Interview 17th – 19th October 1980

SR: I am concerned here principally with two questions: the question of the role of language and the question of the writer's role in his work.

GR: I can briefly say two things before we begin. For me the role of language has altered considerably. In the beginning, for me language was an instrument that I viewed highly subjectively and that I used to depict my inner difficulties: that was the case in *einstein,* in *Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs* (*The Outbreak of WW I*) and in *Der Wille zur Krankheit* (*The Will to Sickness*), even though in two stories, in *Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs* in the title story, and in "How to be a Detective"—I went about it in a very artificial way, they were still all more or less a way of testing out my sense of displacement.[1] By 'displacement' I don't mean my psychological state, but just that I am 'displaced' in society, not in a place where someone belongs. And I've had this feeling always really, a feeling of alienation, only because for a long time I have had feelings of guilt that it is this way. I have conceived and carried out many actions on the basis of this feeling of guilt that I would otherwise never have done: and so I would say, for me writ-

[1] Gerhard Roth, *die autobiographie des albert einstein*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972; *Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs und andere Romane*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1972; *Der Wille zur Krankheit*, Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1973. Available in English translation are: *the autobiography of albert einstein*, Malcolm Green, trans., London: Atlas Press, 1992; *The Will to Sickness*, trans. Tristram Wolff, Providence, R. I.: Burning Deck Press, 2006.

ing was in the first instance a way of covering up. In *einstein,* I tried with the help of language to portray this feeling of alienation aesthetically without exploring social relations. It is just this – a process of concealment from myself.
Then, in the other stories, I have simply applied the language experiences that I gained in the process of writing. For example, in *Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs* and then in *The Will to Sickness* I have made this language situation artificially useful for myself in as far as I could apply it like a mathematical equation. I wasn't satisfied with my development in this book, because it seemed to me like a dead end street. Because of this language restriction—every form is a language restriction—because of this artificial style, I couldn't any longer write what I wanted to write. When you have to make the theme conform, so to speak, to the expressive possibility, then you have to find a way out. I have, so to say, started right from the beginning again and in my American book, I have tried with great simplicity and great exactitude to create a spectrum that enables me to describe things and events that are important to me and that I want to depict.

SR: You have said in an interview that you had the feeling at that time that you could simply fabricate books and for you as a writer that was a kind of dissatisfaction.[2]

[2] 'I noticed that I could *fabricate* books. ... I didn't want to react any longer like a camera that just registers and copies'. Ulrich Greiner, 'Ich will ein Erzähler sein: Porträt des Schriftstellers Gerhard Roth', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 December 1976. Reprinted in U. G., *Der Tod des Nachsommers: Aufsätze, Porträts, Kritiken zur österreichischen Gegenwartsliteratur*, München: Hanser, 1979: pp. 158-163.

GR: Yes, the feeling that I have actually already made this style which, as I said, arose out of a necessity, usable for myself. I could have gone on writing in this form, every day my few lines, but in principle it was becoming increasingly difficult for me, because in this style a certain word-repetitiveness had formed: I was already capable of reacting to particular word-constellations. That was already like a chemical process: the words reacted as in a chemical process, attracted certain other words and brought certain other thoughts with them. This first phase of mine will perhaps be regarded by outsiders and by certain critics more as experimental and the second phase as conservative, to use just some possible terms, and yet for me every book is experimental. I can't have any attitude to the work other than an experimental one. The examination of my experience is possible for me only in that form of language, which I devise for my work. I could never say, 'well, I've found my style and now I'll make twenty books with it.' No, I always try to apply new methods, even if to begin with, they are not always quite clear. The last book, *Der stille Ozean* (*The Calm Ocean*), for example, is, first of all, thematically a relatively new thing for the present time, because in the German-speaking world the possibility of confusing it with the *Heimatroman* is immediately there.[3] The *Heimatroman*, a genre that emerged under National Socialism but was already present in the Wilhelminian period, has for decades hindered artists from engaging with the theme. The concepts that one needs for the writing of such a novel are loaded. I

[3] Gerhard Roth, *Der stille Ozean*, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1980. English translation: *The Calm Ocean*, Helga Schreckenberger and Jacqueline Vansant trans., Riverside CA: Ariadne Press, 1993.

have tried not to involve myself with these concepts and have approached it rather in the style of the Russians or in the style of William Faulkner and the writers of the American South who have suddenly discovered their milieu ... Carson McCullers or Sherwood Anderson in *Weinsberg Ohio* ...

SR: Such writers—the Americans, the Russian—are your literary ancestors so to speak.

GR: Yes. In German literature I am really reading only Stifter intensively and over and over again ...[4]

SR: Stifter is really important to you?

GR: He is important to me, yes, but I don't have this interest, this philosophy that Stifter represented. In Stifter I simply admire the precision and ...

SR: The precision of the writing?

GR: Yes. Yes!

SR: And of description?

GR: Yes, the writing and the description. Every time Stifter produces the world out of tiny microcosms: that's the aston-

[4] See Gerhard Roth, 'Technik des Naturempfindens gegen Kunst der Technik'. *Neue Kronen-Zeitung*, (Steiermark-Ausgabe) (Graz), 11 February 1973. Reprinted in G. R. *Menschen, Bilder, Marionetten - Prosa, Kurzromane, Stücke*, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer, 1979: pp. 49-51.

ishing thing about what he does! For that reason I find him fascinating. And for the current book, for *Landläufiger Tod* (*Common Death*), over the past ten months, along with other books that are concerned with suicide, I have repeatedly read Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* and Melville's *Moby Dick.*

SR: *The Calm Ocean* begins with a motto from Melville: does that come from the novel?

GR: It's from a letter to a friend. The letter appears in the *Winkler* edition, in the Afterword.[5] I have *Moby Dick* in four or five different editions and in various translations. In Hamburg I had a different one. I have one here in the country and I possess three or four editions of *Sketches from a Hunter's Album* because when I'm working or reflecting, wherever I am, I read that book over and over. The third book that I've been reading for some years is *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote and then, of course, also Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Plague* and Sartre's stories. I also frequently read Hemingway's stories.

[5] "I have a sort of sea-feeling here in the country, now that the ground is covered in snow. I look out of my window in the morning when I rise as I would out of a port-hole of a ship in the Atlantic." Herman Melville, 'Letter to Evert A. Duyckinck,' 13. 12. 1850: *Herman Melville: Correspondence*, Ed. Lynn Horth, Evanston and Chicago, Northwestern University Press, 1993: p. 173.

SR: And what about American "New Journalism" – Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Capote ...?[6]

GR: On the language side I don't have much in common with Tom Wolfe, although I very much like reading him—*Radical Chic*, for example. I like him a lot but he has no influence on me.

SR: Influence—no, I wouldn't say that either.

GR: I'm familiar with all that: I read it all. I'm familiar with everything of Mailer's that there is in German. I'm familiar with Capote as well, especially *In Cold Blood.* There are other works of his that I don't like as much, but in *In Cold Blood* it's the theme that really interests me. There's a kind of journalism at work there that doesn't turn its back on art even for a moment. It could just as well be radio, that's the great thing about the book. Nowhere in it is there anything journalistic in the bad sense, nor even journalistic in the best sense: it is always art, there's always imagination in it, in everything, in the most sober reports that he reproduces. It's this precision and simplicity that attracts me so much to the book. It's also the same with Camus' *The Stranger,* which is simple right down to the most banal detail. It's the same, too, with Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*—a completely unspectacular book, but when you read it longer

[6] "New Journalism", a concept introduced in the early 1970s by the American journalist Tom Wolfe to describe a form of journalistic writing strongly influenced by the techniques of literary fiction. See: Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism,* Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson Eds. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

and get involved with it, you notice Turgenev's tremendous mastery. In the case of *Moby Dick,* I appreciate Melville's courage in making all the mistakes that even today still count as mistakes, the changes of narrative perspective, for example. Captain Ahab portrays what he is thinking to himself which in the first person he couldn't do at all and so on. He [Melville] simply doesn't bother himself about it.

SR: Melville developed an 'oceanic' style – he wasn't afraid of being stylistically inconsistent.

GR: Yes, that's correct! There are passages with scientific treatises and so forth in there and for many critics writing in the papers today who have some objection to everything, it would have to be an interesting conceptual framework to test their own criteria on. They would all have to deem the book a botched job because, according to the criteria that they use, they can't understand it at all. In Melville's case, you can say that the language is thoroughly biblical. I also appreciate his courage and the drive in the book to engage with the fragmentary. This is particularly important for me now in the new book: I write a page here, a page there, sometimes three pages, sometimes seven pages, sometimes sixty pages and then perhaps a short scientific essay about the region, how many inhabitants there are etc.

SR: How are you developing this structural principle? To me a fragmentary narrative structure like this has a lot to do with the natural movements of time, of the seasons and so on.

GR: What you are saying here, Goethe set himself as a goal in his later work, to himself become nature. I can see, for example, also in Melville, in *Moby Dick,* that art passes over into nature and has reached a stage where already it almost exhibits an identity when set against natural forms.

SR: Is this also the case with Stifter?

GR: In Stifter's case it didn't go as far. The man who first succeeded in taking this gigantic step was Melville. Others have thought about it and attempted it but for me the first one who succeeded was Melville. That's the stupendous thing about the book. But that is just what cannot be gathered from literature—the discoveries which someone else has gained through writing and has gone on sooner or later to develop—otherwise, if that were the case, after Joyce literature would look quite different to what it actually looks like now. For example, if you look at Thomas Mann's *Der Erwählte* (*The Holy Sinner*) in comparison with Joyce's *Ulysses*, those are literary paths that have absolutely nothing to do with one another. *Ulysses* seems to have passed Mann by without leaving a trace. But in the case of Döblin, especially in *Berlin Alexanderplatz,* a similarity to Joyce is probably present. That means that an author can only accept something as an affinity, that he feels an affinity to some style or other in some book or other and agrees with that way of viewing things. I'm convinced that one is very strongly affected by many books that one has not even read yet. Since I read twenty or thirty pages of Dostoyevsky's *Die Dämonen* (*The Devils*), I have been occupied with that book and I don't any more dare read it to the end because it

possibly won't fulfil the paradigm that I have made of it for myself. I often read only 'about' *Die Dämonen*—essays and so forth—and refuse to compare that with the book.

SR: And that suffices?

GR: No, it doesn't suffice at all but I am afraid to read it, so to speak, because in doing so I will lose a fetish. For me the unread *Dämonen* is a fetish. For years *Moby Dick* was a fetish for me and only this year have I read it through in one run and in summer for a second and third time. Before that it was like a fetish for me. I also carried *Sketches from a Hunter's Diary* around with me for a year, unread as a fetish, by reading only the first story. Perhaps the reason for it is that it is so hard to find literary fetishes. The manner of influence is not such that I would now like to copy something, but I imagine what there might be in the book in the way of aesthetic, linguistic or content-related categories that are similar to what I am thinking about or am concerned with. Sometimes it happens that I read it and am finished with it, then I never read it again.

SR: Are these writers, as Hans Wollschläger put it, also contemporaries? [7]

GR: Yes, all of them! That's clear. Each one, that's the beauty of it. In literature there's no time difference for me as

[7] Hans Wollschläger (1935-2007), a German polymath, author, composer and translator of i. a. Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, William Faulkner, James Joyce (*Ulysses* 1975), Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain und Oscar Wilde.

a reader. The moment they speak to me, they are my contemporaries. I would characterise Büchner, for example, as the one from German literature who, at the moment, interests me the most.

