

Interview 11th November 1982

SR: How important for you were *manuskripte* and the different events of *Forum Stadtpark* in the 1960s? What was conveyed to you by them? What were you doing at the time? How did you contribute?

GR: My first contact with *Forum Stadtpark* was at nineteen, that was in 1961 and I played a role in the plays *Maler und Farbe (Painter and Paints)* and *Schweinetransport (Pork Transport)* by Wolfgang Bauer. I was studying medicine at the time and came into contact with *Forum Stadtpark* for the first time. Someone spoke to me in the anatomy class saying that it had been heard that whenever we were reading some play or other in school at the Lichtenberg Gymnasium, I always read very well and that amateur actors were being sought for a play by Wolfgang Bauer and would I come and audition. Well, I came along but didn't audition; I hadn't learned a role and said that I could read something, if you would like, and then we just began to rehearse. I was very naïve because I liked doing it and couldn't imagine that I could be nervous but then at the premiere, of course, on one occasion I froze up. We performed it three times and from then on for many years I had no contact at all with *Forum Stadtpark*, didn't attend any events—I was studying medicine. Up until the publication of my book *the autobiography*

of albert einstein and the printing of *Künstel* in *manuskripte*, I was hardly at *Forum Stadtpark*. I can't say never, but very, very seldom. The events themselves had no influence on me at all, but they had a relatively good influence on the atmosphere in Graz. You read about them in the papers and that encouraged you to do something yourself.

SR: Did you read *Die Zeit*, for example, at that time?

GR: No.

SR: Austrian newspapers?

GR: *Der Spiegel*. I read *Der Spiegel* for a long time in my student days, then I had a long time when I hardly read a German newspaper, hardly even our newspapers. That was when I was living with my wife and three children, five of us, that is, in one room and often had night duty and shift duty; that was actually my darkest phase. I was in fact writing then but hardly concerned myself with anything else. *manuskripte* was, of course, important later when writing *the autobiography of albert einstein*, in as far as the most varied novels and stories were preprinted in *manuskripte* and because back then the courage to engage with modernity came into the house, so to speak, through this magazine—the fact that something like that existed. One was encouraged to examine one's style and to further develop one's writing. In my own first attempts, I began writing very traditionally and I have to add that, even today, I consider it good that I did that because I believe that one must learn the tools of the

trade thoroughly and it is certainly no bad thing to be able to write in the traditional style, should it be necessary.

SR: I noticed in the chapter “Aufzeichnungen eines überflüssigen Menschen” in the Graz student magazine *impuls*, that it was written somewhat traditionally, in the style of Hamsun, for example.

GR: He was my role model at the time. I had just read *Hunger* and *Mysteries*; I had read all of Hamsun from A-Z in three or four weeks. I was on vacation and lay in bed all day reading Hamsun. That stimulated me a lot. That was the Hamsun-Dostoyevsky-phase, then there was still a Hemingway-phase; it took me quite a long time until I found my own style.

SR: So that was a long way from the *Aufzeichnungen* to *Künstel*.

GR: Yes, a very long way.

SR: And in the meantime you were reading *manuskripte* and the works of the *Wiener Gruppe*.

GR: Yes, particularly Konrad Bayer—I liked him a lot. And then, naturally, what the Graz authors were writing in *manuskripte*; at that time especially Handke and Frischmuth, Wolfgang Bauer, Klaus Hoffer—at least up to a certain point—they were influences. Hengstler, Wilhelm Hengstler, he is an author from the early phase [of *Forum Stadtpark*] who has still not completed his first book but Suhrkamp

wants to publish it; it is called *slow motion* and I believe that it is quite good.³⁵

SR: Would I be correct to interpret your early works, *Künstel, die autobiographie des albert einstein*, in the context of the *Wiener Gruppe*?

GR: In the case of *einstein*, my preoccupation with the mentally ill was the greatest influence, namely with the work of Leo Navratil, *Schizophrenie und Sprache* and *Schizophrenie und Kunst*.³⁶ That brought me first of all to *einstein* and to the stylistic form. The *Wiener Gruppe* was actually relatively unimportant for this work, even if there are parallels there which in the main were not so consciously or were absolutely not consciously put there by me, as, for example, in *Der Wille zur Krankheit* or *Künstel* or in the volume *Der Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkriegs*, where working with a knowledge the *Wiener Gruppe* is absolutely in there. The *Wiener Gruppe* shouldn't be overestimated; that happens very easily. The *Wiener Gruppe* also comes from somewhere. The *Wiener Gruppe* also had its influences and in this connection it must be said that the influences that the

³⁵ Wilhelm Hengstler (b. Graz 1944). See his Anthology *Ausgeträumt. Zehn Erzählungen*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1978 and *Die letzte Premiere. Geschichten*, Frankfurt /M.: Suhrkamp 1987.

