

Peter D.G. Brown

Oskar Panizza
His Life and Works



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“Are you insane?” – “No.”

(Oskar Panizza,
“Autobiographical Sketch”)



John P. Ramirez

Preface

The current book emerges from a fourteen-year study of the subject, which first germinated as *Doghouse, Jailhouse, Madhouse: A Study of Oskar Panizza's Life and Literature* (Diss. Columbia, 1971). I owe much to the sustained encouragement, guidance, and criticism of Professor Joseph P. Bauke during this period of my research.

I am deeply indebted to several important German colleagues, whose groundbreaking efforts have succeeded in bringing Panizza's works closer to a growing segment of the reading and film-going public: Hans Prescher, the knowledgeable editor of *Das Liebeskonzil* (1964, 1976); Axel Mathes, whose firm began in 1977 to republish Panizza's major writings; Professor Walter Rösler, the leading Panizza scholar in the German Democratic Republic; Peter Berling and Werner Schroeter, producer and director of the *Liebeskonzil* film (1981).

For many a year, my two children, Stephanie and Andrew, have exhibited a loving endurance toward their father and his preoccupation with a phantom called Panizza. To my own father, Weir M. Brown, I owe my first introduction back in 1969 to this curious author from Bad Kissingen. Lastly, I wish to acknowledge the invaluable contributions from my curatorial wife, Susan, not the least of which was to make sure that I kept a proper distance from my subject.

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July 1983

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Introduction

The following work is the first critical study of the life and literature of Oskar Panizza, and it appears a good half-century after the author's death. The last sixty years have seen the publication of tens of thousands of books, dissertations, and articles on German writers ranging from Johannes Aal to Stefan Zweig. And yet this remarkable author, whose works strongly impressed such disparate colleagues as Theodor Fontane, Max Halbe, Michael George Conrad, Otto Julius Bierbaum, Thomas Mann, Frank Wedekind, Detlev von Liliencron, and Kurt Tucholsky, was allowed to fade into virtual oblivion.

There are several reasons for the deletion of Oskar Panizza from the annals of literary history. Most of his writing was done during the 1890's, when half a dozen of his books fell under the ax of German censorship. They were banned, confiscated, and destroyed. Only a very few of his works have ever been republished, and there are indications that Panizza's embarrassed relatives at one time tried to purchase all copies of his books that appeared on the bibliopolic market. During the first half of this century, these efforts to suppress his writings were surprisingly successful. Max Krell writes that whenever a Panizza imprint surfaced in the rare book trade, "prices were offered that not even an early Hölderlin edition would command."¹

Perhaps even more important was the fact that most people found Panizza's writings exceedingly offensive. Since he was a physician by training, he wrote about the human body with the detachment and

objectivity of a medical practitioner. The bodies he saw were not those perceived by the Classics or Romantics before the age of Marx and Darwin. Panizza wrote contemporaneously with German Naturalism, and he shared with this movement the quest for a presentation of real phenomena, regardless of their ugliness, impropriety, vulgarity, or horror. His literary treatment of masturbation, syphilis, hermaphroditism, excretory functions, necrophilia, vomiting, and acute paranoia, for instance, was—and still is—considered to be in bad taste by those who feel there are certain intimate aspects of life which should be banned from the pages of literature. Fortunately, tastes and tolerances have changed since the 1890's, but Panizza retains the dubious distinction of having lived and written a century ahead of his time.

His politics were those of an independent radical, or a radical independent; but this by itself would have been no cause for outright rejection by the reading public. It was his savage attack on religion, however, his systematic debunking of Christian mythology, which severely offended the vast majority of his contemporaries. Following Nietzsche's lead, Panizza rejected and ridiculed religion as an oppressive institution, perpetrated by "inferior" persons to deprive others of their freedom to delight in the real pleasure of a real world. For his sacrilegious play *Das Liebeskonzil*, the author became a literary *cause célèbre* in 1895; he was damned by the popular press, and cruelly incarcerated by the administrators of justice. After years of imprisonment, exile abroad, and prohibition of his books, Panizza's mental health deteriorated to the point of no return. The last seventeen years of his life were spent as a patient in an insane asylum, where his death in 1921 went completely unnoticed by the literary world. At the end of World War II, any public awareness of Oskar Panizza's life and literature had disappeared. Even for literary historians he had become a non-entity.