SR: I have been engaging quite a lot recently with Oswald Wiener's *Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa* (*The Improvement of Central Europe*). Wiener refers to Wittgenstein's *Philosophische Bemerkungen* (*Philosophical Remarks*) when he says: "The assumption that a reality exists outside language, had revealed itself as an illusion." [8]

GR: I don't think you can just take that totally out of context. The interesting thing for me about this statement when you utter it now, is that it sounds different than at the time when I read it – in context. It wasn't so torn out of context, because the assumption is very clear in itself. Flaubert in his work would possibly have come to the same conclusion as Oswald Wiener. It is a Flaubertian writer's statement, I would say, and not a scientific, philosophical statement.

SR: One can say that it's quite the opposite to you ...

GR: I have a connection already to this Flaubertian relationship to writing. It's not alien to me, this sitting for hours

[8] Oswald Wiener (b. 1935) was a member of the anarchic individualist *Wiener Gruppe* (1954-1964) that arose out of the Vienna *Art-Club*. See Oswald Wiener, *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa*, Rowohlt: Hamburg, 1969. Preprints of this 'novel' centred on the Austrian critique of language appeared between 1965 and 1969 in *manuskripte*, the magazine of Graz's *Forum Stadtpark*.

over language to ponder which formulation is the most natural. No, I believe with regard to this proposition that we are both thinking something different, hence this conversation. In this sentence I see a writer's sentence.

SR: You read *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa* as a novel and not as philosophy ... ?

GR: Neither the one nor the other. I have taken it as a document of a brilliant thinker and writer. It is very difficult to say; all these classifications hardly fit Wiener. It occurs to me that just a short time ago I read a book by Carpentier – literary essays – in which he writes that always, just when the question is asked: "That's not a novel, is it?", a new form of novel has come into being, and that writing novels actually consists of inventing new forms. *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa* is, of course, a spectacular instance of this thesis.

SR: Is this a Flaubertian principle?

GR: Yes, and I have to say here, to bring it around to my own work in which I make the same demands, Günter Blöcker's critical review in the *F.A.Z.* comes to mind when he wrote: "What's *The Calm Ocean* meant to be? Is it a biology lesson or is it a *Heimatroman* or is it a report from the country?"[9] He only asks questions like that because he has

[9] Günter Blöcker, 'Ein kundiger Protokollant seelischer Irritationen'. In: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 March 1980: "Again and again one asks oneself, what is this all about? Are we in a biology course? Is this an introduction to rural welfare studies? A guide for city dwellers who

looked for a pattern that he wanted to impose on it, because he is working in the context of the concept "novel" and, because in *The Calm Ocean* the formal things, which are concealed in the language and the construction, are simply not spectacularly on display, but pretend that they are not there. The book pretends that there are only chance movements that I have noted down, as if everything is random. In reality—and that is just what Blöcker has accused it of—a mesh of death, violence, rabies traverses the entire book and if you don't recognise that, or don't want to, then of course you arrive at a misconception. That was the big surprise for me in the reviews of the book. For years, I have been engaged with it, have for so long confronted it, that for me this process of the fine, of the exact, had become a self-evident thing. I have sought to approach a quite particular image—in language—and it has astounded me, that some, actually surprisingly many, couldn't follow it and also haven't recognised it. Raddatz very rightly recognised that about the book in the *Zeit* review.[10] Something was lacking perhaps in the review in that he has framed it as a response to Blöcker and consequently has not brought out so clearly certain other features of the book. It would have been nicer, if Raddatz had written his own review of this book independently of Blöcker and

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want to set themselves up in the country? Or a reference book on Austrian folklore?"

[10] Fritz J. Raddatz, 'Zeit der Tollwut'. In *Die Zeit*, 11 April 1980: "But Roth creates this feeling without any declamatory effects – he sets the snare with such hairline precision that even so careful a reader as Günter Blöcker comes to a grotesquely wrong conclusion. He sees in the minutely assembled landscape images 'inconsolable boredom' and in his review lands himself in a dreary error ..."

not as an answer to something that has already been written. But essentially he has pointed out the error that Blöcker had fallen into.

But we have wandered away from the topic. By that I just wanted to say that the renewal of a stylistic form, for example, that of the novel, may appear unspectacular. To take a well-known example, with regard to form, in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* you don't get anything spectacular. It is simply immense, a total work of art in language, but there is no doubt that the book could have been written a hundred years earlier and even then it would also have been a milestone in the development of literature. The second example is Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (*The Man Without Qualities*), which formally also does not appear so revolutionary but, of course, in reality it is. Just as in recent years the influence of Latin-Americans like Marquez, for instance, has represented a great impetus in literature. Previously, it was the Americans, Truman Capote, for example. His *In Cold Blood* is in its own way an essential literary work.

SR: You said to me before that taking photographs is a method of becoming aware and remaining aware.

GE: Of perceiving.

SR: Of perceiving ... and what about language? Is language itself also a method of becoming and remaining aware?

GR: Yes, that's most certainly the case! There is no one who continually formulates things internally. That would

exceed our human capacity, wouldn't it? The state of linguistic formulation, conscious formulation—this process is naturally going on by itself unconsciously—like the conscious process of perception, is somewhat tiring and, in spite of everything, in everyday life it is something rather exceptional. Whenever I photograph for four or five hours, afterwards I'm very tired. I can't maintain this state of concentration endlessly—that demands a great deal of attention. You always have to take in the landscape, the people, the surroundings very consciously, continually, and similarly there's the process of becoming weary while writing and, for this reason, you can't write on and on because this continual linguistic conceptualising is really something physically and intellectually tiring. For me both of these things, perceiving and conceptualising linguistically, are closely linked. Perception is already the first selection principle, so to speak. At this point, the first important event must occur, the essential thing must be recognised here, found and registered, or noted in a notebook or captured with a camera. Then, the second process is the conscious activity of linguistic selection whereby surprises often occur at the writing desk itself. This is not a state of transcendence over the work such that you sit down and dominate the things that you describe according to some inner law. Only when you are so immersed in your work—you could almost call it a state of trance—so as to abandon yourself to a situation in which you don't know whether the ice onto which you are stepping is going to hold—then, from time to time, not always, the work is satisfying and it's probably also something that will be good.

Now with regard to the act of photography, I can assist here with a quotation from Ortega y Gasset where he is writing about hunting and searching for what the fascination of hunting might be.[11] He goes through all the things which hunting is reproached with, purported to be, its perceived motivations etcetera and finally arrives at the idea that there is only one actual and true reason for the eternal hunting history of mankind and that is the state of alertness, the fact that during the hunt the hunter feels a state of absolute alertness—the ear, the eye, the senses are totally sharp—and in this I recognise what a vegetative state one normally exists in. This state of enormous alertness is almost trancelike and this quite massive alertness brings along with it something magical as in a dream. Otherwise, you go through nature half aware or thinking, with some intention or goal in mind and perceiving more, then suddenly this action, this action in the moment is situated at the mid-point of all these considerations. Everything that is now happening around about you is important and is included. For this reason, most hunters prefer to go hunting alone, because company doesn't allow this alertness. With this quotation I just wanted to get quickly to the state of alertness in the act of photography. It is something similar, isn't it? Consequently, I've already referred to this sate of alertness in *einstein.* I would like a

[11] Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955), Spanish philosopher. The German translation of Gasset's introductory essay to the hunting story by Conde de Yebes, *Prólogo a "Veinte años de caza mayor"*, which appeared in 1957 as Volume 42 in *Rowohlts deutscher Enzyklopädie* under the title *Meditationen über die Jagd* (*Meditations on Hunting*), attracted quite a lot of interest in German-speaking countries.

drug that made me incredibly sober and didn't intoxicate me: one that does the exact opposite and at the same time the euphoria is again there. The whole system of *einstein* has arisen somewhere from the actual scientific discoveries of a madman. This similarity between the spirit world of the sciences with all its atoms and molecules and all its scientific explanations of nature and the environment has become something fantastical again.

SR: Is making photographs a form of consciousness altering?

GR: Everything that you abandon yourself to, necessarily alters you, but I do that so that I can maintain my profession, so to speak, there where I have opened myself up and where I have written down thoughts, in order to keep seeing and to continue to formulate things linguistically. You have seen that I make a lot of notes and this is hugely important for me. For the most part, I don't use half the notes that I make but the fact that I write at all puts me into a state of contentment. Amongst other things, writing is a way to calm myself down. When I have occupied myself writing for a certain time in the day, I am much quieter in myself than when I don't. It has nothing to do with a guilty conscience ...

SR: Fear?

GR: ... I just feel calmed down when I do that. It can be an hour, half an hour ... it can also be five hours.

SR: I think that this feeling of calming down while writing has a lot to do with the state of concentration itself.

GR: Yes, and also with the knowledge or insight that you gain in the process about how you can move ahead. You can't measure that in pages. Therefore, for ten months now I have only thought about the book. In these almost eleven months since December, I have written the story for *Zeitmagazin*, quite a short article about the Emperor Franz Josef and otherwise nothing at all.[12] Apart from that, I have just read and thought about it. Because I hadn't found the formal container for the story, I was already disturbed about the situation; this has never before lasted so long. I didn't know where it belonged or what I should do with it. That's also work. Without actually sitting at the desk, I have been busy here with the writing. I mean that in the full sense—taking photographs, making notes—that's all a part of it. I believe that if someone is a real artist, then they can't do anything that isn't art, not even when they pick up a spoon. That's something that is fully within them.

SR: Can this be learned or ... ?

GR: I don't know. I can't say. It's certainly also a type of practice, what in sport is called training. It is the desire to keep this brightness and flickering in oneself awake. You can't just turn it off and on—it is always there. From this also comes the consideration that among writers the ten-

[12] G. R., 'Land an der Grenze'. *Zeitmagazin*, 16, 11 März 1980, pp. 18-29; 'Kaiserwetter in Wien'. *Zeitmagazin*, 27, 27 Juni 1980, pp. 26-27.

dency to drink is relatively strong. It is always anaesthetising. For example, Hemingway always drank whisky as a reward. He wrote this way. He sat in the café and ordered a glass of whisky from the waiter. He wrote another passage and by the time the whisky was standing on the table, he wrote the last three or four sentences with great pleasure. One the one hand, it is very fortunate to constantly be transforming things and, on the other, it is the exhaustion and the weariness that I have talked about which is connected with it. Of course there are epochs, so to speak—it strikes you as being so long—of emptiness, when there is absolutely nothing in you at all, when you are just animal. But I know from friends that I have observed, that in spite of this you are a transformer of things without knowing, sensing or feeling it yourself. You can feel inwardly quite empty and yet appear quite otherwise in your behaviour and being. That's not a criterion, not something better or worse but is simply something different. There's something of displacement or estrangement in it, something of a general world feeling but also something of a great sobriety. I think that when people arrive at this place, that it should be called transformation and that, at least in part, it must already be a predisposition; otherwise everyone would have committed suicide, if this writing had not simultaneously been present.

SR: Helmut Eisendle has written a lot about intoxication. The state of intoxication appears to be very important to him.[13]

[13] Helmut Eisendle (1939-2003), an Austrian psychologist and writer. A member of the 'Grazer Autorenversammlung.' See in particular his

GR: It's important for everyone. I hardly know an author who doesn't drink or take pills or is not otherwise somehow or other experimenting with themselves, to quieten themselves in between times. This applies equally whenever the silence in oneself becomes too great. Again it is this longing for this other feeling, the feeling of creativity. And so this game always shifts between creativity, writing, anaesthetisation and emptiness. And there, just where the exchange is disturbed, the personal difficulties of the author arise.

SR: Is then writing—language—a method to reach another level of consciousness?

