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## Adventures in the Human Zoo: Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* in Context

Ian Foster

Hereinspaziert in die Menagerie  
Ihr stolzen Herren, ihr lebenslustige Frauen,  
Mit heißer Wollust und mit kaltem Grauen  
Die unbeseelte Kreatur zu schauen,  
Gebändigt durch das menschliche Genie.  
(Wedekind, Prologue to *Erdegeist*, 1895)

Below the main title on the first page of Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee*<sup>i</sup> are the following words: "Im Wiener Thiergarten bei den Negern der Goldküste, Westküste". For the uninitiated modern reader this is a somewhat puzzling, if not to say shocking location. Negroes from the Gold Coast in a Viennese zoo? How did they get there and what were they doing?

For the Viennese, the 1890s offered a host of sorely needed attractions and distractions. The city's population had more than doubled in the previous twenty years, reaching 1.8 million by the turn of the century.<sup>ii</sup> Immigration was largely responsible for this dramatic surge. The census of 1890, for example, revealed that 65.5% of the city's inhabitants had been born outside Vienna. There was an acute and chronic housing shortage that led to overcrowding and aggravated inadequate sanitation.

Radical change was expected, radical solutions needed. Long-term dissatisfaction contributed to a shift in city politics between 1895 and 1897, of which the Christian Social Party was to be the immediate beneficiary.<sup>iii</sup> Beginning with a victory in the municipal elections of March/April 1895, Karl Lueger's coalition of forces, under the twin banners of antisemitism and anti-liberalism, began to sweep all other parties before it. In April 1896, the Christian Socials increased their majority in the city parliament. However, establishment elites regarded "der schöne Karl" as an upstart rabble-rouser. For the time being, a puppet figure, Josef Strobach, held the mayoral office, while Lueger contented himself with the post of vice-mayor. Nevertheless, as far as his supporters were concerned, the Christian Social millennium had arrived. The weekly *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten*, self-styled "independent organ for the political, economic and social interests of the Christian people in Austria", wrote on 13 July 1896: "Die christliche Bewegung ist heute bereits zu stark; sie läßt sich weder durch ein

Machtwort der Regierung hinwegdecretiren, noch streicht sie vor dem jüdischen Großcapital die Segel, sondern sie tritt im Gegentheile jetzt ihren Siegeszug in die Kronländer an". This was no mere windy exaggeration, for in March 1897 Lueger's party was to win massive support not only in Vienna, but also, and more importantly, in Lower Austria.<sup>iv</sup>

Yet for the masses there were more mundane concerns and less controversial pastimes. The summer of 1896 presented a particularly rich and diverse programme. As well as the formal theatre and opera, which closed for July and reopened in August, there was a wealth of entertainment on offer at variety theatres around the city. Ronacher's "Etablissement", for example, offered Bernardi "the human chameleon", Diamantine Vernici "the winding transformation dancer" and the "athletic feats" of Miss Katy Dare. No fewer than fourteen "sensational acts" were on the programme at Danzer's Orpheum. There was also cinema. In the Kärntnerstraße, the Lumière brothers were showing "living photographs" only one year after their first performance in Paris.

Beyond mere amusements, the weather and state occasions could drive politics from the front pages. August began with an unseasonably violent storm and ended with the Schwarzenbergplatz decked out in bright colours and rows of oriental towers for the visit of the Russian Czar. In the popular press, the continuing search for a bomber in Leopoldstadt, whose attack on the workshop of one Markus Basch had cost the life of an apprentice, still occupied the headline writers' attentions.

### ***The Prater***

And then there was the Prater. The layout and significance of Vienna's pleasure park had been reshaped by the World Exhibition of 1873 and the regulation of the Danube in 1875. The Exhibition, held on land adjacent to the Volksprater, the funfair area, had been a financial failure, but it had bequeathed a giant circular building known as the Rotunde to the city. While the rest of the exhibition halls were pulled down, the Rotunde survived and was used for a variety of purposes -- everything from circuses to trade fairs -- until its destruction by fire in 1937.

The Prater's other great landmark, the giant wheel built by the English engineer Bassett, was begun in 1896, and completed the following year.<sup>v</sup> A shorter-lived attraction, opened in 1895, was the extensive mock-up of Venetian waterways and palazzi known as "Venedig in Wien", "Venice in Vienna", also situated at the Prater's northern end. Real gondoliers, wrestlers and an Italian restaurant were imported to add an authentic flavour to this ancestor of the modern theme

park. The green areas of the Prater and its main avenues were also somewhat livelier than in their present incarnation. The famous three coffee-houses were then intact and open for business. At the same time, the Prater was a centre of prostitution and petty crime. Pickpockets were particularly fond of its crowds. It was also a favourite spot for beggars and itinerant hucksters of all descriptions.

The Volksprater suffered from its proximity to "Venice in Vienna" and the mixed delights on offer at the Rotunde and in the surrounding park. The 1890s were in fact the beginning of a long-term decline. But in 1896, Calafatti's famous roundabout and Kratky-Baschik's Magic Theatre were still drawing crowds, though nowadays only street signs remind pleasure-seekers of a more expansive past. Also commemorated by a street sign in the present-day Prater is a vivarium. And it was near the Vivariumstraße that the Wiener Thiergarten that Altenberg refers to on the title page of *Ashantee* was situated.

The "Wiener Thiergarten am Schüttel", to give it its full name, had a somewhat mixed history. Founded in 1863 as a menagerie with some two hundred mammal specimens, nearly a thousand birds and fourteen reptiles, it had become insolvent in 1866 and had been forced to sell its collection and premises.<sup>vi</sup> There were repeated attempts to revive the zoo over the following decades, none successful enough to compete with the more colourful Prater attractions next door. In 1893, the premises of the nearby vivarium (founded in 1888) were acquired by a "Wiener Thiergartengesellschaft". This society was then responsible for reopening the zoo in the following year. However, despite the society's name, the zoo's major attractions from 1895 until its closure in 1901 were not animals, but people. More accurately, non-European people. Hans Pemmer, in his history of the Prater, gives an intriguing list: "So kamen 1895 Zulukaffern und Matabele, 1896 und 1897 *Aschanti*, 1898 indische Fakire und Senegambier, 1899 Bischari, Siamesen, Japaner und Kabylen, 1900 Derwische, Beduinen, Buren, Kaffern" (italics added).<sup>vii</sup> Lest the reader gain the impression that this phenomenon was confined to a five-year period in Vienna, one should immediately add that Pemmer's list represents no more than a perfunctory survey. In order to grasp the full implications of the Prater displays, one must take into account the activities of their pioneer, Carl Hagenbeck.

### ***Hagenbeck's Human Zoo***

Hagenbeck, born in Hamburg in 1844, was the son of a fish merchant who sometimes displayed exotic animals to bolster the family income. This activity had grown out of occasional purchases of live seals caught accidentally in fishing nets. Also, Hagenbeck senior bought animals from homecoming mariners and occasionally resorted to Phineas Barnum style forgeries. At first, the

Hagenbecks acted mainly as traders, showing most animals only until a permanent home was found for them in a menagerie or circus.

By 1859, Carl Hagenbeck had left school to join a flourishing family business, and in the following decade the firm traded all over Europe. Hagenbeck's autobiographical account *Von Tieren und Menschen* is infused with the spirit of the Gründerzeit.<sup>viii</sup> In the 1870s, growth in the animal trade began to slacken, and Hagenbeck looked around for further areas in which the business could expand. It was at this crucial moment that an animal painter, Heinrich Leutemann, described by Hagenbeck as an old friend, made a suggestion that was to determine the direction of the family business for the next thirty years.

