

Across the Border: Peter Handke's *Repetition*

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'The journeys of men should lead to
where they have come from.'
(Shlomo of Karlin)

In recent years, there are few clearer examples of the misunderstanding between culture and culture industry than that of Peter Handke. Around the time of his return to Austria it was considered as a given that this author, who from the very beginning has stood at the centre of public scrutiny, represented the highest class of contemporary German-language literature. The specific narrative genre he developed succeeded by dint of its completely original linguistic and imaginative precision, through which – in works such as *The Goalie's Anxiety* or *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* – the author reports and meditates upon the silent catastrophes that continuously befall the human interior. It is particularly worth noting, retrospectively, the ways in which these texts manage to satisfy the demands of the book market, without giving up any claim to 'literary' status. The secret of this success, I venture, is that Handke's narratives – though doubtlessly formed from high artistic understanding and true feeling – are hardly at odds with an idea of literature which critics are ready or able to understand. Handke's texts were accessible; even after a quick perusal, all kinds of progressive observations could be applied to them. Handke likewise laid no overlarge obstacles in the way of literary criticism. In the shortest time, numerous essays, analyses and monographs were written up and Handke's work was subsumed into the canon.¹

Already with the appearance of the three books of *Slow Homecoming*, however, the engagement with Handke became more hesitant.² Far more hermetic, far more difficult to describe, these works, which observe the

world in a different manner, almost seem to me to be conceived in order to put a stop to this critical and scholarly game. The author clearly paid a dear price for this insolence – whether unintentional or strategic – through which the author secured for his writings a claim to a certain discretion after publication. What unsettled critics more than anything else was Handke's new and, one could say, programmatic design for the visualization of a more beautiful world by virtue of language alone. Neither critics nor scholars managed to come up with much to say about the many wonderfully-built textual arcs of 'Child Story' or 'The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire', except to designate them as examples of the abstruse extravagance of Handke in his latest phase. Since then readers have retreated, scholars have for the most part liquidated their interests (if I'm not mistaken), and as for the critics, who were naturally the most exposed, some have felt compelled to publicly rescind their confidence in Handke.³ In recent years it has come to a point where Handke's new works may still be reviewed, but these reviews are as a rule formed by animosity, either open or concealed. Even the few positive commentaries exhibit a strange perplexity and a palpable discomfort. In every case, the metaphysic developed in Handke's newer books, which aims to translate the seen and perceived into language, remains undiscussed. There is obviously no longer a contemporary discourse in which metaphysics may claim a place. And yet art, wherever and whenever it may take place, bears the closest ties to the realm of metaphysics. In order to explore this proximity, the writer requires a courage which should not be underestimated; for critics and scholars who see metaphysics as a kind of junk closet, it is naturally easy to be satisfied with the general admonishment that, in the higher realms, the air is thin and the danger of falling great. What I want to do now is not to discuss the particularities of this distancing from Peter Handke – nor do I want to be tempted by the considerable task of sketching the psychology and sociology of the parasitic species that takes literature as its host; instead, I simply want to experimentally

process a few things regarding the book *Repetition*, which upon first reading in 1986 made a great and, as I have since learned, lasting impression on me.

Repetition is the report of a summer journey to Slovenia, undertaken in 1960 or 1961 by a young man named Filip Kobal, on the trail of his missing older brother Gregor. The reporter and narrator is Filip Kobal himself, who looks back on the time from a distance of a quarter century. As much as we learn from him about the young Filip Kobal, the currently middle-aged narrator is unwilling to give us much information regarding his present identity. It's almost as if he, who we can recognize only by his words, is the missing brother himself, whose trail the young Filip Kobal is following. The beneficial effect that this search for clues, described by Handke, has on the reader, is rooted in the following constellation: that the young Kobal is led by the older, for whom he is searching, and that protagonist and narrator, separated from each other only by passed time, relate to each other like the two brothers who are the subjects of Handke's story.

