

# We Shall Have Worked

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## I

The narrator of Peter Handke's *Repetition*, 45-year-old Filip Kobal, recounts a journey made by his younger self a quarter-century earlier. We follow him from his parents' home in Southern Austria into the remote Slovenian Karst, where his brother Gregor, some twenty years his senior, disappeared in 1943, after fleeing his post in the German army and possibly joining the resistance. Filip takes with him two books that once belonged to Gregor: a copybook from agricultural college, written in Slovenian, the language of their ancestors, and a German–Slovenian dictionary, which Gregor bequeathed to him as a 'baptismal present'. And through reading these books, through translating and deciphering their foreign words and phrases, he does indeed receive a baptism of sorts – that is, a moment of radical communion, not only with his missing brother and Slovenian forebears but with the world in the widest sense. By way of his attentive engagement with words and their meanings, he is lifted out of his self and given over to the unbounded realm of human continuity and community. The brother he meets in his dictionary, and the forebears he meets in his brother, are neither ghosts nor mere evocations, but revelations of the living presence language shelters within it: 'And for a moment, as though my wish were its own fulfillment, I caught sight of my brother (full-grown as I had never known him).'<sup>1</sup>

The first of *Repetition*'s epigraphs comes from the *Zohar*, or 'Book of Splendor', the most important literary work of the Jewish mystical tradition. 'The kings of old died', it reads; 'they could not find their food.' According to Maurice Blanchot, the gift of Judaism to civilization 'is not so much the revelation of the one God, but the revelation of the word as the place where humankind can be in relation to what excludes all relation: the infinitely Distant, the

absolutely Foreign. God speaks and man speaks to him ... the word spans the abyss.'<sup>2</sup> But for Filip at the age of twenty, as the inheritor of a language in which even the most common words have been rendered hollow by the atrocities of recent history, the abyss divides him not only from the other world, the 'infinitely distant' world of God, but also, it seems, from *this* world – from the things and forms of ordinary shared experience, our daily bread.

And so it's telling that the language Filip discovers, and which in being discovered illuminates and replenishes reality for him, is neither his corrupted mother tongue (German) nor a divine language whose significance is assured by a tradition he doesn't have access to (Hebrew), but a language of peasants – 'of an unknown people that has none but borrowed words for war, authority, and triumphal processions, but devises names for the humblest things – indoors for the space under the windowsill, out of doors for the shiny trace of a braked wagon wheel on a stone flag – and is at its most creative when it comes to naming hiding places, places for refuge and survival, such as only children can think up – nests in the underbrush, the cave behind the cave, the fertile field deep in the woods.'<sup>3</sup>

Yet the recuperation of language Handke attempts in *Repetition* does, I think, lean on the Jewish tradition, if only as a means of reimagining – or better, *reorienting* – the prevailing Western image of language as a binary construct founded on an opposition between meaning and form, letter and spirit. According to Judaism there is no such split, and language – specifically Hebrew, the holy tongue through which God created the world – serves as a bridge between the corporeal or human plane and the divine plane. The *Sefer Yetsira*, an anonymous treatise from the third century, takes this notion further, claiming that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were not only creative forces in the formation of the world – God says *OR* ('light') and light comes into being – but also elements in its material structure: 'Twenty-two letters are the foundation: He engraved them, He hewed them out, He combined them, He weighed them, and He set them at opposites, and He formed through them everything that is formed and everything that is destined to be formed.'<sup>4</sup> Language, according to this

1 Peter Handke, *Repetition*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Amsterdam: The Last Books, 2013), 132.

2 Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infant*, in *Lavish Absence* by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 48.