In 1874, Hagenbeck was asked to import a herd of reindeer for sale to various zoos. Leutemann wrote suggesting that a family of Lapps should be brought along to tend the animals. As Hagenbeck puts it:

Was dem Künstler in seinem Briefe vorschwebte, war sicherlich nur das malerische nordische Bild, das er sich in abgeschlossener Vollkommenheit mit Menschen und Tieren und womöglich einem winterlichen Hintergrund vorzustellen vermochte. In diesem Vorschlag aber war schon die glückliche Idee der Völkerschaustellungen, die sich in den nächsten Jahren wie eine bunte Kette aneinanderreiheten, verborgen. (Hagenbeck, p. 80)

The arrival of the reindeer accompanied by a family of Lapps, including a mother and two young children, in Hamburg in mid-September 1874 attracted a crowd of thousands. Hagenbeck explains the success as the result of a certain naivete, which characterized the whole undertaking: "Die Gäste aus dem hohen Norden hatten gar keine Begriffe von Schaustellungen und was damit zusammenhängt, es wurde auch absolut keine Vorstellung gegeben" (Hagenbeck, p. 81).

The enthusiasm of the public for such displays soon knew no bounds. Hagenbeck describes these early versions of what were later to become elaborate "Völkerschaustellungen" as "anthropological-zoological displays", emphasizing the close connection with the animal trade. Indeed, as the exhibitions grew, zoological gardens began to take a commercial interest in them and were keen to enter into arrangements with Hagenbeck for such events to be held on their premises. Just how seriously Hagenbeck took the scientific value of the displays -- despite his frequent assertions that they served an educational purpose -- may be gauged from his description of the preparations for an expanded "Ceylon" exhibition in 1884: "Diesmal sollte es

sich nicht nur um Elefanten und ihre Kornaks handeln, sondern um eine Völkersausstellung im großen Stile, mit dem nötigen ethnographischen und zoologischen Drum und Dran" (Hagenbeck, p. 94). A born showman, Hagenbeck had seized on the notion of displaying "exotic" peoples as a spectacle that needed to be staged with sufficient pseudo-scientific gloss to make it palatable not only to the voyeuristic masses, whose tastes he knew well enough, but also to a more selective bourgeois audience, and ultimately to the ruling classes. It is no accident that Hagenbeck notes proudly in the course of his autobiography that the Emperors of Austria-Hungary and Germany, together with sundry titled heads of Europe, took a keen interest in the exhibitions. The moment at which the upper classes began to arrange special visits to "Völkerschaustellungen" sets a seal of social approval and respectability on the whole venture.<sup>ix</sup>

By the late 1870s, the animal trade had declined to a point where the Hagenbeck family firm was barely able to continue profitably. The "Völkerschaustellungen" actually kept the entire business afloat for a number of years until demand picked up again. The arrival of each troupe of "exotic" peoples became a carefully staged publicity stunt. For example, they would be ferried through each new city in open carriages or marched through the streets in the style of a circus procession. Some of Hagenbeck's exhibits made grand tours of European capitals. The Ceylon exhibition of 1884, for example, toured major European cities from April onwards, arriving in Vienna in late summer. Site of the exhibition was the Rotunde in the Prater. So great was the number of customers that Hagenbeck's management introduced special "people's prices" and cheap matinee shows for children. Within the first week the event was crowned by a visit by Emperor Franz Joseph (Hagenbeck, p. 145). Greater things were yet to come. In the following two years Hagenbeck's "giant Ceylon exhibition" toured the rest of Europe, finishing its run in Paris in 1886, where it was claimed that a million people had visited the display in two-and-a-half months.

The rise of Hagenbeck's displays coincided with the birth and nurture of German Imperial ambitions. As Germany began to stake its claim alongside other European powers to territories in Africa and elsewhere, the "Völkerschaustellungen" became an exercise not only in pseudo-anthropological education but also in propaganda -- designed to convince the public that expenditure on colonial ventures was worthwhile. As the various colourful caravans made their way around Europe, they presented a living survey of the state of play at the fringes of colonial expansion.<sup>x</sup> Yet while this aspect must remain uppermost in one's mind in considering *German* responses to Hagenbeck spectacles, the case of Austria-Hungary was rather different. Habsburg colonial ambitions were confined by and large to the Balkans, where Austria-Hungary succeeded Turkey as the controlling power in the 1870s and went on to annex

Bosnia-Hercegovina in 1908. To be sure, there may well have been a degree of vicarious Imperial pride (the superiority of Europeans in "civilizing" distant corners of the globe), but there was also a specifically Austro-Hungarian component, indeed a specifically Viennese component in the cultural impact of the arrival of groups of exotic peoples around 1900, and this local component will form the main subject of the following sections.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the "Völkerschaustellungen" were such an integral part of Hagenbeck's activities that he constructed a permanent site for the displays when he expanded his own zoo in Hamburg-Stellingen in 1908. Given the scale of these exhibitions and their enormous popularity, their relevance to an examination of the literary portrayal of "exotic" peoples and the wider themes of colonialism and exoticism in European literature need scarcely be stressed. However, much of the available secondary literature, with a few exceptions, has been written without reference to this context.<sup>xi</sup>

### ***The Ashanti in Vienna***

The arrival of the Ashanti in Vienna in 1896 was carefully orchestrated in the classic Hagenbeck manner, though it is not entirely clear whether Hagenbeck was indeed directly involved. The route taken by the party was circuitous in the extreme, leading through the whole first district and calculated to gain maximum attention. On 10 July the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* announced:

Ein ganz eigenartiges Schauspiel wird sich morgen (Freitag) Nachmittags den Passanten der belebtesten Stadtheile bieten. Wie wir erfahren, wird fast die ganze Bevölkerung eines Aschantidorfes, gegen siebzig schwarze Männer, Frauen und Kinder, Freitag um 3 Uhr mit dem Budapester Postschiffe bei der Station Weißgärber landen, und sich in einer langen Wagenreihe von fünfzehn Fiakern über den Ring, Kohlmarkt, Graben, Rothenthurmstraße und Praterstraße in ihre Villencolonie begeben, die ihnen im Wiener Thiergarten errichtet wurde.

A few days later, on 14 July, advertisements began to appear announcing a "grand ethnographic display". The attraction was well-timed, since the school holidays began on 17 July. By the end of the first week, the management were laying on special direct buses and installing extra cash registers to cope with the flood of visitors. By the end of August, nearly 300,000 had passed through the turnstiles of the Wiener Thiergarten (see *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 August and 5 September 1896). The seventy inhabitants of the Ashanti village were then joined by a further twenty-five Ashanti from a touring group, thus allowing the management to advertise, somewhat disingenuously, "100 natives". Between the opening of the display in July

and the departure of the Ashanti on 16 October, nearly half a million sightseers visited the village -- that is, between five and six thousand a day.

Before going on to describe the cultural impact of the presence of 100 Africans -- of which Altenberg's text represents an important example -- it is worth looking more closely at what the Ashanti village offered its public. Firstly, it is important to observe that, as with all Hagenbeck-style exhibitions, we are in no way dealing with an attempt to recreate an authentic African village. Not only is it impossible to speak of authenticity because of the very fact that the Ashanti and similar groups were being treated as exhibits and the presence of an observer inevitably affects what is being observed, but even the basic premises of "authentic" recreation were falsified. For example, the huts that composed the Ashanti village were built before the arrival of the "natives", presumably according to European expectations. Nonetheless, some features of the village did represent an effort at recreation. As with all Hagenbeck-style "Völkerschaustellungen", the main attraction was intended to be the people themselves and their way of life, however distorted by the presence of the watching crowds. The first advertisement for the village in July 1896 used the following words: "Ashanti-Dorf. 70 Eingeborene Männer, Frauen und Kinder, Industrie, Schule, nationale Spiele, Kriegstänze und Gefechte". While the "industry", which seems mainly to have involved the fabrication of artifacts for sale to the public, and the school might be described as authentic, the final three elements were clearly designed from the outset purely to entertain onlookers.