GR: Certainly, it is also that. I mean there isn't just one motivation for writing; there are many. You can say that an erotic force plays a role in writing which ideological critics object to derisively as masturbation, but I believe that in this sense Kafka, for example, was quite a big masturbator: for me that doesn't amount to anything. They are just empty reproaches. It is surely better that Kafka was a masturbator in language than if he had not done so, don't you think?

SR: What does it mean, 'to become a storyteller'? I am referring here to the writing crisis that you fell into around 1972.

GR: Yes, that's right: first and foremost to be a writer. I think I was always one without knowing it, beginning in my

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novel *Exil oder Der braune Salon – Ein Unterhaltungsroman*, Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1977.

childhood. As a boy, for example, around 1945 after the war, I made books, illustrated them myself. My grandmother stitched them together. I made myself a little library, wrote stories and so it continued until I was twelve. Then for many years I kept a diary. Of course, I also wrote poems. At that time I had a thick exercise book of poems. I lost it and since then, I've had this fear of losing things. I always take it [my work] with me. I carried *einstein* around with me for two years in a black folder. Wherever I was, I took this book with me. And as for this thing [*Landläufiger Tod*] I have it in the suitcase wherever I go.

SR: It looks like a doctor's case. Is it one?

GR: It was found thrown away in a rubbish skip—bulk refuse. But it meets my needs, just the right shape and size. I can carry it as hand luggage on to the plane and it fits exactly.
I have always had this feeling that I have to write. I can't remember a time when it wasn't there. I wouldn't just say that the cause was being different. I didn't become a writer the way that one becomes a cook or a bicycle repairman but simply couldn't do otherwise, anyway so I would explain it today. I didn't attempt to work against it: to me it was self-evident. I don't think that I am standing outside society. On the contrary, I believe that I take part in the world very intensively. I worked for ten years in the data processing centre: I started as an operator and ended up with a department of thirty people.

SR: Have you already written about your experiences at the data processing centre?

GR: Indirectly it was the ending of *Ein neuer Morgen* (*A New Morning*), where Dalton relates his life story.[14] We were a service computer centre and certainly one day I might deal with it but today, although it is already years behind me now, I am not so far removed from it that I could write about it; it still affects me so much. One could say to me, 'he worked there for ten years and he should write about the data processing centre.' Back then I was so barricaded in and it had such an influence on me that the whole time I had to resist it, so that even today I am not yet able to disregard what was really happening to me then.

SR: Writing was a real need for you at that time.

GR: Yes, at the time it was quite strong. I had a whole year on nightshift and, despite this, always wrote during the day. This can't be my life, I thought, this isn't what I understand to be my life. I have actually never connected social demands with my life, never. I have thought, I must have a car or something particular—I enjoy one thing or another—but I have never had an urge to possess things in that sense. For me it's not a matter of status or that kind of thing but of the function, of what I need for my work and I've bought that as quickly as possible. And in the country I have always rented the house; it is not my property. When I moved in it was a very sparse house. It's a so-called *Winzer's* house. The farm

[14] *Ein neuer Morgen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1976.

labourers there are called *Winzers* and what comes out of that is the attitude that they have towards the farm labourers. In summer this year I was talking with children there. They gave me an apple and pointed out a hole. — No, of course, they were cherries! — I shouldn't eat that bit. There's a *Winzer* in it. I asked, what was that. It's a worm. And they made them live that way. The rooms were the size of a hole and had six to ten people in them. It's one of those houses. Originally the house had two rooms, a kitchen and another room and a small room has been made in the attic. When I came in everything was dilapidated. The plaster was hanging down from the ceiling. The water was foul. The power had been cut off because the bills hadn't been paid for years. To get it fixed up, I began living there under genuinely difficult conditions with a mattress on the kitchen floor. Only now in the fourth year has it reached the point of being habitable. Two months ago, I bought myself a bed. I always slept in a sleeping bag on a mattress on the floor and apart from that I only had what was in the house. I've only got an old stove and have used it to heat. So that suited me but I'm not in the country for ideological or alternative reasons. That struck me as too silly. I am alternative in the city too. I like being here in the apartment. I just live here together with my literature. That's what attracts me. I had my first publication while in the data processing centre and, after *einstein,* there was only the wish as quickly as possible to no longer have to work there. Earlier it had been my hope that it wouldn't be necessary to have to work there. Then it became the wish that it would now come to an end as quickly as possible. But then it still lasted a few more years because of my family

situation. I was there for a further six years, but I was always hoping ...

SR: Have you had the feeling from time to time that your role as a writer is a kind of destiny; that becoming a writer was somehow inevitable?

GR: Of course, but I am not a writer in every situation. Also it doesn't mean that I am always writing. I could imagine driving a taxi for five years, but I now feel like a writer, that is to say ...

SR: You remain a writer in any case.

GR: Yes, or I could also be lost without trace, or I could be absolutely denied any recognition and also deny it to myself. The awareness always remains, however, either as depression that one isn't good enough, or as something that I always register whenever I notice anything and think, that's very beautiful, it could also be beautiful to write how something moved or which sentences they chose ... That's the essential thing, I think. 'Destiny' would be too much, I would say because the expression is too strong. I would rather say, that it is a quality, just as there are biologists who as children already collected butterflies. It is simply in one. In my case, it was always reading and writing: I didn't like drawing as much as other children but I have always written for myself. I can remember too, that whenever anyone said anything in any drawings, I added speech balloons without knowing anything about comic books—this influence certainly didn't exist in 1945, 46, 47—in 47 I was five years

old and did that already. At school on the first of November, we made an All Saints Day picture. A cemetery was painted, the gravestone with a chimney and there, where otherwise smoke would have come out, a speech balloon. I don't know why I put it up there but only know that it struck my teacher as peculiar that the dead were being talked to.
I don't see myself differently because I am a writer; even if I had remained an operator in the data processing centre, I still would have been different. I have always suffered from this quality of difference. At thirteen or fourteen in school I was tormented by the class. It went on for months and since then school has been just a great drama and I hate school. I feel sorry for children who have to go to school. It can't be otherwise, I see that, but I pity them deeply and I understand any child that has committed suicide at school: it's perfectly clear to me. From the first moment on at school I felt stupid and abandoned. Everything went so quickly at school and all the subjects ... it didn't interest me at all.

SR: This feeling of stupidity, is it possibly not something else, a kind of muteness?

GR: Yes, but stupidity for me shows some wit. I have found no adjustment to this social environment that surrounds us because I can hardly adjust myself at all, that's my mistake, my difficulty, so to speak. That is striking in certain realms of the environment. In the country there are crazy people, drinkers and all that: there you don't stand out. If you don't bring very urban crimes with you, hashish or the like, quite a lot is permissible, especially if you show people a bit of human kindness, which I feel for them. At the data processing

centre, I was very happy to be together with my co-workers; even outside work we also spent our leisure time together. It was simply a group in which I felt comfortable and I was an operator there for a long time, that is, on shift work in data processing, which was the lowliest work at the data processing centre. It wasn't because I was the head of section there but just because I liked the people. At the time, I didn't want to work at anything that was related, that entered back into the writing, because I was afraid that I might ruin myself that way and that my development wouldn't unfold as cleanly as it would if I did a different kind of work. If I had to work again today, I certainly wouldn't take up a newspaper job or anything like that, but at most would become a filmmaker, which has almost more to do with management than with existence as a free and independent writer.

SR: How do you now view your social role as a writer? What is your function in relation to society?

GR: Why not first summarise how I see myself *in toto*. Why I wanted to be a writer. After this subjective phase about which we have been speaking today was written to a close, came the need to write about things which simply were not possible in the other style, not as 'sophisticated' so to speak, not only to write for literary fans. The question was rather whether it isn't possible to realise this quality in another form: therefore this decision to become a storyteller. Socially it is difficult to live as a writer; nonetheless I wouldn't want to do anything else, but there is hardly a profession that has to cope with as many insinuations as that of the writer and indeed cope with them defencelessly. A politician

who is very strongly criticised also has his newspapers—a whole industry is engaged in correctly interpreting what comes out of the master's mouth—but a writer basically has no one. A critic who is well disposed towards him is still from another world. Therefore only sporadically can there be a form of understanding between writer and critic, because they are two different worlds with quite different points of view.

SR: Do you like as a critic the German, Ulrich Greiner, who writes on contemporary literature for *Die Zeit*?[15]

GR: I like him, yes, I'll say that, but that of course is connected with the fact that he has written positively about me. I don't think that I would like him as much, if he had slated me. I must be quite honest, it is also perfectly understandable whenever I have received a negative review in *Die Zeit* or in the *F.A.Z* and whenever someone writes a positive review and it's also right—that is, when what was intended comes out—then automatically a certain sympathy is present, because the one who writes the review which fits, has recognised you at some point—you certainly feel acknowledged. But it's not the role of a friend; that's not possible. I know a couple of critics with whom I get along well but that's only possible at a great distance and only by seeing one another very sporadically. A friendship with a critic is for me as difficult to imagine as a friendship between a teacher and me was at school—that's more or less how it is. It's a pleasure at school with this teacher because you get an

[15] See footnote 2.

A but otherwise you wouldn't like to share the teacher's life. You have a different conception of life. I don't waste my energies on critics. It's best to accept silently what is in the newspapers. *Die Zeit* has to operate, you have to accept that: nothing else helps at all.
The second difficult thing is the financial dependency of writers. Earnings don't come in on the scale that one might wish. I would like it to be such that I could concentrate hard on the work that I am doing and not stay awake all night worrying about the next instalment that is coming. With the publisher, where I receive money monthly, it is better for me. The terms are stated in the contract but there are advances that I have to deduct and there's hardly anyone who works who, after they have changed firms, for example, has to pay their earnings or a part of them back to the company: that's just impossible and is only the case with an author. Or to take another example, in the theatre where you receive ten percent of the takings, there I actually lose from every discounted ticket another ten percent. I am the only one there who really bears the risk: the director, the actors, the stagehands, they all get their cut and, if the theatre is poorly patronised, and I couldn't do anything about it, which is also possible, because the production is bad, for example, I am the only one who gets to feel that financially. A brief example to explain this: my first play *Lichtenberg* had its first production here at the Graz Schauspielhaus.[16] Three visiting actors took part in the play. The studio theatre has room for 80 people and the seats were sold out—a ticket cost only 30 Schillings—and it [the play] could only be performed eight

[16] *Lichtenberg*, Frankfurt/M.: Verlag der Autoren, 1973.

or ten times, because the three visiting actors were there and after their contract ended, they departed again, then the play was taken off. Here I earned—you can work it out for yourself—ten percent of 30 Schillings is 3 Schillings, times 80, comes to 240 Schillings per evening. That's 30 Marks and it was performed ten times. So all in all I earned 300 Marks. Of that, I had to deduct a third for the publisher. That left 200 Marks and on that I still had to pay tax. However, when did I actually receive the 200 Marks? Six or nine months after the play was finished, was in print and had been accepted by the Graz Schauspielhaus, a further six months went by until the time of the production. That is now a year and a quarter. I was writing away at it for almost a year—that's two and a quarter years and the settlement from the theatre followed six months later after the production ended and the publisher paid me after a further six months. The publisher's payout to the author is half-yearly. In the process four years went by from the time when I started work on the play. But in the meantime you have to live on something.
Of course, you can earn a lot writing, but little from the theatre. Simmel earns plenty and Grass. But in the theatre, for example, when there is only one stage, even if it is a large stage with 800 spectators, it's hardly possible to make money for a year's work, even if it is broadcast on television, which is not always the case.

SR: What do you earn from a television broadcast?

GR: Here in Austria 10,000 Marks and a third goes to the publisher.

SR: Does the publisher always get a third?