³⁶ The Austrian psychiatrist Leo Navratil (1921–2006) founded in 1981 'Das Haus der Künstler' (The Artists' House) in the grounds of the Gugging Insane Asylum. His research into the written and visual art works of a group of male mental patients as a continuation of the work of Hans Prinzhorn, i. a., facilitated greater insight into the life-world of schizophrenics.

Wiener Gruppe had were present exactly the same as for me, for example, Surrealism, Dadaism, Klebnikov, Daniel Charms and so forth. There is a whole series, from Benjamin Peret to Arragon etcetera, or poetry by the most varied poets, Schwitters, for example. The *Wiener Gruppe* doesn't stand as the inventor of a literature but rather it has a particular significance in literature and formed its literature from other differing influences.

SR: So you didn't come to modernity through your reading of the *Wiener Gruppe* but you were reading them at the same time.

GR: I wasn't acquainted with the *Wiener Gruppe* earlier than with Dada, for example, but I must add that the *Wiener Gruppe* has certainly influenced me a lot.

To be precise one must add the following: the *Wiener Gruppe* has most probably been an influence on me and not an insignificant one. But I would like it if this factor were not so exclusively projected onto the *Wiener Gruppe*, as the *Wiener Gruppe* was also exposed to very great and strong influences that shaped its literature. By this I mean especially the influence of French Surrealism, Dada, Expressionism in Germany, and the most varied people Schwitters, Klebnikov etc. or Mayakowsky. Perhaps the Vernacular Poems [Mundartgedichte] are the most original creation of the *Gruppe* and they had no influence on me at all. Everything else you can trace back, even though I find the *Wiener Gruppe's* synthesis of different literatures very interesting and very good. And just as the *Wiener Gruppe* came to awareness through the literature that came before it, I came

to my literature through literature that came before me, and I must add that it wasn't exclusively the *Wiener Gruppe* that influenced me. Earlier I had already read Dada and suchlike, Hülsebeck, for example.

SR: The distinction nonetheless remains meaningful.

GR: Especially in critical works and investigations there is a constant that says, yes, the *Wiener Gruppe*! And thereby something is constructed in Austria which is fundamentally incorrect, namely that this form of literature was invented in Austria after 1945. It has a certain importance in Austria, a much greater importance, for instance, for Austrian literature than for German literature. Except for Oswald Wiener, in Germany the *Wiener Gruppe* hardly plays a role. Rowohlt has now even given up the rights to the Konrad Bayer volume.

SR: In the critical literature the work of the *Wiener Gruppe* is sometimes treated as a kind of causation, as a source.

GR: Every kind of literature is a source, but not the invention of a literature. The important thing about the *Wiener Gruppe* was that as a result of its appearance, of its literary products, in Austria traditional writing was no longer the only form in which one could write, rather the concept of experimental writing has played an increasingly large role, with Jandl, with Mayröcker etc. The experimental mode of writing is characterised in Austria by precious literati as the real literature, the right literature. There is a very, very fragmented relationship to traditional story telling in Aus-

tria, which is also an influence from the *Wiener Gruppe*. Whether that is correct or not, that is another question, one can say, for instance, that experimentally, the literature of Camus and Sartre delivered nothing and yet *The Stranger* is a book which I wouldn't swap for most of the books that have appeared in Austria since 1945. Or in American literature from Hemingway to Faulkner ... It is necessary to grasp the dimensions of the situation. The exclusive claim that only that is literature which is experimental literature, definitely cannot be sustained.

SR: Are you familiar with the essay by Priessnitz und Rausch³⁷ in the volume *Wie die Grazer auszogen, die Literatur zu erobern*? It deals with a particular concept of the avantgarde in Austrian literature.

GR: I have in fact read it once but I don't remember it off-hand.