One can also observe a process of accommodation to the expectations of the paying public, probably under the influence of a profit-hungry management. (There are suggestions in some press reports that the Thiergarten was already in financial difficulties). In accounts of the Ashanti in Vienna two examples are apparent. In the first case, a religious ceremony welcoming a new child into the community was promoted in lurid tones with the following words: "Obzwar das Fest eigentlich ein intimes, von den Schwarzen für die Schwarzen veranstaltetes ist, wird für die Besucher des Interessanten in Hülle und Fülle zu sehen sein" (*Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 September 1896). From then on, African religious ceremonies, usually described with the word "Fetischtanz", were a regular part of the programme. The use of the word "fetish" is in fact peculiarly appropriate, since it derives from the Portuguese *feticeiro* and rests on a European misunderstanding of West African religious practices.<sup>xii</sup> The second case concerns artifacts made by the Ashanti. In 1896, the sale of souvenirs went unmentioned in the publicity for the village, though it evidently represented a source of extra income for the Africans. Shortly before the departure of the Ashanti, 200 such ethnographic items were disposed of in a raffle. In the following season, in April 1897, a group of 120 Africans, among them some who had



participated in the previous year, arrived for a display entitled "Africa's Gold Coast and Its Inhabitants". This time, however, a full complement of goldsmiths, gunsmiths, potters and bronzeworkers was advertised from the start and a full African bazaar promised as part of the attraction.

The process of accommodation to the expectations of the public did not stop at mere shifts in emphasis like these. The presence of the Ashanti provided the impetus for exotic spectacles on a grand scale. Following the arrival of a party of 37 Javanese in June 1897 -- who in due course set up their own "authentic" village and coffee-house, where visitors could be served by "native women" -- the management of the Thiergarten planned an "Ausstattungs-Pantomime" involving all its exotic specimens, human and animal. This was entitled "Das Opferfest der Javaner oder Der Raub der Plantagentochter" and involved a cast of 150 people, Javanese and Ashantis, together with horses, elephants and cattle. The body of the spectacle was composed of "scenes from plantation life", punctuated by comic "Intermezzis" (sic) performed by clowns and Ashanti children.

Such "Pantomimen" (there does not seem to be an adequate translation of the word in this sense) were frequently performed in circus arenas or in association with large exhibitions. Similar performances were often titled "Spektakelstücke". Indeed, the dividing lines between circus and zoo, exhibition and theatre were not at all clear. Often, animal acts we would more readily associate with the circus would form part of a zoo's attractions. Exhibitions with pseudo-historical or scientific-sounding titles (like "Life in Ancient Rome", "The Queen of Abyssinia's Feast", "To Siberia" or "The Death of Zriny") could easily involve what were essentially circus acts dressed up in historical costume. Hagenbeck and his imitators discovered that entertainment with a supposedly serious scientific or historical background ("mit dem nötigen ethnographischen und zoologischen Drum und Dran") had enormous pulling power.

Over the period of the Ashantis' two seasons in Vienna, as the local public became more familiar with their presence, the presentation shifted from the original pseudo-ethnographic framework -- what Hagenbeck at one point refers to as "das Leben und Treiben der Eingeborenen" -- to a more openly theatrical terminology. One description of the "Pantomime", for example, refers to the skill of the Ashantis in playing their role.<sup>xiii</sup>

### ***The Cultural Impact***

For the space of two short seasons Vienna was struck by an African fever. Not only were the Ashantis themselves the subject of a flood of press reports, detailing, among other things, their

visits to the city sights and their shopping trips, but more importantly the figure of the African entered the cultural discourse of the city in an unprecedented way. By late summer 1896, the Royal and Imperial Court Opera was performing a German version of a five-act opera by Meyerbeer and Scrib e entitled "Die Afrikanerin". For those seeking more permanent mementoes, Viennese manufacturers were soon producing "reizende kleine Aschantigruppen mit braunem Teint und krausem Haar".<sup>xiv</sup> Soon there were Ashanti jokes and cartoons featuring the Ashanti in the "Witzblatter".

The Ashantis were, of course, by no means the first blacks to visit Vienna. Street names can again give us clues to this submerged portion of history. There is, for example, an Afrikanergasse in the Leopoldstadt district, whose name derives from an 18th century official delegation from Morocco.<sup>xv</sup> The Mohrengasse presumably has a similar background. Around 1800, the Viennese Natural History Museum boasted a number of stuffed black Africans among its prize exhibits, two of whom had been exotic servants to Central European royalty.<sup>xvi</sup> There are also numerous examples of non-European peoples being displayed to a paying public. In the early 19th century, two Brazilian Indians were displayed at the Schonbrunn Zoo and described as coming "aus den Handen der Natur in die Mitte eines verfeinerten Volkes".<sup>xvii</sup> In the 1840s, the presence of four Africans in the de Bach circus ring failed to arouse one critic's imagination: "...und vollends von der Mohrin und den drei Mohren fand der Kritiker sonst nichts zu sagen, als da sie schwarz waren".<sup>xviii</sup> By the 1890s there was nothing new about the presence of Africans in Vienna, apart from perhaps the numbers in which they now appeared (dozens rather than in twos and threes).

One principal source of the fascination that the Ashanti exerted on the Viennese imagination was blatantly sexual. Scanty clothing (the women were usually topless, the men in loincloths) was deemed a sign of their naturalness. Africans displayed in Europe from the 18th century onwards were conventionally presented in thin, revealing garments.<sup>xix</sup> These were noble savages who had no need of the sartorial trappings of civilized Europeans. This rhetoric disguised a prurient voyeurism. Yet while voyeurism may account for some of the masses who flocked to see the Ashanti, the peculiar resonance of this African spectacle in Vienna should not be explained away by generalized references to European cravings for visual titillation.

There is another theme in the Viennese press reports of the time and -- insofar as it is realistic to reconstruct it from what such reports have to tell us -- in the cultural discourse of the city. This theme can best be seen in the shifting terminology used to describe the Africans, which consisted of a series of terms that could be applied both to the Ashanti and to the Viennese. For

example, the Ashanti were frequently referred to as "unsere schwarzen Gäste", which would cast the Viennese in the role of "hosts". When the Viennese public visited the Thiergarten village, they became "guests" of the Ashanti. Other terms were similarly reversible: in their village the Ashanti were "Einheimische" or "Eingeborene" , where the Viennese, otherwise "Einheimische", could become "Fremde" or "Besucher" -- the last two then being appropriate labels for the Ashanti in other contexts. One finds in fact a whole rhetoric constructed around the poles of familiarity and otherness. For example, Viennese newcomers to the Ashanti village might, it was often suggested, find themselves in need of a "Cicerone" or guide and would find one among the village's habitués -- not the Ashanti, but those who had already explored this strange, foreign territory in the Prater. Altenberg casts himself in this role in a letter to Hugo Salus where he describes spending five hours as "Führer durch Aschantee von einer ganzen Anzahl von Damen".<sup>xx</sup>

The significance of this rhetoric of difference -- of belonging and not belonging -- in a city where over half of the population had been born elsewhere and where virulent antisemitism was in the process of celebrating its political triumph is plain. Within a few weeks of their arrival in Vienna, the Africans entered a highly differentiated language of racial/ethnic difference. According to one interpretation, that language, political antisemitism, was successful in Vienna precisely because it was the one shared language in a polyglot city of immigrants.<sup>xxi</sup> It provided the decisive catalyst for Vienna's African fever of 1896 and 1897.

Local antisemitic rhetoric cast the Jews in the role of the eternal outsider. Recent immigrants from Galicia were termed ignoble savages fresh from "Halb-Asien". The Ashanti, as black Africans and symbolic absolute Other, offered the perfect foil for the antisemites. The antisemitic *Kikeriki* published the following doggerel on 8 October 1896:

#### Der Fetisch-Tanz

Die Fetisch-Tänze der Aschanti-Wilden,  
Die jetzt für Wien die great attraction bilden,  
Nennt unsere Judenpresse "unvergleichlich",  
Wir aber finden, wie auch leicht aufzeiglich,  
In nächster Nähe ein Vergleichsobjekt.  
Seht doch nur, wie "so schein wie kaner"  
Im Kaftan der Galizianer,  
Die Beine schlendert und sie wieder streckt

Im tollen Tanze um ein Fetisch-Tier  
Das goldene Kalb, den alten Apis-Stier.

Contempt for liberal support for the Habsburg state voiced itself in an antisemitic rhetoric that pictured all Jews as caftan-wearing aliens. In this chain of thought the Ashanti formed a vital link.