The post-war "discovery" of this forgotten author was not accomplished by a single stroke, nor was it the achievement of one man. Certainly the major credit goes to a Frenchman, Jean Bréjoux, who chanced upon the name of Panizza's in Walter Mehring's account of his father's lost library.² Mehring's description of Panizza's scandalous drama, *Das Liebeskonzil*, prompted Bréjoux to locate one of the rare copies of this play, which he then proceeded to translate into French and publish in 1960.³ This French translation, which constitutes the first public printing of the author's *magnum opus* in the

twentieth century, contains a preface by André Breton. "Even in our day," wrote Breton, "it is likely that the audience's reaction would force the curtain to be lowered before the end of the first scene."⁴ Perhaps Breton was correct, for another ten years were to pass before Bréjoux' stage adaptation of *Le Concile d'Amour* was produced in early 1969 at the Théâtre de Paris. Fully seventy-five years had elapsed between the first publication of Panizza's masterpiece and its world premiere, a "performance delay" comparable to that of Büchner's *Woyzeck*.⁵

The present critical study of Oskar Panizza's life and literature is not, strictly speaking, a biography; nor does it contain an exhaustive discussion of all of his writings. The only previous attempt at collecting biographical source material was made by a Munich book dealer, Horst Stobbe, who published a booklet entitled *In memoriam Oskar Panizza*.⁶ It contains a seventeen-page autobiographical sketch written by Panizza in 1904, as well as excerpts from psychiatric testimonials, Panizza's mother's writings, some late poems, a primary bibliography, and the invaluable reminiscences of Deacon Friedrich Lipfert,⁷ a man closely associated with the author during the last decades of his life. My study attempts to integrate these materials with a number of other sources, notably the letters, memoirs, and other printed works by the various people who at one time had known the author. What emerges is often closer to a psychiatric case history than a conventional biography, but Panizza was a psychiatrist by profession, one whose life and works make little sense when divorced from his own psychopathology.

In the initial, biographical section of this study, primary emphasis is placed on the author's works on non-fiction. The second section is a critical examination of Panizza's creative art, dealing specifically with his poetic, prosaic, and dramatic fiction. With a writer such as Panizza, it would be undesirable to separate the man's life from his works, even if this were possible. For artistic and psychological reasons, he lived in order to write, and he wrote in order to live. When he could no longer do both, he stopped doing either, and gradually lost contact with external reality. His genius can often be separated from his madness, but his art just cannot be divorced from his life for the simple reason that he usually wrote about himself. Whether or not his life and art are of commensurate interest remains to be seen.

The quotations have been left in the German original only when their idiomatic flavor would have been lost in an English rendition.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, and they attempt as much as possible to retain the quality, good or poor, of the original German passages. Quotations from *Das Liebeskonzil*, the author's best known work, are taken from my English version, "The Love Council."⁸ Parenthetical documentation is employed wherever possible. Panizza's highly individualistic orthography and punctuation have been retained throughout the German citations, and the reader has been spared the tedious eyesore of thousands of "sics." Although he was never overly consistent, Panizza's spelling generally represents a simplification along phonetic lines. His unorthodox punctuation is characterized by a plethora of dashes, usually signifying perceptible pauses. It will be the arduous task of a future editor to issue a text as the author intended it to be, with his own distinctive orthography and with genuine errors corrected. Meanwhile, it seems wisest to adhere to the texts edited, however poorly, by the author himself.

The purpose of this entire presentation is to fill a glaring gap in German literary history. Panizza merited considerable interest during the 1890's, and his best works have refused to grow old during the subsequent decades. It is hoped that these works will soon be freely read, discussed, and performed, so that their author may finally assume his modest place in German cultural history. The reader is reminded that the following critical study is only the first one devoted to this author. It is not, therefore, intended to be the last word on Oskar Panizza.