SR: What they maintain there is that from the perspective of a purely experimental literature, the literature of Graz comes across as somehow reactionary. The Graz authors have re-established links to traditional methods of writing and from an ideological point of view, this is not acceptable. These people are on the side of someone like Heißenbüttel—of neo-positivism. Alfred Kolleritsch said yesterday, that Jandl cultivates this variety of experimental literature more or

³⁷ Reinhard Priessnitz und Mechthild Rausch, 'tribut an die tradition: aspekte einer postexperimentellen literatur' in: *Wie die Grazer auszogen, die Literatur zu erobern*, P. Laemmle und Jörg Drews (Hrsg.), München: text + kritik 1975.

less—or at least represents it. It is quite a different direction. They have taken up language as a theme in quite another way. This is said from a purely philosophical standpoint and viewed theoretically. They are not so interested in the existential plane of literature. The themes in *Aufzeichnungen*, for example, or in *Künstel* and especially in *Einstein*, are quite different from the themes in so-called experimental literature.

GR: I am glad that that is something different. I don't belong to any school and don't in any way share this dread about contact with some other kind of literature. Fundamentally, there is no reactionary literature, just good and bad literature. And if a young man of twenty were to write a novel today in the traditional sense, which as a novel were to explode all previous limits—that is, as far as the perception of spiritual and intellectual processes is concerned—so that would be a very important novel and would certainly enter into literature. If one were to make the same claim in painting that would be to say, you are now not permitted to paint differently to Kandinsky or Klee, or abstractly or whatever. Andy Warhol painted neither abstractly nor otherwise but developed a form of his own that could perhaps also be characterised as reactionary. From this point of view, transferred to literature, this would mean that one wasn't permitted to write other than what aligns itself with Dada, Surrealism, or the *Wiener Gruppe*, whereby the question arises whether in this area no literature was produced which wasn't already there—which even in its extreme ramifications wasn't already there. I don't know, for example, how far Rühm goes beyond Dada and Schwitters. To my eyes the

yardsticks that are applied are somewhat exaggerated. Even though the *Wiener Gruppe* must be accorded very great significance, even an inspirational significance, I am convinced that the literature of Graz would also have existed without the *Wiener Gruppe*. I believe that Wolfgang Bauer and Kolleritsch and Handke and Frischmuth and I would have existed anyway. It may well be that things would have been a little different but I am familiar with the anxieties about contact and the demands for exclusivity of this kind of literature and here my view of literature is fundamentally different. In my view, it also has to do with the existential in literature and with the expression of the feeling and circumstances of the times. This cannot be advanced purely linguistically, although that is also very, very important, but in literature there will always be the need, the real need, to recognise oneself and one's times in the literary work.

SR: The Grazers' refusal of theory is talked about repeatedly as if it were somehow an error that the Graz authors have not conceived of their work so philosophically, theoretically or from the standpoint of a critique of ideology. I am not taking the side of these critics but in Germany at the present time this tendency is very important.

GR: Yes, well what should I say about that? I would like to ask in which critiques of ideology and suchlike investigations did Knut Hamsun believe; that would interest me. I don't believe that literature must be linked automatically to theory. In the optimal case as with Sartre or Camus, I think it can be linked but I don't believe that this is necessarily a prerequisite. I don't detect much of this tendency in Thomas

Mann or in Tolstoy. I don't know—I think these tales about theory are too glibly handled. In my case, reflection on what I am writing takes place in the books themselves. That can be confirmed. When one reads the books, that can be confirmed even from the quotations.

SR: It would be tempting for a critic, for example, to explain the [recourse to] the fragment in *einstein* by way of the contact with the *Wiener Gruppe* without considering the novel itself.

GR: I wrote *einstein* before I could read Oswald Wiener; he appeared only later. It took on the most varied forms and was naturally also further influenced in its structure by the work of Oswald Wiener; that is correct, but in the first instance it was established and principally worked through from my preoccupation with the mentally ill and the literature of or about the mentally ill—the fundamental impulse was there.

SR: How did you come to this literature of or about the mentally ill? Was that through your studies?

GR: Yes, in my medical studies I was interested in schizophrenia and then read a good deal about schizophrenia in the university library – Bleuel, for example. I then came across the visual imagery of the mentally ill, Prinzhorn and the whole story, through the painter, Peter Pongratz, who engaged with it very early on, and then inevitably one comes across Navratil. That left a strong impression on me and has had a big influence on my literary development.

SR: When did you first have contact with Freud? At school?

GR: At that time a Freud taboo more or less still prevailed. I come from a doctor's family and my father was very much against my coming home as a twenty-year-old medical student with *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He characterised it as nonsense. *The Interpretation of Dreams* fascinated me; despite all the logic it struck me as capricious. I believe that it carries something capricious within it.

SR: Did you immediately interpret it in a literary way?