At the same time, the Ashanti not only offered a vehicle for antisemites to make comparisons but also -- and this is a point that needs to be stressed in order to illustrate the complex effects of political antisemitism on liberal, particularly Jewish liberal consciousness -- for the liberals themselves. The liberal view of the Ashanti sought to outflank the "otherness" foisted on the Jews by espousing a humane cultural relativism. The liberal press couched its reports in a would-be scientific phraseology, displaying an enlightened ethnological curiosity. A good example may be found in the *Neue freie Presse* of 6 October 1896. Following the death of a 28-year-old Ashanti gunsmith named John Ahadji of pneumonia, the newspaper's reporter observed the reactions of the villagers to the bad news: ".. der ganze Stamm führte eine Trauer-Ceremonie auf, welche, trotz ihrer absonderlichen und lärmenden Form auf die europäischen Beobachter dieser Szenen nicht ohne ergreifende Wirkung blieb". This is the authentic sound of liberal ideology on the Ashanti: that these were, despite superficial differences, fellow human beings whose customs and habits, however strange they seemed to the average Central European, could engage the interest and the sympathy of the observer. Inevitably though, the liberal enlightened view of noble savages who part of the great family of humanity tended to aestheticize the Ashanti and give an idealized portrait. A little later in the same report we read: "...es bot ein eigenartiges Bild, als die schwarzen Frauen ohne Unterlaß blüthenweiße Taschentücher an die Augen führten". The opportunity to present the reader with a striking image undermines the sympathy appropriate to a funeral and makes of the mourners merely another phenomenon registered by the gaze of the Viennese *flâneur*.

### *Ashantee*

Altenberg's sketches on the Ashanti are conventionally described as the response of an aesthete to the natural innocence and spontaneity of the Africans exhibited in the park.<sup>xxii</sup> The unconscious racist assumptions behind such descriptions require no further comment, but even the notion that the text is primarily "Altenberg's response" is problematic. To be sure, the bulk of the short prose passages are concerned with encounters between the narrator figure, variously styled Peter A. or Sir Peter, and the Ashanti, but not all of them. Originally, the sequence consisted of 33 sections. 23 of the original sketches plus a further five new texts were

incorporated into the fourth edition of *Wie ich es sehe* in 1904 under the title "Ashantee". The rest remained in the original order despite the omission of several substantial texts.<sup>xxiii</sup> In both versions the text is dedicated to "Meinen schwarzen Freundinnen, den unvergeßlichen "Paradieses-Menschen" Akolé, Akóschia, Tíoko, Djôjô, Nâh-Bâduh". These names and the events mentioned in the text, like the storm referred to in "Akólés Gesang. Akólés süßes Lied" (*Ashantee*, p. 39), also appear in the press reports of 1896. To a certain extent, therefore, the text is based on the exhibition of 1896 (the book appeared in the spring of 1897). Evidence for this view is also provided by a letter to Schnitzler, in which Altenberg refers to the Ashanti woman Nâh-Bâduh as the "last madness of my soul".<sup>xxiv</sup>

### *The Art of Quotation*

The first section of *Ashantee* purports to be a quotation from *Meyers Conversations-Lexikon*, a popular encyclopedia. In fact, it is nothing of the sort. The source Altenberg gives for the text (volume one, page 900) corresponds to the fourth edition of Meyer's encyclopedia.<sup>xxv</sup> However, the encyclopedia entry is some 1500 words in length and Altenberg's "quotation" less than 150. All of the elements in Altenberg's text appear in the encyclopedia article and in the same order, with a few important exceptions. Rereading the Altenberg text after looking up the reference given, it becomes obvious that the former was intended to offer "notes" on the latter. The number of elliptical sentences bears out this interpretation. But these are notes of a particular kind.

What does Altenberg's abbreviated version of the encyclopedia article contain? The reader is informed that "Ashantee" is a "Negro kingdom" in West Africa partly conquered by the English, a fertile country with a moderate climate, whose palm and rubber trees are "nutzbar" (presumably for European industries). The main food crop is yams. Altenberg's version adds a comment here that the yam is "a plant similar to our potato". The inhabitants of Ashantiland are "true, woolly-haired negroes", who speak "Odschi" and are known for their skill in weaving and goldwork. They are polygamous. Where Meyer's encyclopedia refers to "gebräuchliche Vielweiberei", Altenberg's version laconically notes "es herrscht Vielweiberei". Furthermore, the Ashanti practise a "fetishist" religion. Here again Altenberg adds details not in the original. Where the encyclopedia mentions evil spirits which the Ashanti priests have the power to placate through mysterious means, Altenberg's text names these means explicitly as "geheimnisvolle Ceremonien und hysterische Tänze". The Altenberg text continues with General Wolsley's defeat of the Ashanti king in 1874 and the subsequent forbidding of human sacrifices. It ends with references to works by Brackenbury and Stanley on the history of the conquest and colonization of West Africa. Meyer's encyclopedia gives no fewer than nine

references.

Altenberg's condensed account contains in fact the entire repertoire of colonialist clichés about Africa. Ashantiland is a potentially profitable place inhabited by uncivilized negroes who indulge in hysterical dancing and sexual orgies. The African is presented as lacking European restraint. The reference to human sacrifice ("Der König... gelobte Abschaffung der Menschenopfer", p. 4) clearly implies that such sacrifices still take place. And where the idea of human sacrifice is mentioned, another colonialist cliché, the native as cannibal, cannot be far away. Modern echoes of this idea are alive and well. The chocolate confectionery known as a "Mohrenkopf" in Austria or less offensively a "Negerkuß" provides one example. By consuming the Moor's head one is forcibly reminded of a cannibalistic rite in "darkest Africa". Another echo may be found in one flavour of ice cream that can be bought in present-day Vienna which goes by the name "Aschantis". The dark pieces of nut in the lighter ice cream supposedly represent the heads of the Ashanti in a white crowd.

Altenberg's reasons for placing a text like this at the beginning of the sequence have not been adequately explained by previous commentators. Sander Gilman sees it as part of an overtly ideological frame, whose main function is "to counter or undermine the popular tone of the Prater's exhibition of the black" by setting the Ashanti in the context of the "textual ethnological museum" of scientific discourse.<sup>xxvi</sup> Though this is not his main point and he is more concerned with what he calls coded references to black sexuality, Gilman's reading is rather misleading. The "quotation" is not intended chiefly to condemn the populism of the Prater, but is in fact part of a critique of liberal notions of "Bildung" and, indeed, culture. Its reduction of the original lengthy article to a brief series of lurid details about fetishism, hysterical dances and human sacrifices, framed by remarks about climate and profitability satirizes the hypocrisy of the liberal interest in science.

Liberal conceptions of the cultivated, scientific view were openly mocked by the antisemitic press of the period. In its pages, the Ashanti were implicitly and explicitly compared with the Jews, to the detriment of both. For example, the weekly *Wiener neueste Nachrichten* published a Feuilleton entitled "Aus dem Thiergarten im Prater" by one Robert Horn on 14 September 1896. This text quotes extensively from the fifth edition of *Meyers Conversations-Lexikon* of 1895, adding the comments of its author:

Die Aschantis sind echte Neger, welche das Odschi sprechen. Ich muß zu meiner Schande gestehen, daß ich dieses Odschi fast gar nicht spreche. [...] Das Aschantiland ist das eigentliche

Goldland von Guinea, und Gold ist das einzige Zahlungsmittel. Hier scheint die Natur die Valutaregulierung besorgt zu haben und nicht der Herr Rothschild.

The mocking tone in which information is given here signals contempt for the "Bildungsgut" on display. Each item in the encyclopedia entry is linked to some manifestation of Viennese life, frequently to something Horn sees as the fault of the Jews. Altenberg, of course, does not gloss his chosen text. His technique is more subtle, but both he and Horn have a similar target. One might draw a parallel here with Karl Kraus, whose declared enemy was not the antisemitic press, but the leading liberal newspaper the *Neue freie Presse*.