3 Handke, *Repetition*, 208.

4 *Sefer Yetsira*, Chapter 2, in *Understanding Jewish Mysticism: A Source Reader* by David R. Blumenthal (New York: Ktav Publishing House Inc., 1978), 21.

theory, is not only the archetype of the world but also its stuff; the letters of the alphabet entered the constitution of reality and became part of its fabric. The world is therefore a book to be read; or as Robert Duncan puts it: ‘Our human language is a ground in which we participate in the greater language in which the universe itself is written. Living is reading the message or poem that creation is about.’<sup>5</sup> This readable world, which is not only inscribed but is itself the inscription, Filip encounters on his first morning in Slovenia:

The previous night, I had taken in the details of the valley, but now I saw them as letters, as a series of signs, beginning with the grass-pulling horse and combining to form a coherent script. I now interpreted this land before my eyes, with the objects, whether lying, standing, or leaning, which rose up from it, this describable earth, as ‘the world’; and I was able to address this land, without special reference to the valley of the Sava or to Yugoslavia, as ‘my country’. [...] And so my progress in that predawn hour became a deciphering, a continued reading, a transcribing, a silent taking of notes. [...] Long before sunrise, I saw the valley plunged into another sun, the sun of letters.<sup>6</sup>

This is a conception of language in which the distance between a word and the thing it refers to is substantially reduced, if not completely effaced. The relation between *OR* and the phenomenon of light isn’t arbitrary, as Saussurian semiotics would have it, but *symbolic* in the Romantic sense of the term: ‘By a symbol I mean, not a metaphor or allegory or any other figure of speech or form of fancy, but an actual and essential part of that, the whole of which it represents.’<sup>7</sup>

We’re a long way here from the linguistic scepticism of Handke’s early prose, books such as *Kasper* or *The Goalie’s Anxiety at the Penalty Kick*, in which language is depicted as a kind of veil that divides us from the world of existing things, a set of protocols and conventions that regulates experience and reduces perception to pre-established patterns. These

books continue a tradition of so-called *Sprachkritik* in German-language literature (and modernist literature in general) that is both prefigured and exemplified by Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Lord Chandos Letter* of 1902. Hofmannsthal’s narrator, in a fictional letter to his friend, the philosopher Francis Bacon, explains how his crisis of faith with regards to language has left him unable to ‘utter words normally used by everyone with unhesitating fluency’. He describes how at first using words like ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, or ‘body’ caused him an ‘inexplicable uneasiness’, which gradually broadened, until even ordinary conversation ‘became so fraught with difficulties that I had to stop participating in these conversations at all’.<sup>8</sup> Or as Filip laments in the first chapter of *Repetition*: ‘Why, at the age of twenty, did I feel tired at the thought that some interlocutor might open his mouth? Why did speech – even my own – often banish me to a muffled middle class living room? Why had words lost all meaning? Why was it only the rare *mot juste* that made me feel that I had a soul?’<sup>9</sup>

It is against this backdrop that we have to consider the gradual shift of focus in Handke’s work, from his early critiques of language toward an increasingly tender (though still precarious) preoccupation with its shards – a shift that begins with the *Slow Homecoming* trilogy of 1979 and finds its full expression in *Repetition* (1986). As one of Handke’s translators, Gitta Honegger, points out, this is a shift ‘not of concern, but of the ways he approaches these concerns. [...] For Handke it is the necessary next step: once the false idols are exposed, there is the much more arduous task of reclaiming language without constituting new idols.’<sup>10</sup> W. G. Sebald, in an essay on *Repetition*, implies that Handke’s self-consciously avant-garde texts of the 1960s and ’70s, though ‘doubtlessly formed from high artistic understanding and true feeling’, for the most part align with the dominant ideological trends of European modernism – e.g., the crisis of language and the alienation of the subject – and that this at least in part accounts for their being so readily embraced by critics and so promptly absorbed into the canon (for ‘even after a quick perusal, all kinds of progressive observations

5 Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, eds. Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 314.

6 Handke, *Repetition*, 118–20. (Re ‘the sun of letters’: the notion of language as light-emitting is recurrent in Jewish mysticism, e.g., ‘In every letter shine multiple lights’ (the *Zohar*).)

7 R. J. White, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Lay Sermons*, Bollingen Series, vol. 75 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 79.

8 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rothenberg (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 121.

9 Handke, *Repetition*, 217.

10 Gitta Honegger, in the Translator’s Introduction to *Voyage to the Sonorous Land, or The Art of Asking and The Hour We Knew Nothing of Each Other* by Peter Handke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), xv–xvi.

could be applied to them’).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the slower, quieter, more metaphysically inclined and ostensibly formally conventional works of the 1980s were largely rejected by critics for retreating into what they read as a form of neo-Romanticism – though actually, I’d argue, these works are his most profoundly subversive. They don’t merely hold up a mirror to the destructive effects of modernity – the dehumanizing obsession with speed, efficiency, progress, growth – but actively resist them, not so much with *what* they say as with the care with which they say it. Every page of *Repetition*, meticulously attuned to the subtlest resonances of language and the forms of reality it names and describes, is both the articulation and enactment of a poetics and ethics of radical slowness, of attention.