Directly upon passing his final exams, Filip Kobal leaves his home – his old father, his ailing mother, and his confused sister – and travels across the border to the country on the other side of the Karawanks, whence came the Kobals, and where Gregor fled when he was drafted into the German army in the mid-thirties, in order to study the cultivation of fruit trees at the agricultural school in Maribor. The crossing of the border opens up a new kingdom for Filip. Although the industrial city of Jesenice, the first stop of his journey, 'grey on grey, squeezed into a narrow valley, shut in between two shade-casting mountains', in no way corresponds to the picture Filip had imagined to himself of this neighbouring empire as a collection of 'cities resplendent with colour, spreading out over a wide plain, [...] the one merging with the next all the way to the sea' – nevertheless, as the narrator specifically remarks, the city 'fully confirmed my anticipation'. Jesenice is actually the entryway to a new world. Filip notices how the droves of people going about their business, unlike in the small cities of his

hometown, 'took notice of me now and then but never stared', and the longer he observes his surroundings, the more certain he becomes 'that this was a great country'. In the train-station tavern he dreams of being accepted into the population of this great country, amidst a people that he envisages as being 'on an unceasing, peaceful, adventurous, serene journey through the night, a journey in which the sleeping, the sick, the dying, even the dead were included'. The normally mostly light-flooded empire, in this passage drowned in darkness, which Filip Kobal sees himself entering, is qualitatively as far removed as is thinkable from the false homeland from which, according to the synopsis of his previous years, he escapes 'after almost twenty years in a non-place, in a frosty, unfriendly, cannibalistic village'. As the narrator remarks, Filip Kobal's feeling of freedom is completely concrete, for in contrast to his 'so-called native land', the country on whose threshold he stands lays claim to him not 'in the name of compulsory education or compulsory military service', but rather, as the narrator in turn states, it lets itself be laid claim to, 'as the land of my forefathers, which thus, however strange, was at least my own country'. 'At last', the narrator recalls from his memories, 'I was stateless; at last, instead of being always present, I could be lightheartedly absent'. Outland, the country of ancestors and of absence: these passages strangely invoke the coincidence between the 'kingdom of freedom' and that of the dead, which may initially prove perplexing. Yet there is something to this, since both the kingdom of freedom and that of shades are sites of expectation, where no living being has yet been. The narrator recalls how his mother, whenever speaking of her Slovenian homeland, would recite the names of the major towns of Lipica, Temnica, Vipava, Doberdob, Tomaj, Tabor, Kopriva, as though they were settlements in 'a land of peace where we, the Kobal family, would at last recapture our true selves'. The land of peace envisaged by son and mother is not only a metaphysical, but also a political concept. Without doubt, the metaphysics of an 'other world' where one goes to meet one's ancestors point towards a

position of resignation, in which liberation can always only be a liberation from life; yet at the same time the utterances of the mother, remembered by the son, are defined by their resolute resistance to coercive assimilation, and their clearly pronounced resentment against Austria. Thus, talk of a possible alternative situation leads not only to a quiet demise: it also has a real social significance. The country of peace, evoked by the pretty-sounding Slovenian names, is the absolute opposite to the false homeland of Austria, as well as to the malignancy of a society organized by confederations and associations. The text makes this unmistakably clear. What is beneficial for Filip Kobal about the crowd in which he finds himself, walking the streets of Yugoslavian cities, is primarily 'what it lacked, the things that were missing: the chamois beards, the hartshorn buttons, the loden suits, the lederhosen; in short, no one in it wore a costume'. Thus, for Filip Kobal – in a foreign land, amid the passing shades of Jesenice – it is less the resigned absorption into an anonymous other that communicates the feeling that he is finally among his own kind, as it is the absence of all costume, of all insignia, of anything overdetermined. The dialectical mediation of metaphysics and politics enables a change of positions: namely, that as the bent shades of Jesenice come to life, the costume-wearers take on the appearance of evil, unredeemed, dead souls. The 'costumed' is in no way identical to an orientation which aims to conserve the homeland; rather, it is the unmistakable indication of an opportunism, by which the propagation of the concept of 'homeland' becomes allied with the destruction of homeland. Additionally, the 'costumed' also signifies the negation of every foreign country. If the concept of homeland comes about in the nineteenth century in response to the evermore ineluctable experience of the foreign, the ideologisation of homeland in the twentieth century, similarly inspired by a fear of loss, develops into the attempted expansion of the homeland, as far as possible and employing force when necessary, at the cost of other homelands. The word Austria, as the name for the Alpine republic left over after the dissolution

