

# Talking about Censorship Supposes Being Precise about What Is Supposed to Be Censored: The Handke Affair as a Case Study

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*In March 2006, Peter Handke went to Milošević's funeral, where he gave a speech saying he still did not know the truth about Yugoslavia's war and Milošević's responsibility. This event gave rise to a scandal or "affair", called "L'affaire Handke", starting with a petition signed by Elfriede Jelinek and other artists, denouncing the "censorship" Handke was a victim of. Reconstructing this affair, I shall analyze various questions: was it relevant to say that Handke was a victim of "censorship?" What was the position of the various people that came to Handke's defence? What was the position of those that criticized him? Are they talking about the same thing? Obviously, the answers to these questions depend on the object considered to be the supposed object of censure: the writer himself (as free to say anything he wants), or the thing he is talking about – a very cruel war and genocide in Bosnia.*

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Asking what the truth of literature is refers to another question: how do different readers interpret the text they read? Of course, each reader thinks he is free to interpret a text as he wishes or is able. However, is it pertinent to think that each "truth" is equally relevant?

In this respect, I would like to emphasize an aspect of the work I have been involved in for fifteen years, and not only because the subject is important: What are censorship and self-censorship? What is the truth of literature and, with regard to this truth, what is the possible role, place, and responsibility of writers in society? All of these questions are related to another, deeper one, which is: why do we speak and write at all? Also, it seems to me that

the study I have made of Peter Handke could be useful as an aid to understanding the depth of these questions. To summarize this study (published in 2003 in France under the title *Le cas Handke*), I have tried to understand why Handke defended Milošević from 1991 onwards. To try to understand this, I read all his writings with this question in mind. However, I did not read them just any which way. In fact, I began by rereading *Wunschloses Unglück*, which I had read twenty years before without remarking anything in particular and in which, with this question in mind, I discovered something I had not paid attention to on first reading. Actually, I found in this touching book what seemed to be a first clue or a first index and, after that, I read all Handke's works chronologically, from the beginning, in order to verify my first intuition and try to hear and feel what his own path had been and to get to the bottom of his "true feeling", to employ one of his own expressions.

Moreover, because I am also a writer, a novelist interested in the phenomenon called inspiration, and because I have also worked and published in history, the history and epistemology of medicine, and also psychoanalysis, I have been able to shed light on the background and what seemed to be the logic common to both Handke's writings and his political engagement.

What is amazing is that, if you agree to consider that the writer is no different from the man that is writing, if you agree to consider that a writer is, like all human beings, partially determined by his language, his own individual history inscribed in collective history, if you agree to consider the writer as a subject both conscious and unconscious of his writing, you discover in Handke's works the expression of a strong denial of reality and, more widely, you may interpret his behaviour and his discourses as the clinical illustration of the Freudian mechanism exemplified by *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe. To put it more clearly, Freud showed how unconscious denial engenders, almost mechanically, repetition – which has unquestionably been proven over the last century, clinically speaking, at the individual level. Also, because of the way Handke speaks of his own history, his own origins, because of the words he does or does not use in talking about what concerns his own filiation, and because of the way he talks about history, I discovered the answer to my question, and I also discovered that apparently most of his readers did not understand what he was actually talking about. If I dare to make this claim, which seems to be a bit provocative, it is because there is a kind of unanimity in critical and literary circles about the supposed clarity of Handke's literature. His French translator Georges-Arthur Goldsmith, for instance, writes: "Peter Handke's work makes visible what *is*, it re-establishes the facts through the extreme precision of the writing" (*Peter Handke* 8).

Likewise John Updike, quoted by McDonald, said: “There is no denying his wilful intensity and knifelike clarity of evocation”; and McDonald himself remarks that “Handke’s style possessed a power that somehow came through even in English translation” (McDonald, *The Apologist*, digital edition). My question to John Updike is: what does Handke evoke? And to McDonald: how can we define this power?

What is amazing, when you follow the way I read Handke’s work, shedding light on the way he disguises or erases, book after book, what he does not want to know regarding historical reality, you understand how seductive Handke’s art is, and how his readers have been totally blinded by this poetic seduction. As you may suppose, the first person to be deeply surprised by this discovery was me.

