faith, by which a paradox is internalized and redeemed through the subject: “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness, is the truth, the highest truth there is for an existing person.”⁶⁷⁶ This definition of truth, which Kierkegaard refers to as “a paraphrasing of faith,” can be used to arrive at an alternate understanding of the New Subjectivist turn away from linguistic skepticism: renouncing the fixation on language’s inconsistencies, these writers internalize the “objective uncertainty” of language by returning to the primary lens of their personal, subjective experience. This allows them to embrace language’s aporia while writing towards a personal transcendence of language through literature. The experimental “reportage”-approach of New Subjective works like Handke’s *Das Gewicht der Welt* and Brinkmann’s *Rom, Blicke* performs this leap of faith with relation to language, asserting a subjective truth despite an underlying web of conceptual contradiction; the wager set by these works, and the faith that they represent, is that truth resides in literature, not in language.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 203.

⁶⁷⁶Ibid.

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