GR: These logical chains that Freud links up and that bring these baffling findings to the light of day, for me have something capricious about them. Up to today, I can't say why and what this is? I am clinging to mathematical laws here but these are very random and magical processes. Freud had a fantastic capacity for empathy—I guess—but the book fascinated me. Later on before *Winterreise*, I read *Civilisation and its Discontents* and that was one of the reasons for *Winterreise*.

SR: Did you read it by chance or with the novel already in mind?

GR: No, no, that took shape only after reading the book, just at the point where Freud writes in *Civilisation and its Discontents* that when the metaphysical plane drops away in the human being, man can find meaning in work—in meaningful work—and now my question, first just for myself, was how these people perceive meaning in their work and

what this question of meaning signifies for people at all; whether meaning isn't just something artificial that fundamentally doesn't exist, and everyone suspects of the other person that they see a meaning or are doing something meaningful, not just them, and because they don't have it themselves, they don't feel good and think that they too have to march along in this column of meaning.

SR: At the present time in the West we are experiencing a denigration of work. Can we resist this or is the process of denigration running continuously onward?

GR: The worst thing—as one sees—is to have no work, but I believe that it is a question of consciousness, in that one realises that meaning is something artificial and is not something that comes about through the living together of all people, and that there are limits in human labour. I think that it is important for society that tasks are carried out that are not pleasant; there will always be people who let their time be bought from them, even for work which is not meaningful, if this work is well paid—that will always exist.

By the way, Breschnew has died—because I was just thinking about Communism. There, work has even had a myth bestowed on it and is glorified in a way that never happens so shamelessly under Capitalism. Under Capitalism people are indeed also exploited but the redeeming thing about it, is that no myth made of it.

SR: But now in England under Thatcher, for example, we are seeing massive unemployment that is leading many people to despair.

GR: Yes, I believe, many people will have to learn to think creatively and to be concerned with the self. That is never taught. For this reason, not to have work is such a burden, because people are thrown back on themselves, first taken out of a community that just works day after day, and second, because there is work going on all around, and only they are sitting there and doing nothing. Whenever people have nothing with which they can occupy themselves and spiritually engage with—that is the burden. For a person who is creatively active, that will never be as bad as for someone who fundamentally is not capable of that.

SR: Something else on Freud: the theory of the death instinct. What is your position on this?

GR: Of course I believe in the death instinct. With me it is not purely an intellectual affair, but rather an instinctive matter. I sense the death instinct in myself: to what extent that is pathological, I can't judge. I don't know whether everyone says what they are thinking. Precisely in this area, I think that a great deal is concealed and kept quiet about.

SR: Does Ascher in *The Calm Ocean* become a suicide?

GR: Yes, he will shoot himself, in *Landläufiger Tod*.

SR: Is the name also significant: Ascher—ashes?

GR: No, that comes from Lou Archer. In Ross McDonald's work a detective is called Archer, the precise observer. That's only important for me. In *Der große Horizont*, Daniel

Haid is named after *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Nagl [in *Winterreise*] is a homage to *Mysteries* by Knut Hamsun.

SR: When you are talking about death, is this more or less in the sense of Freud's death instinct?

GR: That doesn't really interest me theoretically. These are attempts to get rid of feelings and thoughts, which exist in me but not on the basis of a theory, to prove a theory, but one comes to similar results.

Above all, I think that every literature that builds too much on theory or on ideologies or philosophical constructions that have already been processed by other people, represents a weakness. An author has to radically convert his experiences into language with language. That proceeds in the most multifarious fashion.

SR: So the Grazers' so-called refusal of theory is rather an attempt to come closer to life itself.

GR: I can't speak about the Graz authors, only about myself. For me, it is just that I have to make the theory myself; it must come out of my work and every theory is at the same time an explanation and also a cage again. Whenever one has a theory, the struggle is always to get out of this cage again when it becomes too narrow. In the ideal case, I see literature like the development of Picasso who, barely had he gained an understanding, smashed it to pieces again and went on ahead to the next one. In the best instance, literature must be capable of doing that and I know the moment one says that, criticism becomes voluble but one must wait

and see how the complete oeuvre of an author looks when it is completed. The work of an author cannot be so quickly judged, when they have written for only ten years or so; rather the possibility of surprising oneself and others must also be granted. And for me, novels like *Der große Horizont* or *Ein neuer Morgen* or *Winterreise* are steps in a certain process of development: I knew that I could only write like that for as long as that was experimental for me. It has been an experiment for me personally to do that and to develop this method of writing. Now something else is interesting to me but that is not therefore a deficiency in quality. In conclusion, I would like to offer here as a comparison Marquez who has written very simple and clear books like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* or *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor* or *No One Writes to the Colonel* and then again, on the other hand, highly complicated ones like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *The Autumn of the Patriarch*.

