Taking a walk through childhood

Novel of the week

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HAT can one say to express the simultaneous experience of childhood and landscape? There is a word, a German word, and that word is Kindschaft! I clap my hands in amazement! So writes Peter Handke in his remarkable new novel. In current German the word means "filiation," but Handke excavates it, Rilke-fashion, and uncovers the meaning "childhood." At one level the whole novel is an attempt to recuperate the sense of landscape felt by a child and to return us to our place in it.

This is a very Romantic aim, and this is a deliberately Romantic book. In his earliest writings, according to Brecht and Kaspar, Handke found a way of conveying a state of mind, already encountered in early Eliot and Kafka, where words seem to come between you and the world, where nothing coheres or appears natural, and from the vantage-point of which the ease with which other people talk and go about their business seems deeply suspicious. But just as Kafka felt there were moments when, miraculously, a written sentence—even one written by himself—seemed full light, so seemed to fill its own space and establish its own rhythm, and when the whole story seemed mysteriously to acquire a unity. It is as if, in the North for his friend Gregor, older by some twenty years than Filip, had disappeared in the region in 1945, after deserting from the German army, in whose ranks, in the Partisans. The family have long treasured his memory and letters, and now Filip takes with him two books which had belonged to Gregor, a German/ Slovak dictionary and the notes Gregor kept when at agricultural college in Slovenia, and which mainly concern the care and grafting of fruit-trees. The family has never felt at home where Filip is no exception. But once across the border he immediately feels at ease, even in the nondenotred border town of Jesenice: "The first world, it was normal and agreed, was the world from which I had come—for me at the moment, it was the world that I had so literally before me." He is in no hurry. Sometimes he sleeps rough, sometimes in local inns, and, though he occasionally takes a train, in the main he walks. In a previous novel, Slow Forty-Seven, Handke had described a walk taken by his hero, and admirer of Cézanne, over Mont S. Victoire. Here there is an even finer description of a walk over forest paths, in which the lesson of the region begins to sink in, and Filip starts to discover his natural rhythm and pace. The climax comes when he is given the role of an old peasant woman in the rocky Karst region above the Bay of Trieste. Here the boy, whose dominant sensations had always been those of being a stranger to his own language and to his own body, learns what it means to live in the world: "Watching the old man, I learned to pause in my movement, to unsimplify, at first forced and spasmodic, became easy and natural, and my working place, the red earth and the white wall, appeared to me in full colour."

His search, he begins to realise, has been not for his brother but rather for how "to tell a story about him." The lesson learned, he returns "to his feet again," it will be another twenty-five years before he can tell that story, the very one we have been reading, and which ends with a peacen of praise to storytelling. The final lesson is the story "to give the letters another shake, blow through the word-sequences, order yourself into script, and give us, through your particular pattern, our common pattern." What saves the book from the sort of sentimental melancholy that John Berger's recent work is filled with is the pageantry of being a stranger. Handke's style ranges from the elegant to the cluttered. He has a remarkable gift for movement evocations that I have ever read of what it means to be alive, to walk upon this earth. Against the banalisation of Romanticism, that strain in which that celebrates the "folk" and "nation," so ably exploited by the Nazis, Handke asserts the redeeming quality of the local place and minority languages. For the 'Ninth Country,' as he calls it, is not Austria or Yugoslavia or Italy, but at once a unique landscape and a place of achieved art. His narrative, in search of ways to speak of that country, is a patchwork of voices, the moving evocations I have ever read of what it means to be alive, to walk upon this earth.