GR: Always a third. 7,000 Marks are left and I have to pay tax on that. So that leaves roughly 5,000. In Germany it is usually more—25,000 Marks—but you have to imagine that I'm supporting five people with this money. And as far as the stories are concerned—I don't know whether this interests you ...

SR: That would certainly interest me.

GR: For *einstein* I received 1,000 Marks—a lump-sum settlement. For *Künstel* and for the *Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs* 1,000 Marks. For *Wille zur Krankheit* 1,000 Marks, not a cent more! Then after eight or nine years of working as a writer I received 3,000 Marks for *Der große Horizont.* I wanted to shift to another publisher—the Residenz Verlag wanted me for *Der große Horizont* and Unseld retained me and paid me 4,000 Marks for the book—but that was a lump-sum payout—and that was it!
For the children's book *Herr Mantel und Herr Hemd* I received 1,000 Marks.[17] Then I came along with *Ein neuer Morgen* and wanted to leave [Suhrkamp] again. For a year then I received 2,000 Marks a month from Unseld but only on the condition that the next three works, including *Ein neuer Morgen,* belonged to him, but only for one year. After this year, I would have to go back to work or whatever. I only managed that because I had the play *Sehnsucht* almost

[17] *Herr Mantel und Herr Hemd*, illustrations by Ida Szigethy, Frankfurt/M.: Insel, 1974.

finished which he didn't know.[18] At that time, I was still with the theatre publisher, Verlag der Autoren. Unseld, that is, Suhrkamp, didn't know that I had a play almost finished with Verlag der Autoren and that I had also completed over half of *Dämmerung*. *Ein neuer Morgen* counted as one book and he drew up this contract with me that was actually a suicidal contract because you can't produce three works in one year, it is almost impossible. Already I had two things practically finished, namely *Ein neuer Morgen* and *Sehnsucht*, and almost a year to complete *Dämmerung* and this I finished relatively quickly in a couple of months. After this I left Unseld. I went to Fischer with *Winterreise* on the condition that they republish everything.[19] The motivation for leaving—Unseld wanted to keep paying me—was the return of Beckermann. Beckermann was always my editor at Suhrkamp up to *Ein neuer Morgen*. He helped me the most with advice and was arbitrarily dismissed from Suhrkamp. He had to go to Japan—he went as a professor to Japan and was then brought back by Fischer and once again I had the feeling that I have a workplace of sorts. Anyway, those were my first eight years as a writer and it would have been impossible to make a living from it—I had to work like that.

SR: Financially, it wasn't a profession.

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[18] Gerhard Roth, *Lichtenberg / Sehnsucht / Dämmerung - Stücke*, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1983 (Fischer Taschenbuch 7068).
[19] Gerhard Roth, *Winterreise*, Frankfurt/M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1978. English translation, *Winterreise*, Joachim Neugroschel trans., New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980.

GR: Financially, it has been hopeless, not very lucrative. And if it is lucrative, the tax situation is catastrophic. I have to pay tax the year I earn and, if I don't earn anything for three years, in the fourth I get it back and can then pay tax on everything. But in principle there are of course possibilities, this has to be said, look at Grass or Böll or the like, for them it is not too bad—Walser, Frisch. But it's the writing ... I wouldn't say no to money. Heinrich Heine thought a lot about the money but to me it is not the essential thing. I always believe that there's a way forward, even if I am not earning anything. I don't have any superannuation, for example, because it's not something that can be reconciled with my mental attitude as a writer. And I don't want health insurance. I'll have it only as long as my children are insured through me, that is, until they start their studies. After that I won't take any more health insurance, because fundamentally I don't want to deprive myself of the right to live outside society, but to suffer with it. That is to say, I don't want to be beholden to anyone, receive anything that perhaps doesn't have anything to do with me from anyone. Health insurance is a wonderful institution, but naturally it's not for me. I wouldn't want to be in hospital and so on. As far as artists are concerned, I find the time when van Gogh lived and shot himself, for example, better, because he could immerse himself in his sense of being different, because this sense of otherness was already very much around. Back then a large, impoverished proletariat existed. It was the time of the great affliction of rural workers when a writer or a painter or suchlike didn't stand out much.

SR: But van Gogh also worked as a pastor.

GR: Yes, but I am only saying that he could slip away, so to speak, and that's becoming increasingly difficult. Everything is increasingly thought through and much that comes as a blessing at the same time also brings an even greater constriction of one's sense of being different.

SR: You said once that writing means being honest. Does being a writer mean living honestly?

GR: Always to try to live that way, I mean to say. I don't believe that one can be honest and never tell a lie; it is probably impossible that one is without a weakness of one kind or another, or doesn't have many, or doesn't deny something or ... One's own fallibility is, of course, for each [writer] also an engine for the writing and furthermore is a reason why they can love and understand other fallible human beings. I don't always have to confess publicly the flaws that I have and set everything 'right' so to speak. To set everything 'right' is again also a form of inhumanity. But in the process of writing there exists nothing other than writing the truth. Untruth is written often enough. What Egon Erwin Kisch said is always interesting: "Truth is the most fascinating thing", at least that's the sense I have retained of his observation. It is truth that summons up the most trouble—that's the way it is! "Can you even write that?", but when you ask yourself this question, it is already gone.
When I am writing, I am an accused person and like the accused in a court of law, I have nothing to lose and all the possibilities of freedom. I don't mean that I see myself as a defendant who now has to lie so as not to be condemned, but in this accused person I see the position, which to the fullest

extent illuminates the boundaries of existence, reflecting on it fully articulately and then to act accordingly.
I don't think that artists are better people, even if they are honest and want to be in their work. It's principally confined to the work. This radical honesty that you bring to bear, of course, has certain consequences. But I don't believe that van Gogh, for example, was viewed by average people as a better human being. If he were to live the same way today, he would be similarly derided: he was just crazy. Imagine, a hundred years ago he fixed candles on to a hat to be able to paint better at night and secured the easel to the ground with iron stakes: no one did that then. However, it was also easier then to implement, more easily possible than today. In big cities today you can be crazy—I don't have any need for craziness in this sense, but I can feel in my gut that I am different and that I react differently to certain things. For someone in a big city that would be less noticeable. Here in Graz you have to say that is, of course, extremely noticeable. In the country, it is less obvious than in Graz or where you come from. In Tübingen it would be quite noticeable, if you lived a crazy life.

SR: Yes, Tübingen is pretty bourgeois.

GR: Yes, exactly, if you live a life that is fully at odds with the normal pattern. I had a scholarship for a year in Hamburg.[20] It was impossible to live my life there. Impossible. There was a bell on the door to the building ...

[20] In March 1979, Roth was awarded a nine-month grant from Hamburg's Cultural Senate in the framework of the facilitation programme *Auswärtige Künstler zu Gast in Hamburg* (Foreign Guest Artists in

SR: The year in Hamburg was one of suffering for you?

GR: It was, yes. But I like to know everything in life: I couldn't give a damn about suffering. I take suffering as it comes, it's all the same to me. In this way it was so interesting for me. There is nothing in life except the death of the children that can fill me with fear. The death of the children would really be the only thing I would be afraid of, but otherwise ...
Yes, in Hamburg it was like this, a ground-floor apartment, the first one by the door and there was a vocational training school opposite and the children sometimes rang the bell at seven or half-past and ran off or, during the evening some drunk or other would ring the door bell and each time, when I was sleeping, I had to get up. Repairmen who came always rang the first bell and that was mine. When the post came, the bell always rang. There were no letterboxes. If the neighbour wasn't there and a parcel came and he was being looked for, if there was anything, I was the first bell and they didn't fetch the building manager, they rang my bell, just because mine was the first one. It was set up so that the telephone wasn't next to the bed and on each occasion I had to get up. Of course, people ring already in the morning. I couldn't sleep at night and so had to sleep during the day and every time there were ten interruptions. Then for the first six or seven weeks when I was outside during the autumn, things were very bad because I didn't know anyone at all there and I didn't want to be always meeting people in

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Hamburg). Roth received DM 2,000 a month and a free furnished apartment.

the art scene but wanted to live. I didn't want to meet other writers, which I did do later, but not in a way that I might become a nuisance because I didn't have anyone, but only then when a certain setting existed.

The only person that I had to talk to there during the day was Herr Wohlers, the bookseller with the wonderful antiquarian bookshop in the Langen Reihe. Of course, he didn't know what was wrong. I got up early and went back in the evening and he was the only person I talked with. I took my meals in pubs and ate standing because I didn't like sitting there alone at the table with my newspapers. I didn't enjoy that and I was so ... Often I wandered along the harbour the whole day in the cemetery or around the Alster and in winter across the Alster: I walked there like one possessed. But I had a phase when I was bad at communicating, apparently because I was trying hard to communicate as I was isolated and it was forced on me, was not voluntary, and I always had the idea that somehow I would get through it. I came from the country where I was familiar with every house and visited far and wide—it was an enormous adjustment for me. Then at the end when I left, I had got to know many, many people and it was very fine and full of variety. This one phase, however, was rather hard to get through. Mostly I needed alcohol and sleeping tablets. Sleeping tablets were necessary; I didn't sleep the whole day or for two or three days, or I got up at two in the morning and along from my building there was a bar, some five minutes' walk away, that was called the 'Endstation'. It was open twenty-four hours and I went drinking there from two in the morning until seven and it grew light. They knew me well there, the pimps and so on—the Hotel Bristol is in the same building, a

brothel. I talked a lot with the women you would expect to find there, was provided with eel and everything possible. They didn't know, of course, how things were going with me or perhaps they knew very well and I only thought that they didn't know. And then, later, I went there again with friends and acquaintances, while at the beginning that had been more of a necessity for me. In these hours between twelve and four no one sits in a bar any more, you sit alone with the bar keeper and a second drunk hangs there, no one goes past—a strange time.

SR: A hell.

GR: Yes, it was a new experience and, as I see it now, I am glad that I experienced everything myself in this form and not otherwise. It suits me that way, it is right existentially and I wouldn't want to be part of a literary industry that took that away from me. For example, for two or three years now, I haven't given any public readings. There are two reasons for this. The first is that I feel uneasy at a reading. And secondly you learn to simulate a life there that has nothing to do with real life: it is all humbug. I know many friends who love that because they feel themselves confirmed there or [for whom] reading like that in the evening is a certain erotic springboard; that isn't unpleasant, but I think it is better for me—everyone must do what they think best—that I expose myself somehow and consciously do nothing forceful to alter the situation that I find myself in. I am not seeking out a bad situation; I didn't go to Hamburg to go to the dogs, become a boozer or fall into despair, but actually because

Hamburg interested me and I very much wanted to be there. I enjoyed it. It had its own dynamic.

SR: I was in Hamburg myself two weeks ago—on the way north ...

GR: But the winter, the winter is dreadful isn't it.

SR: I like the city a lot.

GR: Yes, it's a good city, a working-class city ...

SR: I grew up in a harbour city myself.