And so there is nothing disingenuous or merely rhetorical about this turn in Handke’s career. On the contrary, when we read his oeuvre we get a sense of how much had to be overcome and what was therefore at stake in his search for living speech. And I use the word *living* carefully here. For it’s against a philosophical paradigm that opposes life to language – that sees, in Hegel’s terms, the word as death and even the murder of things – that Handke reinvents the so-called law of writing: ‘to create, letter after letter, syllable after syllable, the brightest of brightnesses; even a last breath must be transformed into a breath of life.’<sup>12</sup>

When we see a continuum, not a rupture, between language and life, the question of the ineffable immediately falls away. Which is not to say that the world is wholly describable or that words give us privileged access into the nature of things, only that the emphasis now lies elsewhere. For the ineffable is a ‘problem’ – i.e., a limit to be overcome – only if we see language as being at the disposal of experience – if we see language as a means to capture experience rather than a medium of experience in and of itself. When we lament the ineffable what we are often really lamenting is our inability to dominate and possess the world. But when we recognize that word and world participate in the same flux and vibration of being – are literally contained one within the other – the writer’s ‘task’ becomes at once simpler and more profound: the radical reorientation, through language, of the self toward the other; or in the phrasing of French poet and Bible translator Henri Meschonnic,

‘the transformation of a form of language by a form of life and the transformation of a form of life by a form of language’.<sup>13</sup> Because there’s a dimension of language beyond, or better, preceding, the reductive notion of a collection of arbitrary signs whose function is the conveyance of information, a dimension where, according to another translator of the Hebrew Bible, Franz Rosenzweig, ‘the distinction between immanence and transcendence disappears’.<sup>14</sup> It is this aspect of language that opens up to Filip in the course of his story, and with it both renewed sense of immediate material reality – ‘it took only one word to evoke the broad end of “our” scythe, or “our” cling peaches, or the blue mist on “our” plums’ – and the intangible presence that bonds it together: ‘then, flinging myself upon the ground, I discovered once and for all what the spirit is.’<sup>15</sup>

## II

In *Repetition*, reading is depicted not merely as a life-enhancing but a life-determining activity; this is a bildungsroman in which the protagonist does not so much ‘come of age’ as ‘come of language’.

The injustice felt by Filip’s father over the disappearance of his eldest son – ‘every day he died again for them’ – as well as his family’s exile from their native Slovenia, turns him into a domestic tyrant. ‘Because he was nowhere at home, he bullied the rest of us [...]. And his uneasiness was contagious. It would infect us if he merely opened the door, let his look of injured hopelessness rest on the members of his family, and disappeared, or if we sensed that he was standing motionless in the hall, as though waiting at once for his saviour and for the landslide that would bury him along with his house and garden.’<sup>16</sup>

Yet there are moments when he does find peace with the world – specifically on Sundays after Mass,

11 W. G. Sebald, ‘Across the Border: Peter Handke’s *Repetition*’, trans. Nathaniel Davis (Amsterdam: The Last Books, 2013), 1.

12 Handke, *Repetition*, 212–13.

13 Henri Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, trans. Pier-Pascale Boulanger (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), 68. Elsewhere in this book, Meschonnic writes: ‘[R]ecalling Beneveniste’s words: “Much more than used for communicating, language is used for living” – the radical historicity of living in and through our language for each one of us. We must therefore think of speaking as an ethical act, and that languages are not first and foremost means of communication, but ways and means of living’ (162).

14 Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), 51.