of the empire, is a paradigm for this paranoid concept of homeland, whose gruesome consequences reach far into the post-war years during which Filip Kobal grew up. At the end of his wanderings, as he returns home through the Karst, he is at first happy to see Austria again – inspired, perhaps, by the hope that he would be able to bring home his various foreign experiences. 'On the way from the border station to the town of Bleiburg [...] I vowed to be friendly while demanding nothing and expecting nothing, as befitted someone who was a stranger even in the land of his birth. The crowns of the trees broadened my shoulders.' Yet barely arrived in the city with the ominous name [*Blei*: lead], he is met once more with the 'guilty, hangdog ugliness and formlessness' of his Austrian compatriots – 'fashionably dressed, they had gleaming badges on their lapels' – constituting a suspicious people, whose sidelong glances prompt the twenty-year-old to reflect on how 'not a few members of this crowd were descended from people who had tortured and murdered, or at least laughed approvingly, and whose descendants would carry on the tradition faithfully and without a qualm'. This remembered realization, as well as the narrator's complete silence regarding his subsequent experiences in his unaccommodating homeland, clarify why he must repeat his voyage out of Austria, twenty-five years after he first left.

The departure for the imaginary true homeland, lying across the mountains, is an attempt not only at self-liberation, but also at the breaking-through of exile, in the widest meaning of this concept. Despite being longtime residents of Rinkenbergl, where they are accepted as natives by their fellow villagers, the Kobal family – comparable in many ways to the Barnabas family of Kafka's *Castle* – have retained, due to their own obstinacy, a feeling of their own foreignness. Unlike their fellow Rinkenberglers, they possess and protect the memory of a way of life more dignified than their present one, oppressed by a corrupted Austrian populace. Thus the father and mother constantly and involuntarily think back to past times, as though they were both cut off from their Slovenian provenance,

and condemned against their will to an existence in Austria, as 'prisoners or exiles'. The family legend which recounts the story of the Kobals' exile, said to be rooted in historical events, tells of a Gregor Kobal who had led the Tolmin peasant revolt, and whose descendants had been driven out of the Isonzo valley following his execution. Since this far-off past, the Kobals have been a clan of farmhands and foresters, migrating across large distances, ending up in Carinthia. The text makes it no secret that the mythological conjecture, by which the oppressed family claims the ancestry of a rebellious forefather sentenced to an ignominious death, is geared towards a new rebellion against 'their exile, their servitude, and the suppression of their language'. It is primarily the father who, 'with all his strength, especially the strength of his obstinacy, [...] was intent on redemption for himself and his family', although he had 'no idea, and never uttered any proposal to us concerning the form the redemption of his family here on earth might take'. According to the mythological model, the task of redemption falls also on the shoulders of his sons. In his thirties, Gregor, the missing brother – who bears the name of the rebellious ancestor, and who was represented in the stories of his mother as 'a king cheated out of his throne' – was the first to set out to discover anew the land in the south; now it is up to the younger brother, considered by the mother as 'rightful heir to the throne', to resume long-lost affairs, and to go where there are cities which are nothing like 'our Klagenfurt' – cities like Görz, where, according to the father's memories, 'there are palm trees in the parks and there's a king buried in the monastery crypt'. The path out of exile is the path towards Jerusalem, and he who is meant to follow it, the young Filip Kobal, must be innocent. Unlike his schoolmates, almost all of whom have at one point survived a bad accident – losing a finger, an ear, or an entire arm – he is still unmarked: 'during my years at the seminary my youth had passed but I had never for one moment known the experience of youth'. Now this holy fool, who recognizes 'the mentally deranged and feeble-minded' as his 'guardian

angels', is sent out above the unhappiness of his family in order to report back from the other side as to whether the other world, which appears in the dreams of the exile, exists also in reality.