GR: Hamburg is also a working-class city. It's good almost everywhere where there is a working-class city and such areas are always generous. The country where I am is much stingier by comparison. Only that doesn't bother me about the country. The country has other advantages: for example, where I am in the country, the conservative element resides—the one that is more pleasant to me. The workers cannot develop a culture there at all; there's no workers' art in the sense that there was a peasant art where the house and the furniture arose from necessity and were also consciously shaped, from the objects to the house itself, the tools and the clothes, everything sprung out of itself. The workers in the country as I got to know them—I know many workers, my grandfather was a glassblower and as a child I spent time with him and the workers. I very much like being among workers. But in the country there they are half farmers, half workers; they go to work in the city but live in the country

and that has given rise to an odd and somehow comical mix. They are so ambitious and nice and decent but that's somehow boring too. The really conservative farmers are all liars too, of course. No city person has any chance at all with a farmer. When you say 'yes' to anything just three times, you are committed for twenty years. They have it all over you. With all due respect to the people who live there, it must be said that you need to watch out for them because the next minute they'll drop you in it. And that concerns the farm and concerns what you buy from them. It's interesting. Most city dwellers always come to the country with a bad conscience. The weekenders give the people their cast off clothes. The farmers laugh secretly about them all. They exploit it right down to the last in the same way that they exploit the soil and the land and their physical strength. Each one exploits the other whenever they get the chance. It's in their world scheme. They have a business relationship to everything because their existence is at one and the same time their business. The soil, the corn, it's all material and so too is the environment. Whenever I arrive there, naturally they are glad to see me, when I have money in my pocket and pick up the tab. But I like doing that. It can of course be annoying but I see the whole thing as a game.

SR: There is a sense of a transformation process in all the narrative figures in your novels: einstein becomes Kalb becomes Künstel becomes Haid becomes Weininger becomes Nagl and so on. It reads like a long film text.

GR: Yes, it's possible that it is like that. I didn't intend it. It is not that I always want to describe the same figure in that

sense but, when all is said and done, I am always myself somehow. And this is not because I am so important to myself, not because my existence seems so important to me, but because I know myself so well or, at the very least, I am in the process of getting to know myself well every day and coming across something new.

SR: This is possibly because the self is an enormous thing with endless possibilities.

GR: Right, that's actually surprising, isn't it, the fact that you can find so many possibilities in yourself is an exciting business. It's not at all the case that I am the starting point myself, that I am thinking, I will write this now about me or I'll be this, but rather that actually each time I invent a figure and then in retrospect realise that it is me. While I am writing, I am persuaded that it is all invention and add ideas of my own so that it has a certain veracity. But unintentionally I bring to it much else from myself as well and basically I am glad that it is that way, because somehow I have the feeling that I am on the trail of something, even if one doesn't like it, and one is being deceived but I take it as a stroke of good luck that I can find trails and I have always thought, the longer you write, the more you lose the brazenness which in writing is there at the beginning. With writing in the beginning there is almost a form of arrogance there; at the outset it was not a kind of modesty but a kind of arrogance. That you find it so important that you are writing down something yourself, and this fiction that you are doing it only for yourself—that cannot go on. You could do it as a child making books for yourself, but this isn't sustainable.

The pure artist that society wants doesn't exist. You can certainly put on the guise of a pure artist but even the pure artist is calculating in a way and always wants an audience. Kleist killed himself out of ambition and I think van Gogh did this also out of despair, which is connected with ambition. In my case, the awareness of total failure is actually becoming increasingly clear—that you don't achieve in a book what you want to achieve ... it's always better in your imagination.

SR: Is it possible for you to contemplate the world without describing it?

GR: We've already discussed something similar today: it is somehow lucky to be able to do it, even to be allowed to. I say 'allowed to' after a very serious crisis this year during the summer: from July to September I have had the severest crisis that I have ever had to overcome. All I wished for was that this emptiness in me, this bit of a hole in my head, would disappear. I was also looking at what I had written previously as something by a stranger, as if I had been living another life and now suddenly I was, as I put it at the beginning, a candidate for suicide. Everything is revolving for me then around what is happening at the moment, the very moment this dimension of silence has gone, there is only the moment again—in love naturally or in many things—eating, drinking—I don't think for a minute about writing, although it is always within me. But it is like a curse, first the desire to be rid of it, then back it comes – there's just no continuity there. Of course, there are also moments when you are just looking and are happy with this looking, but that becomes so strong, that when you are writing, you can remember it ex-

actly because it was so strong at that moment. Then it's not normality. I can imagine doing something else for a while or even for years. For example, in the way that I have been wandering about now in the country—or driving a taxi. I would certainly find taxi driving quite interesting—the whole human theatre that the taxi driver gets to see—as an existential situation, that would be interesting. But I don't have a driver's licence.

SR: Could writing be your way of loving life—an expression of this love?

GR: I don't set out to write from love but I can love in the writing; but it is not in order to express that. I would also use it as an instrument to express my hatred or to express my happiness, my despair or whatever. Somehow or other, it is an end in itself—unintentionally on my part—and that's what bothers people. I could never imagine sitting down and writing a novel for which I would have an edition of 50,000 or imagine writing a play that would be performed in ten theatres, rather it is a theme which interests or fascinates me, and I draw the reader, the imaginary reader, into a game and would like them to follow me, would like to surprise them and lavish them with exotic fragrances and suddenly the door opens and next time round I would like to show them a film or baffle them or lead them around by the nose—I am playing with them. My whole interest is given over to the reader to whom I am presenting this and I share the love I feel between the figures I am creating and my idea of the imaginary reader. After finishing a play or a narrative piece, I like to test how it has turned out. And that's the whole

process. If it comes off for many people, then somehow you have the impression that your own concept has probably been realised. If it only comes off for a few, then you have the impression that humanity is still too stupid to understand it – and, with these two possibilities, that's the only way of surviving. That would, I think, be the wrong way of being an artist. There are also the writers or the painters who don't rank, who can proceed by saying: "Yes! There are too few things here, now I have to alter my style, let's try it this way." The man or woman that I am thinking of cannot do it any other way than the way they do. They are not capable of that. For example, I couldn't copy the style of [other] authors for longer than one or two pages, because it makes me feel ill. For fun I could quote briefly for myself something from Hemingway or Hamsun. That is, I could try it out in a purely formal way. I can imitate straight off the writing style of a Thomas Bernhard, but after a page or a page and a half, it would tire me immeasurably, because firstly, complete attention must be directed towards the imitation and not towards the figures and what is going on with them. And that is a considerable amount of energy that is going to waste, and secondly, I would have no voice of my own, if I were doing that.

SR: I find the word 'voice' very important here. An author has his own narrative voice. When you are writing, you can sense very precisely your own voice.

GR: There are similarities, that's clear. There are affinities, similarities. It's quite clear that you can say, "So there!" Literature is not an invention from within itself in this sense.

Technology demonstrates this. The Japanese who built this device, the Sanyo (pointing to the cassette recorder), there is a history of technical development in the device that is always channelled into such a piece of equipment, and they didn't invent by themselves beforehand everything that is inside it. The speaker looks like one on a Braun or something similar and the handle is a quite common one, as is the receiver, but the whole thing as it is here now, is a piece of Sanyo equipment. Brecht said, "I have borrowed plenty, stolen nothing!" And that is pretty much what can be said. That you remain quite uninfluenced by authors who are important, Italo Svevo, for example, whose *Cousine* I would like to include here—there is no author who is not at all enthusiastic about other authors. You come to literature through them! It has just to be filtered through oneself and then you can say, 'only he can do this or is capable of that'. If anything at all is left over from the life of a writer, then it is what only he could do, what was typical of him. And that is now harder than it used to be—now we have this flood of books and the proliferation of the media. I don't believe that much of what is so great today will be so great in ten or fifteen years. To me it's quite clear that the picture will change. A handful of critics in Germany determine what is good or bad. Right now, I am lucky that I am not being overlooked, that I am somehow being registered, but this is a frightful dependence on a group of critics in Germany. Austria has no newspapers to speak of, and doesn't count. We lack critics as well as good daily papers. Reviews in an Austrian newspaper don't count. We don't have a single important daily paper in Austria, not a single good daily paper. It

is this calamity that explains why Austrian literature happens in Germany—it is one of the main reasons for this. Aside from this, I believe that in any case failure must come to me sometime. I just can't move inevitably with the times and conform continually, so it will just happen. I am preparing myself for it in any case, that's part of it. At bottom I would even like to experience it once.

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GR: We were talking about the link between despair and sexual intercourse, between pain and sexuality—it is my experience that perhaps as far as all things sexual are concerned, one is more courageous in the situation, whereas in despair there is no longer any courage because courage is no longer necessary, although looking at it from outside, you might perhaps talk of courage. I also don't think that gratification is connected with it; it is intoxicating, a rush of feeling, but it isn't so strong that you couldn't see everything clearly. That's the strange thing. Sartre has a beautiful story called *Herostrat,* in which a young fellow locks himself in a toilet with a pistol and wants to run amok and goes to a room with a whore. In this story he has described the situation quite clearly and exactly. As I have said, I didn't want to skirt around the matter and have then tried to describe it at correct intervals. And now the question naturally arises, it is in there and now how does the whole book continue to deal with the act of sex. I can't just put an act of sex on page 25 and then for the rest of the book say, with regard to the despair, just think out the rest for yourselves. You have to stick with it, so to speak. I had to follow through with this scheme

to the end. I would say that for me it was a mathematical-literary problem, the frequency according to the structure, rather than wanting to conceive of it as a programme. It is absolutely not a programme for me, rather it is a method of showing something and of allocating to it a place within what I am writing to which I believe it is entitled in my work.

SR: I read *Winterreise* again last week. That's exactly the scene in which you can recognise yourself and in which I can also recognise myself.

GR: Yes, for me recognising myself in books was always a comfort. For me it was always great that someone else has thought and found things that way and was also brave enough to write it, and that the fact that it was so exact and truthful has often given me strength. And I understand writing as I do it, in this way, that I am writing for those who find these 'heroes'—in quote marks—necessary for recognising themselves. As I imagine my reader today, he is someone, I would say, who has problems at least.

SR: Whenever I read something like that I feel that I am a human being again, that my heroes really exist. I'm not the only one who has had such experiences. That is a very important function of the writer.

GR: That's the only thing I really intend, alongside the pure amusement of writing and leading the reader around by the nose—I wrote this in *einstein,* those ten points there. Beside this, I always have the need to address myself to an individ-

ual, who is having difficulties. This is also the reader that I welcome and with whom I engage in conversation and also understand. It is mostly such people.

SR: On the other hand, it torments me to read that.

GR: It has to be tortuous, that's clear. If, when I am sick, someone tells me what I really have, it torments me and despite that, I am content that I know what is wrong and know that there are also others who have it and how they can deal with it.

SR: There's another sentence in *Winterreise*: "He felt as if he had fallen out of the earth. It was an oceanic feeling of loneliness." The word 'oceanic' here?

GR: It appears as a reference to Freud's "Civilisation and Its Discontents" – he talks there of an oceanic feeling. It is a short essay, very good and interesting.[21]

SR: Another idea in the novel that captured my attention: "To Nagl it seemed most natural to abandon himself."[22] Is this a kind of surrender, entrusting oneself to life?

GR: The temptation to abandon yourself is always present. The moment you abandon yourself, life becomes easier. It is often very hard to stand up for your own opinion and you

[21] Sigmund Freud, 'Das Unbehagen in der Kultur' ('Civilisation and Its Discontents'). *Abriß der Psychoanalyse/Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Frankfurt/M., 1972.
[22] *Winterreise*, p. 5, my translation.

often have to distinguish whether it is vanity or whether it is personally important to you. You can do it very easily by always sticking to your position and never giving in. I wouldn't see this as a favourable trait. The difficulty consists in sorting out from a disconnected everyday world those points that you consider important for yourself. One often behaves in a kind of unconsciousness such that one is nervous, unfriendly to someone, for some kind of mechanical, nervous reason. One lives through many forms of behaviour in a kind of unconsciousness. And to assert yourself means watching out that you don't lapse into this unconsciousness—I don't assume automatically that I am right but I entitle myself to be right, after I have thought it over. It may be that this isn't at all obvious in everyday life or that this is not a reaction that everyone has. To abandon oneself means for me to do what others are doing. For me that isn't suicide but it is the self-assertion of suicide.