15 Handke, *Repetition*, 209, 229.

16 *Ibid.*, 83–84.



when he ‘put on his glasses and opened the weekly Slovenian church gazette, the only newspaper he read. He moved his lips soundlessly at every word, as though not only reading but studying the lines, and in the course of time his slowness engendered a calm that surrounded him and filled the house.’<sup>17</sup>

This state, which stands in contrast to the ‘force of impatience’ and ‘contemptuous obedience’ with which he otherwise goes about his tasks, finally becomes enduring when his wife falls ill: ‘He no longer worked in wordless fury for himself alone – every gesture an expression of despair that no one understood him and no one could help him anyway. Now he would pause for a time, say what was on his mind, and even ask for help in his distress. [...] Even when working, he didn’t seem solitary or possessed; his work was done with the same thoughtful deliberation as his reading, in harmony with something which as I saw it was the light shining into the house, the luminous brown of the windowsill, or the colour of his own eyes.’<sup>18</sup>

It strikes me as significant that this ‘thoughtful deliberation’, this coming-into-awareness of the needs of others and acceptance of his own limitations, is first experienced, even if only fleetingly, in the act of reading – as if reading were a *readying*, a preparation for how to hear and respond to the call of another. Indeed, this is how the Jewish theologian Martin Buber expresses the deep relationship between reading – primarily, of course, but not only, the reading of scripture – and personal transformation. According to Michael Fishbane, ‘Buber stated that the person will hear the Bible’s message who will correspondingly *be there* before the text – attentive and listening. Reading is thus in the service of life. It is a training for human listening. As we “read-hear” more profoundly, he believed, so shall we attend to the tasks of life more authentically.’<sup>19</sup>

In Buber’s terms it is by opening the self to dialogical relation, and not through any specious ‘representation’ of reality, that reading transforms us. ‘Some of us’, writes C. D. Wright, ‘do not read particularly for instruction or pleasure, but to be changed, healed, charged.’<sup>20</sup> And literature does not heal or change us by its content so much as by the conveyance

of an other’s voice – an other which is first and foremost language itself – into that part of ourselves we like to think of as inviolable, our autonomous, immutable ‘essence’. French philosopher George Poulet claims a ‘community of feeling’ in the act of reading – that reading ‘delivers us from egocentricity’ – for ‘it means giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them.’<sup>21</sup> Reading is thus a receiving and giving of hospitality – inhabiting the refuge offered by the text and becoming a refuge for the text in turn. (‘I stayed with this one and that one’, reads *Repetition*’s second epigraph.)

For Buber’s colleague Franz Rosenzweig, this movement of the self from *I* to *other* has grammatical correlative in the conjunction ‘and’ – the so-called ‘biblical conjunction’ – for the ‘infinite series of I *plus* I is replaced by I *and* Thou’, and consequently, ‘these conjunctions of “and” establish living relations of reciprocity’.<sup>22</sup> ‘And’ connects; it joins action to action, object to object, and in so doing defies closure. It is striking, therefore, that this is the final word of Handke’s book: ‘and begin again with your all-appeasing: *And...*’<sup>23</sup> The novel’s ending is thus an opening – a turn to what lies beyond it. This gesture makes explicit a notion implied throughout the text: that true reading does not remove us from the world but returns us to it; that literature is not an escape from life but a way to get into it – a very real *place* to be. ‘The Greek verb for “read”’, notes Handke in his *Essay on the Successful Day*, ‘would signify a “looking up”, even a “perceiving upward” or a “recognizing upward”’.<sup>24</sup> And narrating the hours he spent with his brother’s dictionary under the open sky of the Slovenian Karst, Filip describes how the book served as a ramp guiding his gaze to the outside world, and how this reading ‘was the exact opposite of my usual immersion in so-called breathtaking stories; time and again the words made me raise my head and my eyes. [...] My senses – of sight as well as hearing – have never been so sharp as then, as I read those columns of unconnected words.’<sup>25</sup>

17 Ibid., 84–85.

18 Ibid., 90.

19 Michael Fishbane, ‘The Biblical Dialogue of Martin Buber’, in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 88.

20 C. D. Wright, *Cooling Time*, 55.

21 George Poulet, ‘The Phenomenology of Reading’, in *New Literary History* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 53–68.

22 Fishbane, ‘Speech and Scripture’, in *The Garments of Torah*, 101–2.

23 Handke, *Repetition*, 345.

24 Peter Handke, *The Jukebox and Other Essays in Storytelling*, trans. Ralph Manheim and Krishna Winston (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), 122.