My starting point was that for a true writer – and obviously, even if I do not agree with him, Handke is a true writer – each word he uses is necessary. Indeed, what characterizes true literature is necessity. When you read, even if you do not know exactly what this necessity is for the author, you feel it because this necessity is fairly strong, or even stronger than the writer himself may imagine. When I read Handke with the question “why did he defend Milošević?” I read it in a different way from how his readers are used to reading him. Generally, the text is more or less like a mirror for the reader. Most of the time, the reader does not think about who is writing and why. Most of the time, the reader is only seeking his own pleasure. His goal is to find this pleasure. When he finds it, he talks about this pleasure, about his own feelings more than about the text. However, he does not care what the background is to this pleasure. Moreover, most of the time, he does not want to know about it. It is easy to understand why: when you try to know about it and when you find it – which I did with Handke’s work – you experience a deep inner conflict because there is a painful contradiction between what you want to believe and what you observe. Most of the time, you prefer to avoid the contradiction and keep what you believe – which is wishful thinking – instead of keeping alive this aching conflict and thinking with it, and trying to think through its consequences. In a word, the reader is like all ordinary men, like Handke himself: he prefers to pay attention to his pleasure and avoid the troubling questions concerning its background.

Handke’s writings and the Handke Affair illustrate this wonderfully. Those that have been enjoying Handke’s writings for some twenty or thirty years cannot imagine that this work was entirely created by a man whose reasoning is sometimes like that of an older teenager, sometimes like a traumatized child, and who feels himself to be innocent in everything he says. They cannot imagine that this sixty-year-old talented man

has remained immature on the whole and has not become as kind as his readers would like to see him. And they do not want to know that this man seems to have been deeply seduced by Milošević, as others were, one generation before him, by Hitler. When you take pleasure in reading someone, wouldn't you like the writer to be great and good, as great and good as your pleasure was? Actually, if you agree to see what is in question in the texts more lucidly, and if you agree to hear what the man is really saying beneath the elegance of his apparent discourse, you feel as though the question is being returned to you, like a boomerang: what, in fact, is this pleasure you took from him? This question is quite uncomfortable. However, it is also possibly fruitful, if you do not avoid it but rather work with it.

I hope you will forgive this relatively long introduction, but it was important to sketch the landscape of my analysis. Actually, this reading I did of the entirety of Handke's work was the starting point of a longer project, which is an interpretation of the war initiated by Belgrade in 1991. I concluded this interpretation last spring by publishing propositions to build a strong and durable peace for the young generations in all the countries that have emerged from the former Yugoslavia, under the title *L'effet papillon*.<sup>1</sup>

Now, let me focus on the affair. When you examine an object or a situation, you may develop thousands of discourses that may all be contradictory. All of these discourses developing different points of view will not change the object or the situation, but perhaps one or two of these discourses may change the way you look at this object or situation. It depends on your own judgment, your own feelings, your own history, and your own work. It also depends on your own aptitude to change your mind, which is not so easy.

In my mind, because of the work I did, this affair is deeply interesting precisely because it is like a miniature showing exactly what has been happening in France during the war since 1991. In other words, this affair is a symptom of a larger debate that is very difficult to open in Europe. Obviously, if you did not follow the war closely and the declarations in France about what was happening in the Balkans, you cannot see this aspect.

I have not forgotten that we are talking about censorship; in fact, I am already talking about it. This is because censorship, in the sense I am taking it now, is necessarily applied to a kind of truth that is disturbing. It may be disturbing for the political powers, it may also be disturbing for your own mind and the way you are used to thinking. In this respect, I would introduce a distinction between censorship, self-censorship, or repression on the one hand, and, on the other hand, legal prohibition concerning

historical facts such as crimes against humanity and genocide. This distinction seems to be crucial precisely because, for fifteen years – and especially in this war – we have been confronted with different variations of negationism, which render the debate very difficult.

Thus, I will not take this affair as most of the media do, as a celebrity affair, I will take it as seriously as the subject deserves to be taken. Moreover, I will give you some of my clues to open the door . . . if you dare to – I mean, if you are not too afraid of the truth of literature.

I said that this affair was a symptom. I will remind you of the facts. On 18 March 2006, Slobodan Milošević was buried in Požarevac. Peter Handke went there and gave a speech at his tomb. He could have gone there without saying anything. I can imagine somebody going there because he was very glad that Milošević, who was responsible for this dreadful war, was dead. However, as you probably know, those that were glad were in Belgrade on the same day with yellow balloons and the inscription: “Spring came three days early.” At the same time, Peter Handke was close to the Chetniks and publicly said the following:

The world, the so-called world, knows all about Yugoslavia, Serbia. The world, the so-called world, knows all about Slobodan Milošević. The so-called world knows the truth. Because of this, the so-called world is today absent, not only today, not only here. I know that I don't know. I don't know the truth. But I look. I listen. I feel. I remember. Because of that, I am here today, close to Yugoslavia, close to Serbia, close to Slobodan Milošević. (*L'É Nouvelle Observateur*, electronic archives)<sup>2</sup>

The German press related this speech and, a few days later, Ruth Valentini wrote three lines in *L'É Nouvelle Observateur* under the rubric *sif-flets*, or ‘boos’. In those three lines, not all the facts were confirmed, some details were inaccurate – in particular the supposed kissing of the Serbian flag and the rose thrown onto the coffin – so in any case Peter Handke snapped up the opportunity to argue that Ruth Valentini was lying, but the main fact remains that Handke said what he said. When, after this, he declared he had wanted only to be there as a witness (as published in *Libération* on 4 May 2006), this was another example of Handke's rhetoric. Speaking publicly, Handke was not only a witness but an actor, saying that he did not know the truth about this war and Milošević's responsibility.

Having read these lines, Marcel Bozonnet, the administrator of *La Comédie française*, the most symbolic French theatre, decided to take Handke's play (which had already been scheduled) off the agenda. This removal gave rise to the “affair”, starting with a petition published in the French newspaper *Le Monde* on 3 May 2006 and signed by the Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek and other artists, denouncing the “censorship” of

which Handke was a victim. If you do not know or do not want to know or put aside recent history and events, you may wonder and ask: Why this decision? Handke is a great and well-known writer. What can justify such a decision in a democratic country?

First, it is important to pay attention to the words Marcel Bozonnet used. He specified that the decision was his own, an individual one, and that he assumed full responsibility for it. I attended the press conference he gave on this occasion. Bozonnet was perfectly clear: he had known from the beginning the pro-Milošević positions Handke had taken during the war and, in spite of these positions, which he did not agree with, he at first accepted the programming of Handke's play because he thought that anybody could be wrong and Handke would probably change his position in the end. However, when he heard what Handke said at Milošević's funeral, he was deeply shocked and changed his mind. As he said, hearing Handke, all the memories of this war came back to his mind, the mass murders, the crimes against humanity, the genocide in Bosnia, the trials in the Hague, and he thought he could not, in this context, receive Handke in his theatre, he would not be able to work with him, to shake hands with him. He thought – and I agree with him – that in 2006, after all the trials and enquiries and documents we have, it was inadmissible to deny the facts of what had happened in Yugoslavia, and therefore it was also inadmissible to deny Milošević's responsibility – even if he was not the only one to bear the responsibility for this war and even if one may discuss the meaning and interpretation of those facts.

Of course, when you read the petition entitled “Don't Censor Handke's Work”, written by Anne Weber and signed by Elfriede Jelinek and several intellectuals, you understand pretty well that they do not view the problem in the same way. To quote from the petition, “Peter Handke went to Milošević's funeral. It is not about deciding whether he was right or wrong to go there. It is about knowing whether this fact must justify or not re-establishing a form of censorship in France exerted by those that go with the flow” (*Le Monde*, Paris, 3 May 2006). Of course, for Bozonnet and his supporters, the problem was precisely, after years of confusion in France, to take a clear position regarding Milošević's responsibility.

This first petition is interesting because the text does not mention what actually caused Bozonnet's decision; that is, Handke's declaration. This petition only mentions Handke's presence at the funeral, but not his words. When you analyze and think through the situation precisely, it is comical because of course, if Handke had spoken another way at the funeral, saying for instance “Milošević was a great criminal and a catastrophe for Serbia, and I hope Serbia will judge him in its own memory as Germany

judged Hitler”, this affair would not have taken place. However, it was impossible for Handke to say such a thing – and this is precisely what I read in his work. Actually, my publisher sent him my book in 2003. I know he knows my work. In spite of this, three years later, he went to Milošević’s funeral and spoke the way he did. It shows exactly what I wrote three years before: this unconscious necessity is stronger than himself, and he does not want to know anything. Handke is blind and behaves, regarding this war, like an impostor, as shown by Yves Laplace in Geneva.