It cannot be ignored that the Kobals' secret royal family exhibits some traits which are known from Handke's own family history, as it is reported in *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*. The fictional transpositions carried out in *Repetition* can in turn be read as the author's own redemptory wishes. What is decisive in Handke's rewriting of his own family history in this work cannot simply be equated with the concept of idealization – the Kobals are in many respects a gloomy and self-destructive association – rather, the rewriting is more concerned with the elimination of a single specific element in order to achieve the farthest possible distancing from the German descent of Handke's paternal side; this appears to me to be one of the heaviest burdens on the psychological and moral development of the author Peter Handke. The Kobals have nothing in common with the Germans, nor even anything fundamental in common with the Austrians. It is their privilege and sovereign right to be the others, who take no part in the violence that stems from paternal fear and spreads out across all of Europe. The ideal of human cohabitation, which can be extrapolated from the passages where the family unity of the Kobals is presented in a somewhat sunnier light, is that of a society in which fathers play at most a diminished role. The mother's dream, as reports the narrator, would have been 'to run a big hotel, with the staff as her subjects'. The extensive household of this dream, like the narrative's inherent utopia, is of a clearly matriarchal nature. In the narrator's memory it also appears as though the mother had spoken 'with the voice of a judge', and the maxim that Filip Kobal makes his own, after having apprenticed as a kind of day labourer for the old woman who gives him shelter in the Karst, commands: 'Get away from your father'. Whereas under a patriarchal order each feels as alone as the narrator can't help but feeling, under a matriarchal regime, in which relations are woven more loosely and more extensively, each

individual would almost be a brother to the next. This can be seen in Filip Kobal's encounters with masculine figures in the ancient landscape of the Karst. Figures like the young soldier in Vipava, appearing to Kobal as his *doppelgänger*, or the waiter from the Bohinj, who Filip guesses to have been the child of a smallholder, like he himself was. This waiter, whose portrait is drawn with great devotion, is a veritable *imago* of the ideal of brotherhood. Brimming with constant attentiveness, and only 'seemingly lost in some faraway dream', he surveys, in truth, 'his whole realm'.

Handke's shaping of the story of the waiter from three or four sides belongs to the most beautiful passages of the past decade of German-language literature. Deeply impressed by this individual who embodies true civility – even giving a light to a drunkard with utmost gravity – Filip Kobal thinks only of him the following day. He knows, according to the narrator, that 'it was a kind of love' that draws him not into contact with the waiter, but into proximity to him. The story takes a strange, thoroughly remarkable turn with the silent meeting of the two young men – wherein not a single word is exchanged – on the last day Filip Kobal spends in the 'Black Earth Hotel'. On the way up to his room, around midnight, Filip Kobal passes by the open door to the kitchen, and sees there 'the waiter sitting by a tub full of dishes, using a tablecloth to dry them. Later,' continues the text, 'when I looked out of my window, he was standing in his shirtsleeves on the bridge across the torrent, holding a pile of dishes under his right arm. With his left hand, he took one after another and with a smooth graceful movement sent them sailing into the water like so many Frisbees.' This scene is simply recounted, without commentary, and left in its own right. Due to this unquestioning representation, the figure of the waiter, finishing his daily work in the strangest way, impresses itself deeply on the reader's mind. And the plates sailing out into the darkness, like the no less beautiful sentences describing arcs across a dark background, become dispatches of brotherhood.