25 Handke, *Repetition*, 200, 223.

If, as Buber claims, every act of careful reading is an opening of the self toward an other, then perhaps writing is simply the continuation of this gesture – a *response* to an other. Filip remembers, significantly, how his mother, ‘whenever I had been out of the house for any length of time, in town or alone in the woods or out in the fields, assailed me with her “Tell me!”’; and how until she fell ill he never succeeded in telling her.<sup>26</sup> But in the same way that her illness draws her husband out of his solipsistic isolation, so it prompts Filip to at last express what has always been mute in him. And so his role in this ceremony of care – his *responsibility* – is that of storyteller. And narrative here – the bringing into language of what would otherwise be lost to silence and separation – does indeed have a healing effect. For in the act of telling and listening, language is restored to its role in the creation of human realities, and listener and teller thus collaborate in the articulation of an image of existence and its tangible and fragile actualization: ‘And what did I tell my mother? My wishes. And when her eyes mocked them, that only made me start over again, start further back, circle around them in other words. And when word and wish became one, a warmth invaded my whole body and suddenly something akin to belief would appear in the eyes of the incredulous listener – a quieter, purer colour, a glimmer of thoughtfulness.’<sup>27</sup>

### III

*Repetition*’s final epigraph is a single Latin verb – ‘*laboraverimus*’, or ‘we shall have worked’ – which Handke attributes to Columella, a farmer and writer known for composing two of the most comprehensive Roman agricultural works: *De Re Rustica* (‘On Agriculture’) and *De Arboribus* (‘Trees’). The word occurs only once in Columella’s corpus, in book III.x.12 of *De Re Rustica*, in the context of a discourse on the cultivation of vines: ‘If then, from these vines, we select, not only those parts which are capable of conception and heavy with young, but their coverings and sunshades, so to speak, which are destitute of fruit, we shall have worked for shade and not for a harvest of grapes.’<sup>28</sup>

‘We shall have worked’: this verb tense, the so-called future perfect, which in one of his notebooks

Handke calls ‘the utopian grammatical form’,<sup>29</sup> is frequently used by Gregor in his wartime letters: ‘because it doesn’t exist in Slovene, he would switch to German whenever he wanted to use it: ‘We shall have walked on the green track.’ ‘The boundary stone will have been moved to the edge.’ ‘By the time the buckwheat is sowed, I shall have worked, sung, danced, and slept with a woman.’<sup>30</sup> It also appears in the copybook Gregor compiled while studying at agricultural college in Slovenia, which, like Columella’s treatise, is primarily concerned with the care and grafting of fruit trees. In fact, one of the quotes Filip offers from Gregor’s copybook is a paraphrase of *De Re Rustica*, book III.x.12: ‘He had always chosen scions that had once borne fruit, ‘because otherwise we shall have worked not for yield but for shade’.<sup>31</sup>

‘We shall have worked’: at once imperative and promise. But what is this work that will bring us yield as opposed to shade? A work comparable, perhaps, to the agricultural labour described in Columella’s treatise and Gregor’s copybook – that is, a work of diligent stewardship and loving care.

*Care*, here, implies at least three things about the nature of this work: first, that it will engage a living and present reality and be responsibly attuned to the effects and pressures of that reality; second, that it will be a work of relation and not of objectification; and third, that it will be turned toward the future (‘we *shall* have worked’) and thus expressive of an act of faith and the risk and trust concomitant with faith.

However, this engagement with futurity does not imply a refusal of the present. It is neither a passive waiting for something to come to pass nor an acquisitive grasping after something not yet here. Rather, it is closer I think to what Martin Buber observes in the Hasidic tradition, where messianism is freed of its Gnostic tendencies (and the denial of material being and lived time this implies) and reified as a labour of the here and now, a practice of the present whose aim is the hallowing of the concrete, everyday world. This notion is premised on the Kabbalistic belief that in each thing and being there is a divine spark which it is the task of humankind to free from its exile in matter and reconnect to its original root in God. And so there is nothing – no word or deed, no hour or place – that is not charged with sacred potential, and the messianic promise, while still oriented toward the

26 Ibid., 18.

27 Ibid., 93.

28 Columella, *On Agriculture*, vol. III, trans. E. S. Foster and Edward H. Heffner (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), 291.