If Handke is blind, the author and signatories of this first petition are deaf in considering that Handke’s declaration does not count for or mean anything. Moreover, defining this clear engagement against Milošević as a way of going with the flow is rhetorically amazing. Indeed, for more than ten years, French public opinion and politicians – François Mitterrand to start with – supported Milošević and his Serbia as our historical friends. This propaganda apparently shocked neither Anne Weber nor Elfriede Jelinek. Her petition was signed by those that supported Milošević and Karadžić during the war, which is not surprising. For these people, crimes against humanity and genocide are apparently what Jean-Marie Le Pen calls “details” of history. (For instance, among the signatories we find Vladimir Dimitrijević, a well-known publisher, under the name “L’Age d’homme”, that supported Milošević from the beginning of the war; Patrick Besson, a French writer and journalist that openly supported Radovan Karadžić during the war; and Emir Kusturica, the famous movie director that supported Bosnian Serbs and recently converted to Orthodoxy, changing his first name so as to continue supporting the nationalist Serbian cause.) I imagine that some of those that signed this text did not understand very well what exactly the question was. Broadly speaking, though, to describe the political sensibility of those that support Peter Handke, one finds exactly what historians call the “red-brown”, this dreadful alliance between extreme-left and extreme-nationalist-right, historically embodied in the pact between Stalin and Hitler.

As you may suppose, the affair did not stop with this first text supporting Peter Handke. Being attacked as censors gave rise to a strong reaction – perhaps stronger than Anne Weber and their friends could have imagined: on 10 May, *Le Monde* published another petition entitled “The right to say No”, led by the author and actor Olivier Py supporting Bozonnet’s decision. More than one hundred and fifty personalities signed it, among them another Nobel Prize winner in literature, Gao Xingjian, the writer Leslie Kaplan, and the theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine. Many papers were published on this occasion that spoke of censorship in the name of freedom and free expression, opinion, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

If you analyze the arguments, those that defended Handke and spoke of censorship in the name of free expression are often the same as those that defended Milošević and Karadžić, and they paid attention neither to the historical facts nor to the way Handke was still speaking in 2006, after years of war and crimes against humanity. When you read what they wrote, you can see that they speak of “opinion”, or “freedom of opinion”. In their minds, the evidence that has been collected for years, the evidence we have now concerning the camps, the sterilizations, the systematic rapes, the mass murders, and so on, does not count. For them, it is still a matter of “opinion”. For them, there is no truth of history. The facts do not exist in themselves, as a matter of thinking. Truth and lies are placed at the same level. The reality principle does not function in their minds as a reference point to think through and try to understand history, and especially the mechanism of genocide and the repetition of genocide. Moreover, because this dreadful reality is denied or reduced as a matter of “opinion” – as the negationists always do, for instance the French historian Faurisson, who dares consider that the gas chambers did not exist and whom, as you know, in the name of free expression, Noam Chomsky defended when he was attacked in France for denying the Holocaust, which seems at least paradoxical – because this reality is denied, it is very difficult to speak with these people. The denial of reality functions like a gap, an abyss, in their minds but also in the dialogue. The question is: what is liberty? What is free expression? Are we free to deny what happened? In the name of liberty, are we free to deny mass murders, systematic extermination, or even genocide? Does our liberty have a limit? What is the frame of our liberty? If you remember Spinoza, you know that there is no liberty without necessity. What is the necessity of your way of speaking and writing, what is the secret frame of your discourse? This is a very deep question for each of us.

To conclude by trying to answer the question posed by this short contribution, I shall say that France is a truly democratic country where free expression is possible for everyone that works, even if it is not easy because of the ignorance and strong prejudices shared by many people, even in the media, as in all democratic countries. Those that deplore the strong criticism concerning Handke’s discourse actually do not tolerate the contradiction between their own love for the work and the way they should look at the man if they admit the secret meaning of his discourse and behaviour. To save their blind love, to save their own pleasure in seeing themselves in the mirror of Handke’s writings, they suspend their own judgment and deny the aching truth hidden in the text, this audible truth that could break the mirror, or even the mirror of their own language. Moreover, because



they cannot see the true meaning of the historical reality they have witnessed without understanding, they cannot hear any strong criticism concerning their idol, Peter Handke. I remind you that, for having cancelled the play, Marcel Bozonnet was fired one month later – officially for other reasons, of course. Furthermore, I remind you that our minister of culture received Peter Handke, which was not necessary in this context and could be seen as an ambiguous message to the French public.

I also remind you that Peter Handke's books are in all the bookshops that wish to sell them in France and that all theatres that wish to put on his plays are free to do so. All these facts show that qualifying Bozonnet's decision as a matter of censorship depends on a kind of language abuse – a kind of language abuse and manipulation that is rather common both among the extreme left and the extreme right, both among former communists and strong nationalists. In this respect, Bozonnet's decision was a political signal and a courageous act. After all, he lost his job whereas Peter Handke remains free and continues to be loved, which shows that history is both ironic and immoral. Well, I am glad Peter Handke is free; it is the honour of a democracy to protect the freedom of all its artists and writers. However, I think that it is also our responsibility to fight a famous writer when he uses his notoriety to support an indefensible cause.