SR: Loss of self?

GR: Rather that, yes. As if it was normal, so to speak. During puberty many people—most, actually—have an artistic talent, something extraordinary about themselves. This changes quickly and when they become older, at twenty or so, people become grey and monotonous again. And only a few, so-called 'lunatics' retain this power from puberty, which remains with them. Practically every artist is adolescent. It couldn't be otherwise. They must take pleasure in toys. The world around us and everything in it are somehow like toys. How a car drives along the road, the setting of a camera to make a beautiful image, that's all a toy that you

make for yourself. And the task for oneself means then asserting that this is indeed reality, this is life, there is nothing else and, from my point of view, there are a whole lot of so-called lunatics who are to be found in this group: filmnuts, jazznuts, footballnuts, who build a second reality in their lives to retain this youthful madness—the idea that there is still somehow a dream that fulfils life. I have written a story about football *Roth schlägt Leeds United* (*Roth defeats Leeds United*). I have been at football grounds thousands of times and I know the so-called fan for whom it is an enrichment of his everyday life, who then talks for a week with his colleagues at work about it and is already waiting for the next game. To abandon yourself means to be contented with such a hobby and to make it the second strand of your existence which then becomes a type of substitute religion and then everything that is in you makes itself manifest anyway. Then the boozing is added to it and so on. That's what I understand by 'abandoning oneself'. For anyone who wants to assert themselves, for them there will actually always be only difficult days and for every day that is carefree, they will be thankful.

SR: And Nagl's decision at the end of the novel to flee to Alaska by plane?

GR: I once saw a film with Humphrey Bogart. He walked with his girlfriend into an alpine meadow and fled from the police into the snow. I saw a second film, *Women in Love* by Ken Russell—D. H. Lawrence's book. A man goes up a mountain in Switzerland and I thought, as I was watching it at the time, that the next time an opportunity arises for me to

somehow accommodate that in a book, then I would like to describe it or use it.

SR: A friend of mine did just that in 1971.

GR: And what did he do there for several months? Did he also completely disappear?

SR: He worked there; after a few weeks he found a job.

GR: And what is he doing now?

SR: He is a teacher in New Zealand like the others in his family.

GR: Oh well, it's not necessary to remain there. Greenland would have been too trite: I wanted to find something that expressed coldness. One sentence should bring it to a close and what he does shouldn't be stated. I hardly ever take leave of my figures in a state of hopelessness; I don't like leaving them behind without any prospects. That was the case with *Der große Horizont*, with *Ein neuer Morgen* and also with *Winterreise*. That way I spare myself having to pass judgement on him and, at the same time, I have a bad feeling that I will make Ascher commit suicide in the next book, because I am sorry for him. I am really sorry for him but it has to be; there is nothing to be done for it.

SR: I find the Melville quotation at the beginning of *The Calm Ocean* significant: "I have a sort of sea-feeling here in

the country, now that the ground is covered in snow." That's a reference to *Winterreise,* isn't it?

GR: Yes, of course, that's how it's conceived ... I am always alluding to the earlier books; one book is connected with the other. No books are left standing alone; I have always liked it when an author draws the figures on through in the way that Hemingway [writes] a kind of biography from A to Z, or Miller, Kafka's K. The books must all be connected somehow; I have a feeling that it should be this way. I don't, of course, immediately finish with a theme and move straight away to the next, or with a way of looking at things or an idea, rather it is all still there; an unfinished remainder in me that has not been dealt with carries over. I have the Melville quotation as a bracket between the novel's title and the beginning so that the mindset is immediately there. One doesn't know straight away what is meant by *The Calm Ocean* but in the brief information in the Melville quotation, which refers simultaneously to ocean and land, the book's direction is intimated. A critic in the *Rundschau* reproached me, made comparisons between Melville and myself and accused me of taking the easy way out.[23] He attacked the quotation, which is of course stupid, because the quotation only serves to mediate between the title and the beginning. I simply had to put something in there. I had to insert this bracket between the title and the beginning. The

[23] W. Martin Lüdke, 'Jagdszenen in der Steiermark: Gerhard Roths neuer Roman *Der stille Ozean*', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 5 July 1980: "Roth's novel, which is set in southern Styria, bears the 'Pacific Ocean' in its title only and seeks to feed off Melville's enormous endeavour – possibly to escape desperation."

book was finished already; I had the first correction of the proof already behind me when by chance I found the Melville quotation.

SR: I was preoccupied recently with an American poet for whom Melville was the most important writer.

GR: Who's that?

SR: Charles Olson.

GR: Yes, I know him; he was with the Beat Generation, wasn't he?

SR: The rector of Black Mountain College. He has written about Melville, first off as an MA thesis. For years after that he did further research.

GR: Is that in book form?

SR: Yes, yes. The Harvard dissertation that he didn't submit.

GR: What's it called?

SR: *Call me Ishmael.*[24]

[24] Charles Olson, *Call me Ishmael*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1967.

GR: Lüdke, in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* also mentioned Olson's book. There's also an Olson in my book: the detective in *Ein neuer Morgen.*

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SR: Perhaps something now about what is typically Austrian in your novels.

GR: First that has to be looked at somewhat historically. What is characterised in modern literature as typically Austrian begins with the collapse of the Austrian monarchy and there follows a literature which very much takes into consideration the collapse of the monarchy, Joseph Roth and Musil, for example, two authors who are unthinkable without the background of the monarchy. Alongside that there's the Prague Circle, Hofmannstahl, Karl Kraus, the language policeman, he is also to be understood in the context of the monarchy, *The Last Days of Mankind*, for example. After that came National Socialism, a second big turning point in Austrian literature, with the result that the generation that wrote after 1945 has lived in a state that has been made historically responsible for two wars and had lost both. Over an extended period of time, out of these two big political traumas an ahistorical and formal literature formed in Austria. In the leading position was the *Wiener Gruppe*,[25] which was more strongly influenced by Surrealism, or Klebnikov, Majakowski or Dadaism than by any Austrian tradition. The

[25] The *Wiener Gruppe*: Friedrich Achleitner, H. C. Artmann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, und Oswald Wiener.

Wiener Gruppe with Rühm, Artmann, Wiener, Achleitner, Bayer, didn't found a new literature but has introduced here in Austria for the first time a form of literature that is important for our situation. In Germany, for example, Surrealism has largely stayed out of literature. German literature is therefore relatively little influenced by Surrealism. In Austrian literature this influence is essentially stronger and one reason for this among others is because the *Wiener Gruppe* examined this set of questions intensively. To this was added the *Wiener Gruppe's* discovery of dialect in the *Mundartgedichten* [Vernacular Poems]. In this period I see the origins of contemporary Austrian literature. The preoccupation with literature in the way that Artmann, Bayer, Rühm, Wiener and Co. have done it, for example, was first of all an intensive examination of language, in part going back to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and the *Philosophical Investigations.* That means that in important contemporary Austrian literature after 1945, historical and political events have been subordinated or ignored. This preoccupation with language, which has led to works of high aesthetic value, has led simultaneously to a cleansing of the language of some of the concepts that were damaged by the political events. A dimension was developed again in which one could work as a writer. After the so-called *Wiener Gruppe,* the *Grazer Autoren* have gone a step further and have begun by and large to transform what the *Wiener Gruppe* worked up in language—worked up as language usable by authors—into a new form of story telling.

I don't share the view that this form of story telling which is now done in a particular way by the Graz authors has anything to do with conventional story telling. In the first in-

stance, it has to do with winning back to literature those who are interested in literature, and it is the new beginning of a description of the Austrian environment and the Austrian mentality. This form has developed again slowly over different novels, the novels by Peter Handke, for example, or by Alfred Kolleritsch, plays by Wolfgang Bauer, novels by Barbara Frischmuth—they have arisen out of a new language and have addressed themselves again to existential and historical problems.[26] What is specifically Austrian in my literature is this process of development that has taken place from 1945 until now [1980], i.e., the concern with language forms in the early works, with experimental literature, my form of language purification, so to speak, and then turning to the description of my life in my times, after I had worked up the linguistic means for myself.

Over and above this there is, of course, the other form of what is traditionally Austrian, *The Man Without Qualities,* for example, Hofmannsthal's *Chandos Letter* or Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* ... Now, after this purifying of the language was completed and this historical-political barrier had been overcome and a form of Austrian Dadaism existed—the authors of the *Wiener Gruppe* can perhaps be called that—the vein of Austrian literature again reaches into the present and links up once more with themes that were always significant in Austrian literature. But the significance of Kafka for Handke and Bernhard, for example, and also

[26] Roth refers here to the co-founder of Graz's *Forum Stadtpark* and the editor of its literary magazine *manuskripte*, Alfred Kolleritsch (b. 1931), and to prominent representatives of the so-called "Graz Group" (Grazer Gruppe) of the 1960s: Peter Handke (b. 1942), Wolfgang Bauer (1941-2005), und Barbara Frischmuth (b. 1941).

for particular texts by Artmann must be recognised. I would say that Kafka was the author who had an effect on other authors and was the most undamaged by all the political events here in Austria. In Austria we have overcome historical events differently than in German literature. In German literature there was a very strong examination of the war in Böll and Koeppen, for example, or in Grass's *The Tin Drum*, that is missing until now or has been missing for a long time in Austrian literature and it is now also slowly turning to address this set of questions—see *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* by Peter Handke, see *The Green Side* by Kolleritsch, *Vor dem Ruhestande* by Thomas Bernhard, *Die Alpensaga* by Turrini or now also passages from my own book *The Calm Ocean*, where it deals with the discussion of history. What Austrian literature has gained through this is a more aesthetic approach to language than is to be found in German literature—a more formal and aesthetic treatment of language. The omission to a certain extent of the social and political conditions that prevailed then and still prevail was for a long time a loss. There is nonetheless a group that has been doing this politically in Austria for some considerable time. Among them I would count, for example, Scharang, Innerhofer, Wolfgruber ...

SR: Didn't it come to a confrontation at the end of the sixties between Scharang und Kolleritsch over the politicisation of literature?[27] How did you regard it?

[27] In 1969 the editor, Alfred Kolleritsch, defended the so-called "refusal of theory" of *manuskripte*'s contributors against the critical voices of Scharang and Elfriede Jelinek, among others, who at that time endorsed the West-German model of a politically and theoretically committed

GR: I take the position that the writer is not the lackey of any philosophy other than the author's personal philosophy. I don't feel that I am the lackey of Marxist ideology and certainly not the lackey of Catholic ideology or of any other.

SR: Is what Handke wrote on the question of politics in his essay *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (*I am an ivory-tower dweller*) acceptable to you?

GR: No. That is to say, it's acceptable *to him*: I accept it in that way. I am not an ivory-tower dweller. I also examine ideologies closely for myself. For me an ideology is a tool and not a cage. That is generally how I differ from other authors. For particular repairs and jobs, a particular tool can be necessary, important and possibly even ideal. Each ideology has its limited application. Marxism cannot cover all human problems: it is not capable of that. It can partially cover the desire for social justice but cannot influence my feeling of grief, of joy, of love and so on. It's exactly the same with religion. It can cover the need for metaphysical projections. The author must not find himself inside an ideology as if in a cage in which he is looking about to see

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literature. He maintained that Austria's cultural machinery was configured essentially quite differently: "There is no culture industry in Austria that can absorb the revolt: there is only a cultural debacle here that would become final, if out of sheer frustrated desire, one allowed the debacle in its cemented historical state to run the show single-handedly without driving living art into the inventory" (see *manuskripte* 25/1969, 'marginalie').

whether he is still inside the ideology; rather I consider that the author should know the ideology and utilise it where it brings him something but should not surrender himself to ideologies. I am not so puritanical in outlook that I have to live in an ivory tower; I don't like that, I expose myself. My life is also a kind of experiment for me, a form of participating, of sharing grief, of sharing joy, but always with at least the attempt to preserve a sense of distance from the way in which others are trying to explain to me what I am seeing and experiencing. I like to explain that to myself with the knowledge that others have acquired but then test it for myself and try to do justice to what I am writing.