29 Peter Handke, *Am Felsfenster morgens (und andere Ortszeiten 1982–1987)* (Munich: DTV, 2000), 155.

30 Handke, *Repetition*, 194.

31 Ibid., 168.

future, is no longer an abstract wish but a work of each individual and every moment. ‘Therefore one should have mercy on his tools and all he possesses’, the Baal Shem Tov is reported to have said; ‘one should have mercy on the holy sparks.’<sup>32</sup> This is a vision of reality that restores dignity to the physical and temporal expressions of nature and human existence and proposes a model of faith that doesn’t try to circumvent or deny the internal and external conditions of earthly being but which passes directly through them.

*Repetition* offers several models for this way of being in the world – a young waiter, for instance, whose beauty ‘was not so much in his features as in his constant attentiveness, his friendly vigilance’ (‘I also marveled at the care with which he handled the cheapest and shabbiest objects’), or Filip’s brother for whom ‘the word “holy” [...] applied not to the church, heaven, or any other place outside the world, but *always* to everyday life – getting up in the morning, going to work, meals, routine activities.’<sup>33</sup> But perhaps most exemplary is the roadmender who lived on the outskirts of Filip’s childhood village. Maintaining the streets and pathways in the region was only his everyday occupation, and on his days off he appeared in a different role – as a sign painter and restorer of wayside shrines (a secret which ‘he displayed openly and had no need to hide’): ‘As I watched him adding a shadowy line to a finished letter with a strikingly slow brushstroke, aerating, as it were, a thick letter with a few hair-thin lines, and then conjuring up the next letter from the blank surface, as though it had been there all along and he was only retracing it, I saw in this nascent script the emblem of a hidden, nameless, all the more magnificent and above all unbounded kingdom...’<sup>34</sup>

This is a work, not of will, but of attention; and the forms of such a work, whether the shapes of the sign painter or the rhythms of the poet, are not invented but found, as if by altered vision, in what already is (‘as though they had been there all along and he was only retracing them’). Through such attention we come to cooperate in what we see; we activate what Robert Duncan calls ‘the magic of correspondences’<sup>35</sup> and so transform the world in our perception of it:

At such moments, even the painter’s ladder took on a special quality. It didn’t lean, it towered. The curbstone at its feet gleamed. A haywagon passed, its strands of hay plaited into garlands. The hooks on the shutters did not just hang down, they pointed in definite directions. The door of the inn became a portal, and those who entered looked up at the sign and bared their heads in obeisance. The foot of a chicken scratching about in the background became the yellow claw of a heraldic animal. The road where the sign painter was standing led, not to the small town nearby, but out into the country and at the same time straight toward the tip of his brush. On certain other days, amid the blowing leaves of autumn, the driving snows of winter, the flowery clouds of spring, the heat lightning of summer nights, I had perceived the wide world as a pure Now; but on signposting days there was something more: an exalted Now, an Era.<sup>36</sup>

This passage culminates in a pledge from the young Filip to his future self, the result of which may well be the very book we’re reading: ‘I resolved that at some future date I, too, would do my work so slowly, so thoughtfully, so silently, uninfluenced by anyone who happened to be present, in perfect independence, without encouragement, without praise, expecting nothing, demanding nothing, without ulterior motive of any kind. Whatever this future work might be, it would have to be comparable to this painting, which ennobled the painter and with him the chance witness.’<sup>37</sup>

Creative work is depicted here not as the projection but participation of the self in the world. ‘Not to set forth my Self, but to lose and find it in diligent search’, writes Susan Howe of her project on Emily Dickinson.<sup>38</sup> And a few years ago, at the German Literature Archive in Marbach, I transcribed from one of the journals Handke kept while working on *Repetition* the following fragment: ‘Mein “ich” muß allmählich aus die Erzählung verschwinden – und wiederkommen’; ‘My “I” must gradually disappear from the story – and return.’<sup>39</sup> *Intention* here is less important than *attention*; writing is allied less with acting than with waiting, less with inventing

32 Quoted in the Foreword to *Tales of the Hasidim* by Martin Buber, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), xi.

33 Handke, *Repetition*, 234–35, 188.

34 Ibid., 53.

35 Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, 111.

36 Handke, *Repetition*, 54.

37 Ibid., 55.

38 Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (New York: New Directions, 1985), 46.