### *The Question of Plot*

Seen in the context of the whole sequence of sketches on the Ashanti, Altenberg's version of the information in the encyclopedia article forms one half of a framing device. The second half is the penultimate text, the address of the Ashanti woman Nâh-Bâduh. The reader progresses from an encyclopedia entry at the beginning, a laconic sequence of "Bildungsklischees", to personal contact, almost an invitation to begin a correspondence at the end. Critics have disagreed about whether the sketches on the Ashanti have a plot. Camillo Schaefer, for example, argues "[d]urchgehende Handlung gibt natürlich keine". Sander Gilman, on the other hand, insists that they have an "overall literary structure lacking in [Altenberg's] other works".<sup>xxvii</sup> It might be argued that the movement of the text from a taxonomic "they" to a vocative "you" constitutes a kind of plot. At the same time, there is a plot of a more straightforward kind if one reads the text in the light of a quotation Altenberg placed at the beginning of his first collection *Wie ich es sehe*. The quote is taken from Huysmans' *A rebours*:

Bien souvent, le duc avait médité sur cet inquiétant problème, écrire un roman concentré en quelques phrases qui contiendrait le suc de centaines de pages. Alors les mots ouvriraient de telles perspectives que le lecteur pourrait rêver, pendant des semaines entières, sur son sens, tout à la fois précis et multiple, constaterait le présent, reconstruirait le passé, devinerait le l'avenir d'âmes des personnages, révélé par les lueurs des ces épithètes uniques!<sup>xxviii</sup>

In a sense, the Ashanti offered Altenberg the perfect material with which to test out the method of Huysmans' duke. Since they could only speak a few words of German and a limited amount of English, communication between them and the narrator inevitably mines each word for its every inflection and nuance. As the narrator puts it at one point:

Ich sage: "Akóschia---."

"Yes, Sir ---?!"

Sie fühlt: "Nichts kann er aussprechen als meinen Namen. Wie komisch".

Auf diesem Namen singe ich Lieder. Wie Paganini auf der G-Saite. Mit einem Worte kann man auskommen --- Akóschia! (p. 23)

In such passages it is not hard to see the burden of significance loaded onto Altenberg's idiosyncratic punctuation. The three dashes for an incomplete thought, or question mark and exclamation mark to indicate uncertainty and forthrightness in one and the same statement are typically ambivalent.

The quotation from Huysmans also sums up the reader's problem in *Ashantee*. At times, the "suc" or "pith" may seem more like the Emperor's new clothes. Some uncompleted sentences seem to tail off into nothing rather than call forth new layers of meaning. Yet if one pieces together the fragmentary indications, taking the quote from Huysmans as an artistic programme on Altenberg's part, a plausible narrative emerges. The story, which will be dealt with in greater detail below, concerns the relationships between the narrator and three young Ashanti women. At first, it is Tíoko who fascinates him and apparently responds to his advances, though he appears to be equally interested in Akolé. The arrival of Nâh-Bâduh from Budapest precipitates a crisis in the existing relationship, with the narrator now unable to avoid hurting Tíoko's feelings. However, the text does make it plain that the narrator's feeling for Nâh-Bâduh are unrequited, or at least not greeted with an equal response. There is also a further complication in the shape of the young Ashanti man Noë Salomon Dowoonah, who is also in love with Nâh-Bâduh. Along the way, other relationships among the Africans and between them and the Viennese are adumbrated, but the main thread binding the texts together when they are read in sequence is the narrator's involvement with Tíoko Akolé and Nâh-Bâduh. Four of the seven substantial texts in the first edition which do not appear in the 1904 revision refer to Tíoko and Nâh-Bâduh. Altenberg's revision, which is much more widely known than the first edition, therefore makes the close relationships less obvious. The five new texts in the second version are all of a more general kind. One might speculate that Altenberg reduced the explicitness of the original fearing that the sense would be too "précis" and insufficiently "multiple".

The main theme of *Ashantee* is not, therefore, as its author's contemporary Max Messer argued, the problematic nature of Western industrialized society and the destruction of the equation "culture" equals "humanity".<sup>xxix</sup> Nor is it, as Camillo Schaefer puts it, a "glorification of freedom", although both of these are major themes. The main theme is articulated by the movement from third to second person, by which Altenberg's text goes beyond liberal ideology



and offers the idea that what really counts in the end is not some notion of enlightened tolerance, but the ability to build a personal relationship with someone of a different culture and ethnic origin. Only such a relationship can transcend the gulf that separates the Viennese voyeurs from the inhabitants of a Hagenbeck display.

### *The Tutor*

Altenberg's critique of the attitudes and presuppositions of the abbreviated encyclopedia entry at the beginning of *Ashantee* is a revision of liberal ideology, not a rejection of it. That this is indeed the case is illustrated by the second text in the collection, entitled "Der Hofmeister". At eight-and-a-half pages, this is the longest text in the collection. Despite this, it has received only the most cursory treatment. The private tutor of the title leads his two charges, the girl Fortunatina and the boy Oscar, mainly referred to as "der Knabe", into the Thiergarten display. First, they arrive at the cage of two pampas hares, where the tutor deplores the ignorance of the masses who throw sugar and bread to the animals. On a pedantic note, he asks Fortunatina to remind him to refer to a standard work by Brehm when they return. They then move on to the bear cage, where again the tutor demonstrates his superior knowledge of animal behaviour by succeeding in tempting one of the animals into the water.

Up to this point, the tutor appears to be a parody of the liberal, cultivated "Bürger", eagerly displaying his "Bildungsgut" and involuntarily exposing his know-all attitude. The description of his clothing and appearance does indeed suggest this. There may also be an element of self-parody in the tutor, as the pince-nez and unusual clothing suggest the figure of the author himself. However, the text is more complex and the perspective of the narrator less easily defined. The section begins with a description of the ticket kiosk at the entrance to the zoo, where the ticket-seller sits eating a pear (foreshadowing the peach given to the pampas hares by the tutor). The ticket-seller says: " `Les enfans [sic] ne comptent pas' [...] wie wenn man sagt `Marsch, verschwindet,Ihr habt wenig Bedeutung ---' " (p. 5). Altenberg's text is making precisely the opposite point. Children do count, and their views are given equal weight with those of the educated adult tutor.

The next cage visited is that of the lioness. Fortunatina is fascinated, but Oscar is unimpressed. The narrator verbalizes his thoughts for the reader: "Eine Löwin, was sieht man?! Eingesperrt ist sie ---" (p. 6). The tutor is caught up in his own reverie on Fortunatina and the lioness and thinks to himself that there is no shame in dreaming of oneself as a wild animal. The verbal phrase "sich in Thiere hineinträumen" expresses a wished-for identity of human being and animal. Fortunatina herself daydreams about an African night: "Man hat Beispiele, daß --- Afrika,

Afrika. Kaltblütigkeit, Entschlossenheit haben oft im letzten Momente den kühnen Jäger --- " (p. 7). She pictures the tutor in the yellow leather clothes and boots of a colonial hunter-explorer. As well as explicitly announcing the African theme, this passage illustrates the subtle shifts of perspective characteristic of Altenberg's writing. Whose view are we to take seriously here? That of the boy, who thinks a caged lioness a dull attraction? Or the tutor, who contemplates the caged beast and its human observer as an aesthetic phenomenon? Or the girl, who dreams of a wild Africa as the setting for heroic adventures?

This problem grows still more acute when one considers the scenes which follow. Now that the word "Afrika" has been uttered, the stage is set for the Ashanti to appear, dancing to their syncopated rhythms (as the tutor pedantically observes). Fortunatina compares the rhythm to the sound of a train and suggests "real" music could be written to accompany it. Oscar is again unimpressed and remarks "Für Die ist es jedenfalls Musik". At which point the main theme is sounded again. The tutor says:

Mache nur nicht gleich solche Abgründe zwischen Uns und Ihnen. Für Die, für Die. Was bedeutet es?! Glaubst Du, weil das dumme Volk sich über sie stellt, sie behandelt wie exotische Thiere?! Warum?! Weil Ihre Epidermis dunkle Pigment-Zellen enthält?! (p. 9)

The pretentious reference to "pigment cells" and the bourgeois arrogance towards the stupidity of the masses indicate again that the tutor is a parodic figure -- what he says is not necessarily to be taken absolutely seriously. But at the same time, the insistence that the Ashanti be encountered as people, as individuals first and foremost, encapsulates the whole movement of Altenberg's text.