As a parenthesis, I would like to remind you of an interesting detail that shows the paradoxical way Peter Handke thinks and speaks. During the affair, a paper signed by Jacques Blanc, director of the National Theatre in Brest (Brittany), was published by *Libération* on 4 May 2006 under the title "The Dishonour of the European Theatre". In the text, Blanc specifies the meaning of the title by qualifying Handke himself as "the dishonour of the European Theatre". A few weeks later, Günter Grass confessed he had joined the Waffen-SS when he was seventeen years old. As you know, this surprising declaration gave rise to several reactions in Germany, France, and also the United States. All his life, Grass has fought for responsibility – and we may suppose that this adult concern and engagement was partially determined by this tragic error when he was teenager. Without entering into this other debate, which is – following my point of view – radically different, I only want to share with you my surprise and, truth be told, laughter when I read about Handke's reaction to Grass's declaration. This reaction was published by an Austrian weekly called *NEWS magazin* in September 2006, and was quoted by René Solis in *Libération* on 20 September. According to Solis, Handke declared that Grass's confession was "a shame for the whole community of writers", and he also said that the "the worst thing is to justify [this engagement in the Waffen-SS] by saying that at seventeen one does not know anything". If I have cor-

rectly understood the way Handke reasons, a seventeen-year-old boy has to know what he is doing, but a sixty-five-year-old famous writer may declare publicly that, in spite of all the documents and evidence collected and published over fifteen years, he does not know what the truth is concerning Milošević.

Beyond this affair, beyond Handke as an individual who is also, like all of us, a symptom of his own history, the question is: how was a new genocide possible, in Europe, after the destruction of the Jews during World War II? What interests me is literature's ability to sometimes mask the reality happening under our eyes, as Handke actually masks it with an apparently clear style and a very sophisticated and subtle rhetoric, and to sometimes reveal the same reality thanks to the use of a new form and a simple language, making the same reality suddenly comprehensible for everyone. This is what I tried to do and, if I have succeeded as I hope and think I have, because people in Croatia and in Bosnia do agree strongly with my interpretation, and because the historical facts also confirm this troubling interpretation, it is paradoxically thanks to Peter Handke: because the Freudian mechanism audible in his texts actually functioned at a collective level in the Serbian propaganda. During the affair, I tried to open this larger debate, which is much more important than the isolated case of Peter Handke. However, it remained impossible. Was it because of censorship? If I were a little bit paranoid, perhaps I would be saying so. Fortunately for me, though, I am not. Actually, I prefer to consider it a matter of prejudices and psychic repression. The way I read Peter Handke is quite disturbing – as disturbing as the way I interpret the war in Yugoslavia in its entirety. It is disturbing, but it is also constructive. Because of this, I hope that this new approach will forge a path in people's minds. In this regard, the Handke Affair was the first step. I hope it has helped stimulate a kind of new historical conscience and open people's minds to a question that cannot be avoided when writing and talking about events happening in the world around us: what is our responsibility as writers? If we are free to keep quiet, are we free to deny the truth of events by replacing it with a fantasy of our own, possibly troubled mind? How are we to know whether what we call truth is imaginary or not? How are we to be sure that the language we use is adequate to the events? Answering those questions supposes working in other disciplines, such as history and psychoanalysis. Working in these three fields makes it possible to understand what the truth of literature is. Having done significant work in these three fields for many years, I have a fairly good understanding of why people, and perhaps writers more than the rest, are afraid of the truth of literature.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Both works (*Nous ne verrons jamais Vukovar* and *L'effet papillon*) have now been translated into Croatian and Bosnian and are available in Zagreb and Sarajevo (some copies have also reached Belgrade).

<sup>2</sup> This declaration was made by Peter Handke in Serbian and translated by himself into French. *Le Nouvel Observateur* published it during the affair on its website under the title: "Droit de réponse de Peter Handke à l'article paru dans le *Nouvel Observateur* le 6 avril dernier [2006]". See <http://archquo.nouvelobs.com/cgi/articles?ad=culture/20060503.OBS6399.html&host>.

<sup>3</sup> In the meantime in Germany, for the same political reasons, a very similar affair was taking place with regard to the Heine Prize in Düsseldorf.

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