SR: What then is the political in your novels?

GR: I think that in *The Calm Ocean*, if one analyses Lüscher's running amok at the end, a political idea is very strongly present. He commits this triple murder for the appreciable reason that he comes from a farm labourer's family, and that he stands in a dependent relationship to moral laws and an established political order. So in *The Calm Ocean,* in the social order in which I set this novel, in which foxes suspected of rabies are shot and many things are solved through violence, I express the longing for a more just political arrangement and produce my analysis of it. I believe I take a very definite position on it.
In the novel *Winterreise*, the philosophical, the existential comes before the political. That is to say, I am more concerned with a general philosophical situation than with a political one, even though there is also a political environment here in which one might say that this form of life exists in a

state in which there is at least no appreciable degree of adversity. There is still another form of affliction to social adversity.
Both American books consciously contain passages of social discussion. The image of America that I have my figures experience—and so it also appeared to me as I experienced it—can quite certainly be characterised as a socio-political finding, even though each time this dimension by itself was too little for me.

SR: Yes, I remember some passages in *Der große Horizont* where Haid quotes Horkheimer.[28]

GR: Yes, in Horkheimer there are discussions of the poverty in America and of the question of violence and so on. They are very subtly dispersed through the texts. However, I think that from this point on, there is a continuous chain of discussion, from *Der große Horizont* onwards to the present work—*Landläufiger Tod*—which will now carry this element much more distinctly.
Winterreise has been the most misunderstood in this connection. Because I describe there a personally experienced form of nihilism, I am accused of describing a programme of nihilism, which was absolutely not the case: I was interested in the philosophical basis of this story. It is also doubly interesting that the most objections came from the ideological side. For the Marxist, the Catholic is preferable to the nihilist and vice versa: For the Catholic, the Marxist is also pref-

[28] See Gerhard Roth, *Der große Horizont*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1976, pp. 31-32, 115-116, 135, 154 and 172.

erable to the nihilist. As far as the early works are concerned, I was so caught up in my own subjectivity that I see them simply as an expression of my situation within the society in which I was living and also of my sense of constriction within the society in which I have lived and am living with the result that I put on the protective camouflage, so to speak, of the schizophrenic, and my sense of displacement, my eccentricity found its expression in a crazy text. Even that I consider to be a kind of subjective revolution about which one can hold differing views but which for me in this phase of my development was the only possible form available for me to express myself.

SR: For you that was "a revolt against language" in Wiener's sense.[29]

GR: That's it, a revolt against language, but it was also enjoyable to be difficult to understand because I didn't feel that I was understood. It also had to do with that.

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SR: How do you see your position in recent Austrian literature?

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[29] See Oswald Wiener, *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa*, p. CXLIV: "it is commonly accepted that language is characterised as social consciousness, even as humanity's memory. To take this old chestnut literally for once: a revolt against language is a revolt against society" (my translation).

GR: Perhaps I can only say how I behave because I can't make a judgement there. When I am working, I am certainly a loner. In *Forum Stadtpark* I have two friends, Kolleritsch and Bauer, and both make a different kind of literature to mine; despite this, their presence is important to me. I often depict them in my imagination and think about what reaction that which I am writing will produce in them. I cannot measure my position in the literary industry; I am glad, as soon as I am able to write, and whenever I am writing, that I am writing. I can't say that it doesn't interest me but it doesn't influence me and I don't waste any mental energy on it.

SR: But you have received the grant from the city of Hamburg, for example, which actually says a lot about your position in the Federal Republic.

GR: I can't say anything about that. I don't bother about my position in Austria. I don't have any difficulty working as a writer in Austria and also no difficulty that my works have not been heeded in Austria. Recently, as far as the print media are concerned, a certain animosity or a greater harshness towards me has been present but I cannot examine now why that is the case, rather I just have to continue doing what I do. I believe that in Germany I have more recognition than in Austria but that is also not one hundred percent correct. All my plays have been staged in Austria, my books have been reviewed in all the papers; how things turn out is often a matter of chance. You can't take every critic who writes in a newspaper seriously. The critic is often confused with the newspaper. It is said, for example, that a publication, *Der*

Spiegel etc. has written this or that and yet there are critics there with different points of view, and in Austria there isn't a single literary critic that I can take seriously. I won't even mention newspapers. The interesting thing is that there are not only bad newspapers which are not picked up or quoted outside the country because they aren't quotable; whoever wants to learn something about Austria can learn it better and more accurately in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* than in their own papers.
Secondly, cultural journalism in Austria is simply moribund. There is a kind of court of salon critics in Vienna, which is very much organised around friends, acquaintances and intervention, where a few ladies and gentlemen do what they take for culture. In Germany, it's not better than in Austria but there is no question that they have better newspapers and clearly this possibility of working for better papers spawns better journalists. Therefore some newspapers in Germany are more informative and important for Austrian literature than all the Austrian newspapers put together. There is, however, also a number of very bad newspapers in Germany.

SR: What about *Die Zeit*, for example, or the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*?

GR: *Der Spiegel, Die Süddeutsche, i*n Germany you can name these papers; in Switzerland, the *Neue Züricher Zeitung,* but that's as far as it goes.

SR: They are all important for the reception of Austrian literature.

GR: Yes, but these newspapers are just not read by the Austrian populace. People particularly interested in literature or politics possibly read *Die Zeit* or perhaps the *F.A.Z.*; even the *Rundschau* is less read.

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GR: Now on the question of Büchner and science, as far as the early works are concerned, I don't think that essentially I have to add anything. This theme has only had an effect again in *The Calm Ocean* and that has nothing further to do with Büchner. It's my knowledge that I have dressed this figure in.

SR: In his novels Helmut Eisendle tries to create an aesthetic from a mixture of science and art. What's your reaction to this attempt?

GR: In the initial phase, I followed his work more closely but not any longer. However, that is not a judgement of his work on my part. It is simply that, for whatever reason, in recent times I just haven't read the books. For me Eisendle's work in some phases leaned too heavily on science.
To come back once more to ideology, I have to say that for me it is too much the ideology of science, that compared to literature the tool again becomes too strong. Just as ideologies can be of assistance in writing to see through individual processes and structures and to transform them again into the literary process without explicitly pointing to them, so too it seems to me important to transform the influence of science on literature, as I am doing it, into literature, and that

these starting points don't appear too distinctly and clearly. They should be perceptible but not determining. That is the critical distance that I maintain to the works of Helmut Eisendle.

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SR: In *Winterreise* a passage appears and I quote: "Sometimes it was his only hope that a God might exist. ... Sometimes though he felt that one must exist." And then on the following page: "Only rarely without any reason had he had the feeling that a God existed."[30]
Then, in *The Calm Ocean* it sounds a little different: "Perhaps he was also only a tiny cell in a larger organism that he couldn't recognise, indeed, would never comprehend." [31]

GR: I would express my position as follows; that in my everyday life I am communicating in secret with my metaphysical level. Very occasionally. Rationally it doesn't appear to me explicable; I cannot find any reasons for it beyond the fact that with me it is just the case. It has nothing to do with a particular belief. For example, I wouldn't like to utter the word 'God' at all. I am only using it to allow the metaphysical plane to be hinted at selectively in my work. For me it is something outside language, outside psychology, but certainly in the momentary state in which I find myself, I am somewhat influenced by it.

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[30] *Winterreise*, pp. 90-91, my translation.
[31] *Der stille Ozean*, p. 28, my translation. See also p. 21.

SR: Is there something there that can be perceived?

GR: Yes, it is a feeling. It is a perception and often a wish, which, as I am writing it in *The Calm Ocean,* becomes nebulous and simply disappears as soon as I try to formulate it.

SR: At the beginning of the novel Asher tries to pray. He feels quite silly and can't do it.

GR: This communication I intend as a communication outside of language, a state that is not captured in words. There is a form of praying in despair that isn't foreign to me. It can be found repeatedly in Hemingway's work, for example, where figures in fear of death or in despair direct this shock prayer heavenwards.

SR: Kafka called writing a form of prayer.[32]

GR: For me, the word 'prayer' is too near to ritual that is connected with particular religions. Even the word 'meditation' is already too hackneyed and too fashionable for me. It is a correspondence with another plane—I can't describe it in any other way—and it is frequently caused by the visual. For example, I always have a series of optical instruments with me—pocket microscope, pocket magnifying glasses, telescope, pocket telescope—and it is very interesting just at those moments, when I am walking through a meadow in summer, for example, and am looking at a flower under a

[32] "Writing is a form of prayer", Max Brod, *The Biography of Franz Kafka*, trans. G. Humphreys Roberts, London: Secker and Warburg, 1948, p. 63 and p. 75.

magnifying glass or a pocket microscope, or when I am following a hawk in the air, that such a correspondence is possible. I don't say 'succeeds' because I don't intend it. I am not doing it so that I can have this feeling but it arises in me under such conditions. Or, for example, when I am observing the fish in a pond for some time. It is not always the case, but under such considerations, it was the case for me and, at the time of *Winterreise*, while I was writing this novel, I was very much preoccupied with Steiner, was sick and also actually confronting my own death, and the metaphysical plane was then very strong in me. At the time, I was reading a lot about death and about these views of Steiner, the anthroposophist, which when looked at in a sober state are balderdash, but in a certain spiritual state provide a curious excitation. I believe that in life one passes with one's consciousness through different sets of states. When I apply that as liquid, solid and gaseous [states] to my ontological behaviour, then there is a layer of sobriety in me that for long stretches of my life is most effective. There is the state of working, of creating, of writing and finally of non-active observing and experiencing, of very aware, non-active observing and experiencing. And for me in each of these different states, there are differing adjustments to these things; I cannot examine this question from the standpoint of religion at all. It gets on my nerves whenever I see Catholics performing their Sunday service; I always have an aversion to it. The Pope gets on my nerves, too. It has nothing to do with anything like that at all. It approximates most closely to the Buddhist form of religion, although it also has nothing to do with Buddhism. It is just that it is most possible to conceive of it from there. I don't want to pigeonhole this feeling

that I perceive. I don't want to search for a frame into which I can press it, just for the reason that I cannot grasp it linguistically or intellectually. The state when writing, that is, when transforming—because for me writing is essentially a form of transformation—is certainly not a realistic, sober state. Sartre recognised this. Of course, he altered his opinions over the years, so that for any argument he is quotable somewhere, but, as far as I can remember, he never withdrew this—this contact with the transcendental in the best state for writing.

SR: In Camus' *The Stranger* there is the scene in prison when the priest comes. Meursault sends him away, then he looks out the window at the stars.

GR: Yes, that is limited by the form of expression and what Camus is showing here, the smallness of the Earth, the incomprehensible expanse of space around us, the incomprehensibility of the concept 'endless', that is at once a comfort and a mockery, depending on the psychological state you are in.

SR: How do you react to the word 'creation'? Can you use such a word or is it already too much?