### *Tíoko and Akolé*

Exactly at this point the first personal encounter takes place. The tutor gives the Ashanti girl Tíoko a necklace of glass beads. Again, this action is presented from various points of view. The tutor is inspired by the spontaneity of Tíoko's response to the gift and admires her beauty. Fortunatina reflects on the gentleness of the scene: "Wie im Paradiese ist es eigentlich, wo Menschen und wilde Thiere ---". Her uncompleted thought is immediately undercut by Oscar's cynicism. He asks how much the beads cost and why the tutor should have them with him and questions Tíoko's motives. Presenting beads to the natives may also have unfortunate associations in the minds of modern readers, though these are not necessarily in the foreground here. Leaving the zoo behind, the party sits for a while on a bench. The tutor presents Fortunatina with a necklace similar to the one he had given Tíoko, an action which embarrasses

Oscar, since it suggests that the tutor's motives in making the first gift were not an attempt to buy Tíoko's time and interest. The tutor explains in response to Fortunatina's question that Tíoko spends the evenings doing domestic chores for the ticket-seller, to which she responds: "Ich hielt sie für die Tochter des Königs!" (p. 12). The constant interplay between the three characters, now hard-headed and cynical, now aestheticizing and idealizing, is rather like the switch of perspective in Kafka's short story "Auf der Galerie", where a woman riding bareback in a circus act creates an illusion of grace and beauty that prevents the observer from intervening to stop what he knows to be merely a gaudy show.

Throughout *Ashantee* aestheticizing tendencies are repeatedly set against a sympathetic portrait of the discomforts and indignities suffered by the human exhibits. Towards the end of "Der Hofmeister", the narrator describes Tíoko as follows:

Tíoko, im Garten, bebt, legt den dünnen heliotropfarbenen Kattun über ihre wunderbaren hellbraunen Brüste, welche sonst in Freiheit und Schönheit lebten, wie Gott sie geschaffen, dem edlen Männer-Auge ein Bild der Weltvollkommenheiten gebend, ein Ideal an Kraft und Blüthe (p. 12).

This passage is followed by "Gespräch", in which the narrator encounters Tíoko in person. She complains at being forced to go about half-naked for the entertainment of the visitors:

Wilde müssen wir vorstellen, Herr, Afrikaner. Ganz närrisch ist es. In Afrika könnten wir nicht so sein. Alle würden lachen. [...] Der Clark sagt: "He, Solche wie in Europa gibt es genug. Wozu braucht man Euch?! Nackt müßt Ihr sein natürlich (p. 14).

God may well have intended Tíoko's breasts to be exposed for noble-minded male onlookers, but the proprietors of the zoo know all too well that they are appealing to far less noble-minded European tastes for erotic display in an exotic setting. This constant undercutting of notions of a pure, aesthetic interest in the Ashanti has the effect of colouring the whole aesthetic vocabulary at Altenberg's disposal. When the narrator uses words like "ideal", "rein", "zart" and so on, they automatically evoke an erotic subtext.

The question of the exposed breasts of the Ashanti women as symbols of their naturalness or as an erotic spectacle for the voyeuristic fantasies of European males is brought into sharper focus in the ninth sketch, "Cultur". A young Ashanti woman, "the big Akolé", and a seven-year-old girl, "bibi Akolé", are invited to dinner chez Frau H. After the meal both are given a beautiful

French doll, "zum Spaß", as the narrator puts it. Both sing their dolls to sleep, and then "the big Akolé" uncovers her breast to feed her doll. Little Akolé is said to be in despair, for she cannot feed her doll in this way. The reactions of the dinner guests are described as follows:

Frau H. sagte zu ihren Gästen, es wäre der heiligste Augenblick ihres Lebens. Die Gäste fanden Ähnliches, wenn auch nicht so bombastisch. Selbst monsieur R. de B. lächelte, wie man eigentlich nicht lächelt, wenn man lächelt --- (p. 29).

The ambiguous smile of monsieur R. de B. is the sign of his erotic interest in the supposedly natural display. Altenberg's text documents a significant cultural moment in the evolution of Western mores: the point at which the female breast has become so overloaded with erotic significance that even its exposure for the fulfilment of its biological purpose becomes taboo. If one reflects for a moment on typical attitudes towards ethnological films, for example, where shots of women breastfeeding their babies seem to vouchsafe the authenticity and naturalness of the film's presentation of its subjects, as contrasted with cases in Western countries where women have actually been arrested for suckling their babies in public, then the subtlety of Altenberg's ambivalent account of the Ashanti's nudity can readily be appreciated.

At this level, the meaning of Peter A.'s outburst in the same sketch "Neger sind Kinder!" (p. 28) also takes on a further meaning. This is plainly not meant as a reflection of that nineteenth century commonplace of post-Darwinian thought that black Africans somehow represented a more primitive stage of cultural development, that they were in some sense a childhood stage that European civilization had left far behind. For Peter A. children and blacks are linked because they are "Etwas, [...], was uns zum Tönen bringt" (p. 29). Children and blacks are potent figures in the imaginations of Europeans, figures onto whom we project our fantasies: "Sie selbst spielen kein Instrument, sie dirigieren unsere Seele". And that imagination, in Altenberg's terms, cannot but conceive of the child -- as well as the black -- in erotic terms.

At this point, it is wise to reflect on the socio-cultural context of Altenberg's literary predilection for pre-pubescent girls. (The "ideal" Ashanti women are referred to as "Mädchen"). Prostitution, and in particular child prostitution, was rife in Vienna in the late nineteenth century. The eroticization of children was therefore no mere aesthetic phenomenon. Yet while it is difficult to read *Ashantee*, or any of Altenberg's other texts for that matter, without rapidly becoming aware of the implications of this fixation, it is also important to note that Altenberg's texts are always "self-undermining artifacts". For example, the narrator's attraction to Tíoko, referred to above, is not simply the record of an erotic dalliance but respects the integrity of its subject by stating the

terms within which the fantasy has been constructed. Tíoko appears both as object of the narrator's fantasy and as the victim of the zoo-keeper's exploitative practices. If pressed to identify where the sympathies of the narrator lie, one cannot but conclude that he is on the side of the oppressed, though this passionate sympathy may at times be overlaid with a more dubious erotic interest. It is striking, for example, that the Africans and the children in the text are all referred to by their first names. The adult Europeans remain nameless; at most the reader learns their professional title ("der Clark", "der Thiergarten-Direktor") or perhaps an initial ("Frau H.", "Fräulein D.").<sup>xxx</sup> Also, the narrator's portrayal of the relationships between the Ashanti is a differentiated one. In "Die Hütten (Abends)", the hut of the young men is empty -- as males they have the freedom of the city. The unmarried young women, however, are forced to stay behind. In "Ritterlichkeit", the Ashanti chief Bodjé tells Peter A. how he has beaten Nâh-Bâduh for refusing to dance: "Wofür zahlen die weißen Menschen?! Es ist unsere Pflicht" (p. 59). Peter A. clearly does not approve and is troubled by the beating. In response to his silence, Bodjé asks "Was hast du, Herr---?!". In the first version, the sketch ends with Peter A.'s reply "Nichts, Bodjé---". In the 1904 revision Altenberg adds a final sentence from Bodjé: "Nun, Herr, ich werde sie von nun an träumen lassen in ihrer Hütte". This addition accentuates Peter A.'s role in acting on behalf of the Ashanti women, but the substance of the text remains the same: that the Ashanti men are as capable as the Europeans of exploiting the women in the group when commercial interests are at stake.