Consoling dreams, in which a lengthy procession of messianic figures emerge from

the unredeemed world, belong to the narrative tradition of exile literature. Even in the worst of times, there must be a righteous person walking somewhere in one's country. The task is to recognize him. Different than the dogmatic Christian histories of the Saviour – systematically suppressing hopes for redemption, which in turn gradually grow virulent – the messianism of Jewish provenance, always ready to see the hoped-for redeemer in each stranger or foreigner, contains not only theological, but also political potential. Even when the father has no idea of 'the form the redemption of his family here on earth might take', this much is nevertheless clear: that it must be a redemption taking place in the here and now, as well as a redemption of an entire community. It is no coincidence that the mythical ancestor of the family was an agitator. The rebellious disposition, setting itself against all authority, determines the messianic fantasy from the ground up – which doesn't, however, imply that the figure of the redeemer is established from this model. The redemptive figure of messianism is characterized more by the ability to transform multifariously. Due to his one-eyedness, Gregor, the older brother, having preceded Filip in his journey to the other country, is the king among the blind of the exiled. As the narrator informs us, Gregor 'never actually became an insurrectionary', even though he often stood on the threshold of becoming so; yet in this he embodies a certain type, which the narrator believes to have otherwise seen in only a few children: namely, the pious. Necessitated by the war, the disappearance of the son in whom the hopes of the Kobal family were kept alive – for whom the favourite word 'holy' referred 'not to the church, heaven, or any other place outside the world', but rather with everyday life and getting up early in the morning – the loss of this bearer of hope spells an almost unbearable trauma for the exiled. Even 'twenty years after my brother's disappearance', the narrator remembers, 'our house was still a house of mourning', in which the missing brother left his family 'no peace; every day he died again for them'. From this unappeased and unappeasable mourning,

the otherwise independent parents develop communally the wishful dream of their son's return home. As the text recounts, the parents worship their missing son ardently, each in his or her own way: 'At news of his coming she would immediately have prepared "his apartment", scrubbed the threshold, and hung a wreath over the front door, while my father would have borrowed the neighbour's white horse, harnessed it to the spit-and-polished barouche, and, with tears of joy running down his nose, driven to meet him.'

The strong self-assurance of the exile is represented in the character of the Kopal family. In the future, the mother is certain that 'after our return home, our resurrection from a thousand years of servitude', the village of Kobarid in the Isonzo Valley, from which, according to lore, the Kobals originated, will be renamed Kopalid. Nothing more is required for the messianic adjustment to the world than the tiny displacement of a syllable. The fact that the village is called Karfreit in German is a further symbol for the redemptory mission of the son [-*freit*: -freed], which would see the family's oppressed existence transform into a proud indomitability. According to their family mythology, the Kobals are the designated representatives of the Slovenian people, who like the Jews, the exemplary exilic race, 'had been kingless and stateless down through the centuries, a people of journeymen and hired hands'. As Filip walks among these people through Yugoslavian streets, he feels an anti-authoritarian power emanating from this anonymous populace, who 'had never set up a government of their own'. 'We children of darkness', the narrator states, counting himself as one of this group, 'were radiant with beauty, self-reliant, bold, rebellious, independent, each man of us the next man's hero'. The exclusivity that the narrator ascribes to the Slovenian people is a reflection of the changing consciousness of Filip Kopal, who, like Amalia from Kafka's *The Castle*, learns to bear the imposed destiny of the exile as a mark of honour. One of the least understood attributes of the Jewish diasporic people is the fact that, as Hannah Arendt makes clear, 'Jews neither knew what power really was –