39 Notebook dated 10.11.1985 (Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar).



than with observing. Yet it would be wrong to read ‘observing’ as synonymous with passivity or disengagement. For as Handke asks while describing the eyes of certain faces painted by Giotto (which seem ‘as if they were merely glancing at what was happening and at the same time intimately participating in it’): ‘Isn’t it possible for observation to be a form of action as well? Something that affects what happens and even transforms it?’ And so too ‘waiting’ – which is not only *work* but a form of eros. Indeed, the word *desire* derives from the Latin *desi-dare*, which has the root meaning ‘to await’, or more precisely, ‘to await what the stars will bring’. And so there is no contradiction between waiting and desire. Waiting, in fact, *is* desire – that is, not the lust of the self for possession of an other, but the opening of the self to the call of an other. And what is it the stars will bring? The revelation of pattern, i.e., *constellation*, which is the ‘magic of correspondences’, the revelation of meaning. (‘Words’, says the *Zohar*, ‘are the deposits of cosmic connections.’)

And such a revelation is what we read in *Repetition*, where Filip finds, not a resolution to his desires, but a medium – language – in which to claim, inhabit, and thus transform them – from obscure and painful lack into articulate and potentially healing purpose: ‘[I]n one of his letters from the front, Gregor speaks of the legendary country, which in the language of our Slovene forebears is called the “Ninth Country”, as the goal of our collective longings. “May we all meet again someday”, he wrote, “in the festive Easter vigil carriage on its way to the wedding of the Ninth King in the Ninth Country. Hear, O Lord, my prayer!” I now saw a possible fulfillment of his pious wish: in writing.’<sup>40</sup>

#### IV

And now, a few hours before this text is due to be delivered, an email from a friend, responding to a draft of the previous pages, reminds me that I’ve not yet written about the *title* of Handke’s novel, which in the original German, *Die Wiederholung*, could also mean ‘to retrieve’ or ‘carry back’. ‘I heard someone on the radio the other day’, she writes, ‘read a line from a poem by Hafez: ‘He sits on the doorstep in the dust and waits for his lover.’ I realize now that this waiting is everything, for ‘everything’ is already there in the dust under his feet. And I realize, too, that waiting, far from stasis, is a cyclic passage – retrieving

again and again, from every point of time and grain of dust, from every word whether read, written, or spoken, the erotic moment of co-recognition – *I see you* – in which we assume/resume our lives.’<sup>42</sup>

Waiting as a cyclic passage; repetition and retrieval; the rhythms of the seasons, the weather, the sowing and reaping and sowing Columella describes, the returning ‘again and again’ to the same ground, the same field – as I return, day after day, to Handke’s novel, to this text, to the common field of language. Through the work of repetition, we retrieve time and deliver it forward; we draw it into ourselves, and fulfill it in the act of waiting. *We have worked, are working, shall have worked; we have waited, are waiting, shall have waited.*

And even as I tell myself *I don’t have time*, I remember C. D. Wright’s admonishment, which for months was pinned on the wall above my desk: ‘Important, I believe, to resist finality in one’s own work while assiduously working toward its completeness.’<sup>43</sup>

And then: ‘That great thought, more liberating than anything else in the world – “Friend, you have time” – turns me outward again.’<sup>44</sup>

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Other texts in this series:

- ‘The Sun of Words’, excerpts from *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen*, an interview between Herbert Gamper and Peter Handke
- ‘Across the Border: Peter Handke’s *Repetition*’ by W. G. Sebald  
(both translated by Nathaniel Davis)
- ‘Another Light’ by Phil Baber

42 Cf. *Repetition*, 302: ‘On the last journey [...] one of my travelling companions smiled at me, so giving himself to be recognised and at the same time recognising me. An orgy of recognition: instead of rapture and confluence, shock and oneness, with the verb corresponding to “orgy” translated as “to yearn steadfastly”, and the place name *Orgas* as “Land of Demeter” or “Meadow” or “Fruitland”.’ (It’s perhaps also worth noting that in Greek the word for *orgy* (*orgia*) shares a root with the word for *labour*.)

43 Wright, *Cooling Time*, 3.

44 Handke, *Repetition*, 292.

40 Handke, *Repetition*, 328.