The relationship between the narrator and Tíoko develops in the ninth, tenth and eleventh sketches, "Paradies", "Der Abend" and "Ein Brief aus Accra". In the first of these, the narrator asks Tíoko what she would most like to be given. She replies that she would like green and pink glass beads. In the second, he kisses her for the first time. In the third the narrator is attracted to Akolé, who tells him firmly "Go to Tíoko" (p. 34). The context of this instruction is particularly important. One of the women, Monambo, asks Peter A. to buy a "piss-pot" (the English term is used) for herself and the other women present, since the nights are cold and they have to leave the hut to urinate. As in the case of the Ashanti women's exposure of their breasts, the text crosses here into a territory shaped by sexual taboos. Witnessing or, in this case, talking about how a woman performs a bodily function amounts to intrusion into the private sphere. When Monambo says that Peter A. would readily give Tíoko a piss-pot as a present, she alludes to a sexual relationship between them. The vulnerability of the Ashanti women left alone in the evenings is powerfully evoked by the image of a woman squatting to urinate outside the hut. After the discussion with Monambo, the narrator kisses the hand of each of the three women:

Akolé war zu schön! Ich kniete mich nieder, küßte sie auf die Stirne, die Augen, den Mund

---

"Go to Tíoko ---" sagte sie sanft.

Monambo, Akóschia verkrochen sich in ihren Kattunen.

[The 1904 version adds a further "Go to Tíoko" at this point.]

Since the paragraph which then closes the sketch describes the narrator leaving the hut at daybreak, suggesting the figure of an illicit lover, it is evident that the repeated instruction has not been followed and the narrator has spent the night with Akolé. This interpretation can be substantiated by the observation that three of the following sketches ("Akolé", "Akolé's Gesang. Akolé's süßes Lied" and "Complications") concern Akolé and not Tíoko. Tíoko does not, however, vanish from the text completely, and there is more to be said about her.

### *Nâh-Bâduh and Tíoko*

The nineteenth sketch is in the form of a letter in Altenberg's rather shaky English to the Ashanti woman Monambo. A translation of the letter forms the twentieth sketch. The repetition stresses again the theme of communication despite a limited shared vocabulary, and the letter form suggests the overall movement of the text. Peter A. writes to Monambo in English because he cannot address himself directly to Nâh-Bâduh. As he admits, he knows only one word in Ashanti ("misumo" -- "I love you") and that word is insufficient to describe the complexity of his feelings. Nâh-Bâduh's spontaneous gesture of laying her head on his shoulder has captivated him. At the same time, he knows that he is not alone in his affections, and there is another whose presence concerns Nâh-Bâduh more: "I suppose the reason of all this will be the jounge "Black-man" Noe Salomon Dowoonah" (p. 47, sic).

In the following sketch, "Prinzessin in Grün", he lists the presents "Sir Peter" has given to Nâh-Bâduh. In "L'homme médiocre", the theme raised by the first present-giving (to Tíoko) returns. If the Ashanti women accept gifts from admirers, does this make them venal? For the mediocrity, the association between gifts and women of easy virtue is unavoidable: "Ich hörte aber, man könne junge schwarze Mädchen kaufen?!" (p. 53). Peter A. insists that this is only true "[u]nter den Bedingungen der Liebe" and that once "bought" in this way the woman will only remain with a man as long as love endures. With this idealized vision of marriage à l'Ashanti Altenberg's text is playing upon a literary topos that reaches back to the beginnings of exoticism in European literature. The morality of the natives the traveller finds in a distant land is always more practical, more sensible than that of the stuffy Europeans.<sup>xxx</sup> Here the distant land itself has apparently come to visit. Altenberg's sketches on the Ashanti represent a development of the

two main strands in the satirical use of exoticism: the distant land as a comparison for a depraved and corrupt Europe and the naive eye of the traveller who arrives from overseas and is shocked by things his hosts take for granted.<sup>xxxii</sup> In *Ashantee* Africa quite literally comes to Europe; the naive eye and the distant land are both present.

In the twenty-seventh through to the thirty-second sketch the relationship between Peter A. and Tíoko and Nâh-Bâduh are resolved. In "Le coeur" Tíoko expresses feelings of worthlessness now that she knows that Peter A. loves Nâh-Bâduh. The scene is the hut of the young women on a cold September evening. The narrator quotes ironically from the local newspapers: "Unsere schwarzen Fremdlinge im Thiergarten haben Nichts von Ihrer Laune eingebüßt" (p. 60). The Ashanti women attempt to comfort Tíoko in her despair. She insists "Tíoko finish", which the narrator "translates" as "mit T. ist es aus". She goes on to say that Noe Salomon Dowoonah loves Nâh-Bâduh, yet Nâh-Bâduh does not love him. Therefore, they will both be sad when they return to Africa. She believes Nâh-Bâduh should remain in Vienna with "Sir Peter", an idea taken up by her companions. The sketch ends with Tíoko leaving the hut and not responding to calls for her to return, despite the cold outside.

In "Palawer (Rath der Männer)", the men of the village decide to give Tíoko to the zoo director as a leaving present. Tíoko accepts this decision, but asks whether Sir Peter knows of it. The chief Bodjé replies that it is none of Sir Peter's business. The scene then switches to the zoo director telling a group of people how he had refused this offer. They are surprised at what they consider his lack of romantic feeling. He responds:

Nichts Romantisches würde es sein. [...] Eine vervehmte Magd würde sie bald bei uns. Ich habe diese schwarzen Menschen dennoch lieb gewonnen. Gegen mich selbst. (p. 66)

His explanation of his motives also helps to explain why Peter A. is then reported to have said that the zoo director should have accepted the offer, as he would have got on well with Tíoko. For what the zoo director admits, in fact, is that despite his prejudices he has learned to see the Ashanti as individuals and not as examples of "true, woolly-haired negroes". He refuses because he knows that Tíoko's life would not be "like a chapter of Victor Hugo or Dumas amid the confinements of barrack-room life".

In "Der Tag des Abschiedes" a postscript is added to the narrator's relationship with Tíoko when Tíoko's mother gives Peter A. a small wooden African stool on which Tíoko used to sit and cry. The present is to serve as a reminder that Peter A. once loved her. There follows a short

conversation between Nâh-Bâduh and the narrator in which Peter A. interprets the words "Poor ...no Afrika! Rich ...Afrika!" (p. 69) to mean that Nâh-Bâduh understands that Peter A. would follow her to Africa if he were wealthy, but as he is poor he must stay behind. In "Le départ pour l'Afrique" a few final words are exchanged between them on the station platform. There is a farewell embrace, indicated solely by two lines of dashes following the statement which offers the view of a third person narrator: "Sie steigt langsam herab auf den Perron zu ihm" (p. 70).

The penultimate text, "Ihre Adresse" closes the sequence on Nâh-Bâduh by suggesting a future to the relationship, albeit an open-ended one. The last text "Spätherbst-Abend" is a conversation between the zoo's watchman Joseph and its director. Joseph says that a man was asking for the director. The man (obviously the figure of Peter A. is intended) went into one of the huts and left a quarter of an hour later. The director remarks:

Schon gut, Joseph. Übrigens, die Hütten werden morgen abgebrochen --- Wir brauchen Platz für die Seiltänzer-gesellschaft und den Ballon captif" (p. 72).

In a final brief text, therefore, two possible relationships with the Ashanti are outlined: that of the empathetic observer Peter A., who lingers over the sadness of their departure; and that of the spectacle-hungry audience, for whom the zoo-director is keen to provide new and different attractions.

### *Conclusion*

Altenberg's complex literary portrayal of the Ashanti in the Prater needs to be seen in the context of the political and social forces that were attaining their definitive form in the late 1890s. For the liberals, the Ashanti became an emblem of cultural difference that was used quite consciously to relativize internal tensions within the Habsburg state, particularly the rise of political antisemitism and its view of the Jews as aliens who had insinuated themselves into Austrian society.