GR: I think this word is only to be used in certain contexts; it depends on which other words it is surrounded by. Just because I cannot explain the creation for myself or there is no concrete explanation for the creation, doesn't mean that for me religion is thereby necessarily proven. For me that means only that, as complicated and awesome as it is, what-

ever brilliant insights it is capable of, the human brain still has its limits: limits of receptivity, limits of knowledge. Now whether this is only so because we are the most highly developed intelligences in the entire universe, or whether there is an even higher intelligence in the universe, doesn't affect my life personally. I wouldn't feel death as a punishment; it brings everything together again. It is just a loss of the world around, that you aren't there any more, it is just like that title *The Long Goodbye*—this is the dreadful thing about history. All the rest is not frightening for me—regardless of what follows. The idea of death as darkness holds no terror for me and the idea of death as a form of consciousness on another plane also holds no terror for me but strikes me as highly improbable.

SR: In *Der große Horizont* Haid is standing in the cemetery in New York and has the feeling that another reality possibly exists. He describes his experience of Caspar David Friedrich's Greifswald painting.

GR: Once again that is a state of correspondence with the metaphysical, as I perceive it, for example, contemplating flowers or a bird in flight. They are just moments. That soon disappears again; a memory remains, a thought about it which, when isolated, is taken in the way that I have now described or narrated it, and is something to which I avow. But I cannot form out of these microscopic memories of experiences a structure that leads me to a decision to assert or advocate something. I wouldn't want at all to say anything more than I feel on this matter, but I would like to stand by what happens to me. To say more about it would be very

uncongenial to me. That when flying I say a silent prayer at take-off, for example, I've also done that before. Whether that's education, whether it is in me, or whether it is the expression of truth, that I can't interpret, for at the moment when the situation is no longer there, I am also different, and yet in the state in which I find myself, it is the right thing. I also don't have the feeling that I am betraying my position whenever that goes through my head; I cannot defend myself against thoughts that arise in me. When I was young, up to 26, 27, 28, I had quite strong anxieties about death that to a great extent have retreated in recent years. Now I am not afraid of that any more.

SR: Can you explain that or does it just belong to the passage of time?

GR: I don't know whether it has to do with age; actually one becomes increasingly anxious as one becomes older. Rather, I think that I have a certain readiness for dying. I don't wish for it at the moment but there are circumstances in which I wish for it. My life doesn't run along such consistent lines, that I am always of the same opinion, for example, or of the same view. If someone were now to ask me in general, superficially, "Do you believe in God?", I would say "No". That is the first thing I would say and then I would cite the reasons why that is not the case.

SR: It concerns the form of the question then?

GR: It concerns the form of the question, exactly, which experience someone wants to address in me. The fact that I

have these experiences, for me doesn't mean that I have experiences with God, but I would say that it is not a scientific plane with which I am communicating, nor a political one, but that it is an experience of self of great intensity, without language, without linguistic formulation, like when you are suddenly happy about something and this persists only for a short time. This perspective transforms me, causes the brain to flicker somewhere. The whole thing is like a creative process, except that it isn't creative in the sense that I then sit down and write, rather it satisfies me in and for itself; the experience is sufficient for me and I don't have any need to examine it.

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SR: Another question, on Vesuvius, which appears in *Winterreise*. What does it actually signify?

GR: The volcano. It signifies a volcano. After reflecting on Freud's *Civilisation and Its Discontents* and Camus' *The Stranger,* I started writing from an image, and this image was a volcano. Empedokles on the volcano—they were just images that I had. And then, in a bookshop, I found a book about volcanoes that fascinated me hugely and in the back of my mind I had a short film by the Viennese filmmaker Kubelka.[33] In this film a volcano is to be seen—I don't know exactly any more, it was years ago—perhaps it is Vesuvius

[33] Peter Kubelka (b. 1934), an Austrian avantgarde filmmaker and film theorist. Together with Peter Konlechner he founded in 1964 the *Österreichisches Filmmuseum* in Vienna, which he headed as Director until 2001.

just before it erupts, or it is Etna, and in this house a wedding is being prepared. You can also see solidified masses of lava round about, and since I saw it, I have had the feeling, the wish, to write something about a volcano, and that's all, actually. It has no other significance. Symbolic things that aren't there have been foisted on *Winterreise* in criticism. *Winterreise* is not symbolic, *Winterreise* is rhythmical. Similar motifs recur again and again.

SR: Is this a musical principle?

GR: Yes, a musical principle. You can also say, a principle of mathematical variation. But the things that appear in the book are also addressed quite directly. There are some strange Hitchcock-like scenes, which are intended to show death, like the one where the hotel employee comes in at the moment sexual intercourse is occurring or when the door is opened during the train journey, but everything else is foregrounded. The recollection of the angel contains no symbolism, that is just recollecting an angel. It is typical that in the American criticism absolutely no symbolism was seen, while in the profound German criticism it was, of course, seen as laden with symbolism. I haven't written any symbolic books at all. There are no symbolic acts in *Der große Horizont* and there are no symbolic acts in *Ein neuer Morgen*: I don't like symbolism in literature at all. I can only speak of huge misunderstandings. I mean—a particular point in a story, as for example, Moby Dick in Melville, can quite certainly also be a symbol but that only works with a double, triple or quadruple frame of reference. First, it is a clear, simple story that one can read exactly as it stands. All other

possibilities, which unfold coherently, only speak further for the book. You ought not lose sight of the book amid a welter of possibilities. First of all it is the story that concerns me; the fact that other interpretations are then possible tends to argue for the book. Interpretations are often possible that I haven't intended at all and that is a kind of critic's psychoanalysis—in a play the director's—of my character. A text can also be psychoanalysed.

SR: With *Winterreise* a temptation exists for critics to interpret this novel psychologically or psychoanalytically: a volcano with snow or ice on top, sexuality—one senses a close relationship between the two statements.

GR: Yes, because it just fits. I wrote the title *Winterreise* only at the conclusion of the book. I made the journey in winter after the plan was known and I was sure that I wanted to do it because my partner had no other possibility professionally than to travel at that point in time at which I travelled. I wanted to make the journey because I wanted to write this book and see these stages. I made the journey, then, after knowing approximately what I wanted to write.

SR: Chance is a great artist in this instance.

GR: Yes, I don't believe in chance in this case though. I believe that I could also have written the book in summer in great heat. Then it might have been said, yes, the heat and sexuality, those are two things that absolutely belong together, or in autumn where death is. You really should not overestimate it. Now that the book is called *Winterreise*, the

season is suddenly so important to the explanation of the book. In summer I would simply have chosen another title.

SR: It would perhaps be more important, if you had made up the story, instead of describing everything so closely to reality. I mean, it is a completely different matter, if symbols are used consciously.

GR: Well, yes, and that is also the reason why Jonke,[34] for example, has an unassailable status among German critics, because he doesn't write anything that can be attacked; it's not a comparable situation. But when I am narrating an experience, telling a story, I cannot expect that people with different world views, with different characters, with different deformations of character, will now all say, 'that's good and the story is correct'. To me it is quite clear that the reception of my works will meet with hostility and it is also clear to me that I must also often adjust to a harsh critique, but whether it is justified, we will have to wait and see. I cannot share the certainty of critics. I am just as uncertain myself and live with this uncertainty sometimes stubbornly, sometimes woundedly, often close to destruction, very often with thoughts of suicide, and then once again very sure of my own cause because the critic has just delivered his judgement about the book and that's it for him. I live with it; it is my life and it is my on-going occupation.

[34] Gert Jonke (1946-2009), Austrian novelist and dramatist, member of the Grazer Autorenversammlung.

SR: How important is it for you that your novels and dramatic works are understood?

GR: Every human being wants to be understood; even the insane person wants to be understood, even if they have set up their own language. If I don't want to be understood any more, I will fall silent. If I am not silent, but am speaking or painting or showing something, then I want to be understood. And it is certainly a pleasant thing to be understood by as many people as possible.

SR: You couldn't, for example, accept Stendahl's attitude that, during one's lifetime at least, one cannot expect to be understood?

GR: There is usually something coquettish about such utterances.

SR: Hans Wollschläger also said this recently. He has adopted a fatalistic position. It doesn't worry him that no one understands his work.

GR: That would be regarding the work as an end in itself. I admire it whenever someone has this consistency but to think this way is not a sign of quality. Kleist and others, for example, had a very strong yearning to be understood, performed and recognised. It is another matter if one does it, that is, continue writing one's works, even if one isn't understood or has no communication. That means having this obsessiveness about the work and being unable to do anything other than in the way one is doing it. If I don't have

any expectation of being understood, that doesn't mean that I don't care whether I am understood or not. In this case, I can only say that I have to do it in the way that I am and not count on understanding, just as someone who does good does not count on thanks but is doing it out of goodwill. But I do believe that in principle in artistic work, the desire for communication is present, that the expression is a message and that it is a kind of speech; everything that is art is a kind of speech. And I am not just speaking a monologue with myself but I am also speaking to people. I have already related the situation in my childhood—that I drew and wrote little books only for myself. I can only compare that with this situation. With me it was such that I didn't want to let anyone at all read these books or show them to anyone. Then I was concerned with the books in themselves, for myself alone.

SR: For you, what are the most important signs of being understood? How do you know that your books are being understood?

GR: I cannot speak in the plural about what I am now saying as to how many people understand me or whether there are many who understand me. But in a conversation like the one we are now conducting, I have the impression of being understood and for me that's enjoyable. Or whenever I am talking with someone about a particular book or a particular character and I notice that they are interested and have understood it or whenever someone writes something about it or a play is performed in the theatre and I notice some actors comprehend what I have been thinking without my needing

to intervene in any way. Or how forms of recognition are there in strangers who suddenly recognise themselves in some situation or other in my book. I am also often understood by people getting angry with me and I note a certain understanding there, as when you catch yourself out doing something.

SR: How do you feel about the behaviour of critics? They can cause one considerable harm.

GR: I am not so far beyond it that I can tell myself I don't care about critical reviews. That wouldn't correspond with the facts. But I no longer stare at what is in them, as I did at the beginning of my work as a writer, like a rabbit hypnotised by a snake, but that depends. For example, whenever I tear up a bad review and throw it away, it really doesn't exist any more for me. I accept that some critics will get irritated with me; that amuses me, and some of it is so stupid that it has no effect at all. Naturally there are also things that have an effect. Once, for example, I had a negative review; I lay in bed for three days, felt ashamed to go down into the street, meet friends or to run into people from the literary industry, knowing full well that they had read it and delighted in it. Nonetheless, now after eight or nine years of writing, I accept it fully, because they are the accompanying expression of my failure, of which I am convinced and which I know belongs to the work. I cannot do something literary which, as I believe at least, is something new or difficult to compare to the total output, and just expect that it will be praised from all sides. That would be a false attitude to my work. I don't write in order to be praised by critics,

but rather to bring into the world—to put it somewhat melodramatically—what seems to me to be important.

SR: Are the articles that you have written for *Die Zeit* or rather for *Zeitmagazin* amongst others, possibly a strategy to avoid the critics and communicate directly with the public?

GR: Have I correctly understood that you are asking whether the magazine articles that I have written are a direct form of communication with the reader?

SR: Yes.

GR: The articles which I have written for newspapers are firstly, formal straightjackets for me to have dealt with a particular problem in a simple form in a daily paper and, secondly, they are precisely that which you put to me in the question; they are exactly the examples that I cite, whenever I am working on the critical labour of journalists or critics. I also wanted to work in the profession in order to plant something that was just as vulnerable, where one could oneself say again, but you do it that way, and to make a stand against a certain tendency in journalism. Of course, for me there are advantages in it – that I have taken more time for it, for example – but we now have to proceed on the basis that one ought not view everything that happens in the newspapers from the perspective of petty everyday journalism. In *Die Zeit* or in the literary section of the *F.A.Z.* or in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* it is assumed that more care and time must be present than in a small newspaper or in an

Austrian provincial paper where the journalist's work is multiply compartmentalised.