SR: What we have in literary criticism at the moment are two quite different definitions of the experimental. On the one side, this purely theoretically based definition as it is represented in Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*³⁸ and on the other, the understanding of the experimental in the mind of a living author. What is an experiment in Moscow is not necessarily an experiment in Graz.

GR: That's Bürger's problem: that doesn't interest me.

SR: That is also Heißenbüttel's position.

³⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1974.

GR: And that's interesting, but problems and theories don't interest me all that much. I am very interested in the literature and like to read the finished products. I make my own analyses and from the findings I take what is usable for me, what I find interesting. It is not the case that after Brecht you can no longer write plays other than in the Brechtian mode. As you can see, it is possible. It is a long way from Brecht to Wilson. These are just certain other people who want to set up churches within literature to promulgate certain religions and to keep these religions as pure as possible. They are just particular people who want to do this and they should do it. Literature also has a lot to do with play, with *homo ludens*, and the ones that are just playing are the *homines ludentes*, and the others are the referees and the game's rule makers; they also belong but they just concern themselves with the problem as to whether the playing field should be 110 metres or 180 metres and the one who likes playing football just plays on the playing field, that's the difference.

SR: In your work guilt is often talked about. How did you come initially to the concept of guilt. Is that via Freud or quite independently?

GR: That is probably Catholic, original sin and so forth, without one precisely knowing it. But it is really so, that for long periods in my life I live with feelings of guilt, often nameless guilt feelings. Perhaps now—according to Freudian theory—from acts of repression, but the fact is that for a long time I appeared to myself to be like a criminal, without knowing what crime I had committed, and that I was also always on the run and still always am actually. As you

see, I always have a suitcase packed, and have done that for fifteen years; the awareness that I can disappear at any time is actually my freedom. You can happily call it fleeing but I am saying that the freedom to be able to go into hiding or to disappear, that is a freedom. For a long time, as long as I was at the data processing centre, I couldn't afford that, although I was always playing with the idea. To suddenly and absolutely disappear is for me actually one of the most beautiful ideas and only the fact that I have children and it would make them insecure, holds me back. But I would be mad keen to go into hiding and take on another existence. Possibly to write again in this existence but under a pseudonym and doing something quite different. I would like to be declared dead. In the area of culture from Rimbaud to Jim Morrison that's not an infrequent wish. I once talked about this point in conversation with Wolfi Bauer and was astonished that he was thinking the same thing—simply to disappear completely and wanting to start a new life. Unromantic, but to start over right from the beginning and have a second existence seems to me like a rebirth in itself. What most people perceive as happiness or at least as something positive, that their life path is established and secured, is for me the greatest horror. My anxiety about fixed ties and obligations also comes from this. Even a fixed agreement is something that I have to overcome resistance to, when I say now that tomorrow I will be at this time at such and such a place. The closer the appointment approaches, the more I feel that my life is being circumscribed.

Health is very often connected with stupidity. People who are always only meditating on health are often somewhat stupid. They are afraid of life and of death, both.

SR: The last time I interviewed you, I lost a whole side; the tape recorder wasn't working. It concerned *Winterreise* and the theme of separation from women. And not only from women—from the family and from society. How is it possible to live on without these relationships, without having these so-called normal relationships to the family, to women, to society?

GR: How does one survive without these relationships? One is entering constantly into new relationships. The question is too abstract, philosophical. I am not a hermit. The longing for contact is always present, the longing for love and the longing to give love.

SR: You said once that it would probably be impossible for you to live on as a writer with a woman in the house. That's disturbing, isn't it?

GR: It disturbs me too when a man is in the house who doesn't himself write. That is, when someone else is there who continually has something else in their head and is doing something else which one finds boring, and who takes on other things—that would annoy me, because the distraction is too great. In my case, writing has a lot to do with being alone. The café is also not a possibility for me—Viennese Kaffeehausliteratur. I am distracted too much, I could make notes and, if absolutely necessary, I could write something down but I couldn't concentrate well.

SR: Does one have to be alone to investigate reality?

GR: Me, yes. But I wouldn't like to generalise here. Methods of working and what one prefers—everyone has to find that for themselves.