By avoiding the kind of enlightened relativism proposed in many liberal accounts of the Ashanti exhibition, Altenberg's sketches reject the implicit colonialist view of Meyer's lexicon, a view which distinguishes between "Kultur-" and "Naturvölker" and considers the latter only to be a suitable subject for an ethnological display to enlighten the former as to their supposed origins. Altenberg's text involves the reader intimately in the lives of the individual African characters, but at the same time never loses sight of the problematic relationship the inhabitants of a



Hagenbeck-style display must have had with the surrounding society. As such, the attempt to close the gap between the Ashanti and the Viennese, or avoid it opening up in the first place -- a theme announced by the tutor in "Der Hofmeister" -- may ultimately merely call forth that eternal response of the antisemite that "some of my best friends...". Readers engaged by Altenberg's text, moved by the relationships between the narrator and the Africans, may in the end conclude that these Africans are indeed "some of one's best friends", but that does nothing to change the view of Africa as a dark continent peopled by uncivilized savages. The problem of prejudice remains. As one perceptive Viennese liberal satirist put it: "Die Aschanti sind fort, unsere Schwarzen bleiben leider".<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### *Notes*

- i. Peter Altenberg, *Ashantee* (Berlin, 1897). The sketches on the Ashanti are accompanied by nine further sequences of sketches on other subjects. A modern edition can be found in Werner Schweiger (ed.), *Peter Altenberg. Gesammelte Werke in fünf Bänden* (Vienna and Frankfurt, 1987-), Vol. 1, pp. 231-270.
- ii. For a short account of the demographic situation in Vienna at the end of the 19th century, see Eda Sagarra, "Vienna and its Population in the late 19th century. Social and Demographic Change 1870-1910" in G J Carr and Eda Sagarra (eds), *Fin de Siècle Vienna* (Dublin, 1985), pp. 187-207.
- iii. See Peter Pulzer, *The Rise of Political Anti-Semitism in Germany and Austria* (New York,

1964), especially Chapter Twenty "The Battle for Vienna", pp. 177-188.

iv. Pulzer, p. 185.

v. See Bertrand Michael Buchmann, *Der Prater. Die Geschichte des unteren Werd* (Vienna, 1979), pp. 71-75, 80-81.

vi. See Hans Pemmer, Nini Lackner, *Der Prater von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart. Neu bearbeitet von Günter Dunigl und Ludwig Schmauer* (Munich, 1974), p. 113; also Gustav Jäger, *Kurzer Führer durch den neueröffneten Wiener Thiergarten am Schüttel* (Vienna, 1863). Jäger was the original zoo's director.

vii. Pemmer/Lackner, p. 113.

viii. Carl Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen. Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen* (Berlin, 1909); see also *Neue Deutsche Biographie* (Berlin, 1965), vol. 7, pp. 487-488.

ix. I am grateful to Jacob Langford of Ithaca for drawing my attention to the significance of social status in the presentation of the Hagenbeck displays.

x. See Stefan Goldmann, "Wilde in Europa. Aspekte und Orte ihrer Zurschaustellung", in Thomas Theye (ed.), *Wir und die Wilden. Einblicke in eine kannablistische Beziehung* (Reinbek, 1985), pp. 243-269. On p. 257 Goldmann writes: "Neben der didaktischen Absicht, die Weltkenntnis zu fördern, war das erklärte Ziel dieser Ausstellungen, weite Kreise der Bevölkerung für deutsche Kolonialinteressen zu gewinnen." See also by the same author "Zur Rezeption der Völkerausstellungen um 1900", in Hermann Pohlig et al (eds), *Exotische Welten. Europäische Phantasien* (Stuttgart, 1987), pp. 88-95. This is the catalogue to the exhibition of the same name sponsored by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen and the Württembergischer Kunstverein at the Kunstgebäude am Schloßplatz, Stuttgart in September/November 1987.

xi. The same cannot be said of art history, where interdisciplinary approaches combining work in the fields of ethnography, psychoanalysis and the history of popular culture have proven fruitful in discussing such themes. Sander Gilman, who holds chairs in both comparative literature and psychoanalysis, has repeatedly drawn attention to Altenberg's *Ashantee* and its historical context. Reference may be made to Gilman's volume *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston, 1982), or to his *Pathology and Difference. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (New York, 1985). The section on Altenberg in the latter volume later appeared in concise form as "Black Sexuality and Modern Consciousness" in Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (eds), *Blacks and German Culture* (Wisconsin, 1986), pp. 35-53.

xii. See Edris Makward, "Two African Travellers from Germany: Leo Frobenius and Janheinz Jahn", in Grimm/Hermand, *Blacks in German Culture*, pp. 54-64, p. 58.

xiii. Hagenbeck, p. 457; *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 25 August 1897.

xiv. *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 September 1896.

- xv. See Christine Klusacek and Kurt Stimmer, *Leopoldstadt* (Vienna, 1978), p. 249.
- xvi. See Stefan Goldmann, "Wilde in Europa", p. 248. This practice has not entirely died out. In the Museum of Natural History at Banyoles, 85 miles north of Barcelona in Spain, there is the preserved body of an African Bushman, stolen from his grave and stuffed in 1916. This display caused great offence among African nations due to compete in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics (see *The Observer*, 8 March 1992).
- xvii. See Ursula Giese, "Die ersten 100 Jahre des Schönbrunner Tiergartens", in Walter Fiedler (ed.) *Schönbrunn. Geschichte und Aufgaben* (Vienna, 1976), pp. 48-62, p. 59.
- xviii. *Bäuerle's Theaterzeitung*, 21 February 1846, quoted in Pemmer/Lackner, p. 83.
- xix. Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, p. 112.
- xx. Quoted in Hans Christian Kosler, *Peter Altenberg. Leben und Werk in Texten und Bildern* (Munich, 1981), pp. 78, 80. The only date indicated is the year 1897.
- xxi. See Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938. A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 193-197.
- xxii. Typically, we find one recent work describing the text as follows: "Altenbergs Hinwendung zum noch Unverbildeten und Natürlichen zeigt sich auch in anderer Ausprägung: in seiner Begeisterung für die Aschanti, einen westafrikanischen Negerstamm, der als Attraktion für längere Zeit im Wiener Tiergarten ein authentisch aufgebautes Dorf bewohnte. Das alltägliche Leben dieses Volkes, vor allem das der Frauen und Kinder hat Altenberg in seinem Zyklus bewundernd abgebildet". (See Irene Köwer, *Peter Altenberg als Autor der literarischen Kleinform* (Frankfurt, 1987), p. 49.
- xxiii. The following texts were added after "Der Automat": "Ehebruch", "Prügel", "Mitgift" and "Erbfolge". After a slightly altered version of "Ritterlichkeit", a new sketch entitled "Mütterlichkeit" was added. Texts omitted in the revision included "Gespräch", "Die Hütten Abends", "Souper", "Ein Brief aus Wien", "Le Coeur" and "Conclusion", and the shorter pieces "Einmaleins", "Akolé" and "Le départ pour l'Afrique" (see Schweiger, p. 359). Schweiger's modern edition is a composite of the versions of 1897 and 1904. While the republication of all the texts is welcome, it is worth bearing in mind that there are considerable discrepancies between Altenberg's own editions and these should not be glossed over by pretending that all the sketches about the Ashanti can simply be lumped together.
- xxiv. See Camillo Schaefer, *Peter Altenberg. Ein biographischer Essay* (Vienna, 1980), p. 40.
- xxv. *Meyers Conversations-Lexikon. Eine Encyclopädie des allgemeinen Wissens*, 4th edition (Leipzig and Vienna, 1890) volume one, pp. 900-901.
- xxvi. Sander Gilman, *Pathology and Difference*, pp. 111-112.
- xxvii. Compare Camillo Schaefer, p. 40 with Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, p. 111.

xxviii. Peter Altenberg, *Wie ich es sehe* (5th edition, Berlin, 1910), p. ix.

xxix. Reprinted in Kosler, pp. 80,82.

xxx. A modern example of the same technique can be found in Nadine Gordimer's short story "A Soldier's Embrace", where only the African characters are given names. The white South African liberals, who are the story's principal figures, are referred to only by their generic titles: the wife, the lawyer, the butcher, etc. See Nadine Gordimer, *A Soldier's Embrace* (London, 1980).

xxxi. The most famous example is Diderot's *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772), where the discrepancy between European laws concerning marriage and sexual morality is exposed through a dialogue between a native chief and a missionary priest, who is trying to persuade the locals of the virtues of Christian civilization.

xxxii. The figure of Pedro in Hofmannsthal play *Cristinas Heimreise* (1909) offers a more conventional example of the naive eye of the foreign traveller, though it should be noted that Hofmannsthal succeeds in making the satirical comparison less obvious to the audience, since Pedro appears at first to be no more than a figure of fun.

xxxiii. *Die Bombe*, 25 October 1896. Black was the political colour of the Christian Social Party.