even when they almost had it in their hands – nor were they especially interested in power'.⁴ *Repetition* makes similar claims about the Slovenian people: that as a powerless people, 'without aristocracy, without military marches, without land', they remain uncorrupted, 'their only king' – again almost like the Jews – 'being the legendary hero who wandered about in disguise, showing himself only briefly'. It is clear that Filip Kopal, like his brother before him, is expected to fill this role of the secret king. His messianic disguise is that of the guest, entering the household anonymous, unsuspected. The role was assigned to him early on by his mother and sister, who would set a cup of tea before him upon his return home from school, with the obliging attitude that becomes second nature to women, as though he were 'an unexpected noble guest'. And in his wanderings, the smallholder's son, actually someone with 'no origins at all', becomes conscious of his enormous task. Similar to an early version of the beginning of Kafka's *Castle*, where the prince's chambers are prepared for the wanderer K. when he appears in the village, Filip Kopal is offered a large room in the 'Black Earth Hotel', 'with four beds, enough for a whole family'. And evenings, when he sits in the hotel restaurant, 'no one, not even the militia on its constant rounds, asked me my name; everyone called me "the guest"'. Filip, whose home has become travel and transportation, already during his school years – and who, wandering southwards with his blue seabag and walking stick, moves towards the fulfilment of his predestined role – is here, as the silent guest, the one from whom redemption is expected. It takes a long time – a quarter-century – before the task he carried out at that time becomes, on repetition, clear to him. At first he is simply looking for his brother. Significantly, when he glimpses a vision of his brother in a sort of ancestral invocation, he is unable to bear it. The hallucinatory apparition, with eyes set so deep that their 'white blindness remained hidden', completely overwhelms Filip, forcing him to immediately leave the sight of the apparition, and to find rescue taking up his own way in the stream of the passing crowd. In the

messianic tradition, it is not a matter of the separated falling into each other's arms; more important is that the effort be sustained, that the younger succeeds the elder, the student becomes the teacher, and that the redemptory 'pious wish' – the wish, expressed in one of Gregor's letters from the front, to enter the Ninth Country in the Easter vigil carriage – be given earthly fulfilment, 'in writing'.

The text of *Repetition* constitutes this fulfilment. The book is the Easter vigil carriage, in which the separated members of the Kobal family may sit together once more. The composition of the text is thus no profane matter. From the outset, the storyteller is aware of the difficulty of the task set before him. He 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 at that time, before she fell ill, he never succeeded in telling her. We can assume, from the fact that his mother's illness helps him to overcome his narrative block, that one of the principal tasks of storytelling is to soothe. One of the requirements for the administration of such an artistic practice, so closely related to that of medicine, is the readiness to stay awake through the night. Already for the schoolboy Kobal, 'the one lighted window in the teachers' house' – and not 'the trembling little flame beside the altar' – was the true, eternal light, which would not let hopes for redemption be extinguished. In Handke's work, learning and teaching are ways of conserving the world. This is exemplified in *Repetition* by his brother's notebooks, written in Slovenian and dealing primarily with the cultivation of fruit, which Filip brings with him on his travels, and which become a textbook for his approach to life. On the example of his brother's writings, he realizes that those 'who, unlike the great mass of those who speak and write, had the gift of bringing words and through them things to life', and who are prepared to devote themselves unceasingly to this strange art, are able to produce a healing effect on others. The traceless disappearance of his brother in the Second World War also symbolizes how cruelly

circumstances almost infallibly curtail that which, in a nicely worked out story, is laid out as possibility. The narrator's fear that he could similarly be snuffed out, as his brother was before him, haunts his written-down memories as a feeling of powerlessness. All the same, the temporal structure of his report shows us that he has managed to survive for a good number of years. A quarter-century has passed since the young Filip Kobal found his inner storyteller. Looking back, it becomes clear to the forty-five-year-old that, at the time, he would not have been able to tell the story of homeland to anyone. It is a lengthy process of gestation by which indifferent scraps of one's own life transform into thought-provoking images; and even when the ancient fragments seem to be gathered into a sensible pattern, the storyteller is plagued by doubts, never to be fully assuaged, as to whether what he holds in his hands are only a matter of 'the last remnants, leftovers, shards of something irretrievably lost, which no artifice could put together again'. The fact that, despite this difficulty, and despite such scruples, *Repetition* presents us over and over with passages – like the one cited above, recounting the waiter at night – which almost communicate a sense of levitation, seems to me a mark of the exceptional quality of this story, whose secret ideal, so it seems to me, is one of lightness. Not that the narrator is carefree or lighthearted; but instead of talking about his burdens, he turns to his senses in order to produce something that could help him and his reader – who may also be in need of comfort – to resist the temptation of melancholy. The professional role model chosen by Filip Kobal for his own narrative work is that of the roadmender, who is responsible for the upkeep of the roads in the area, and who, like the author in his hut, lives in a one-room house which resembles the porter's lodge of a manor – despite there being no such manor in the vicinity. This roadmender, who, like the writer, carries out his laborious work day after day, on occasion transforms suddenly into a sign painter, standing high upon a ladder outside the entrance to the inn at the centre of the village. 'As I watched him', recounts the narrator,

‘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.’ I don’t know if the forced relation between hard drudgery and airy magic, particularly significant for the literary art, has ever been more beautifully documented than in the pages of *Repetition* describing the roadmender and sign painter. It is also important that the work of this man, chosen by the narrator as his preceptor, is done outside: that it does not place the landscape in a frame, as is otherwise the case with art, but instead brings the landscape into alignment with itself. The extraordinary openness of the text of *Repetition* arises from its presentation of the external as something much more important than the internal. Accordingly, the model for the true place of the narrator, as Filip Kobal realizes in hindsight, is the shed in his father’s field: ‘I’ve gone directly to the fields from school, and I’m sitting there at the table with my homework.’ This shed, as he now knows, was and is ‘the centre of the world, where the storyteller sits in a cave no larger than a wayside shrine and tells his story’. The field shed the narrator has in mind here, like the sukkah of a different tradition, is a place of rest on the journey through the desert, and its periodic reconstruction, in a civilization which sets ever sharper limits upon what is appropriate for human nature, is a ritual of remembrance for an outdoor life. In *Repetition*, Handke allows the peculiar light which illuminates the space under a leafy canopy or a tent canvas to glisten between words, placed here with astounding caution and precision; in doing so, he succeeds in making the text into a sort of refuge amid the arid lands which, even in the culture industry, grow larger day by day. The book of the journey through the Karst, over which the infamous bora wind blows, resembles thus the dolinas: sinkholes which lie beneath the wind, islands of stillness, surrounded by trees, all bent at the

same angle, where, as the narrator reports, the stubby grass hardly trembles, bean or potato plants hardly sway, and on whose ground therefore, ‘without fear of one another, the beasts of the Karst could assemble, a stocky little roe deer along with a hare and a herd of wild pigs’. To this image of peaceable unity, animated by reference to the ark, is inscribed the hope that, despite prevalent unfavourable conditions, something of our natural homeland may yet be saved.

1 By 1982, the list of secondary literature contained around two-hundred entries.

2 The stream of secondary literature has certainly not dried up in the eighties, yet it relates what Handke has written in the past decade mostly to his earlier writings. To this is added the fact that most of what is published on Handke’s newer work is of a distinctly polemic character. For a long time now, there can be no question of an objective study of one of the most important authors of contemporary literature. [Cf. J. Lohmann, ‘Handke-Beschimpfung oder Der Stillstand der Kritik’, *Tintenfaß* H. 2, 1981.] Characteristic of the increasing distanciation of literary scholars is Manfred Durzak’s *Peter Handke und die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur*, published in 1982. Clearly unconvinced by the ideas developed by Handke in the three books of *Slow Homecoming*, Durzak criticizes the roguishness, the lack of a connection to social reality, and in particular the ‘stylistic pointillism, which endlessly compiles details with no apparent necessity, and misses the vision of a poetic image which brings all together’. My translation; originally cited from N. Honsza (ed.), *Zu Peter Handke – Zwischen Experiment und Tradition* (Stuttgart, 1982), p. 108.

3 Cf. B. Heinrichs, ‘Der Evangelimann. Glücksmärchen, Wanderpredigt, Lesefolter: Die Wiederholung’, *Die Zeit*, 3. X. 1986.

4 My translation; originally cited from H. Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totalitärer Herrschaft*, Vol. 1: *Antisemitismus* (Frankfurt, Berlin, Wien, 1975), p. 54.

Translated from the German by Nathaniel Davis.

Originally published as ‘Jenseits der Grenze’ in *Unheimliche Heimat* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1995), 162–78.

This translation was commissioned and published by The Last Books in 2013.

www.thelastbooks.org