

The Sun of Words

Excerpts from
Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen,
an interview between Herbert Gamper
and Peter Handke

Wednesday April 9th to Saturday April 12th, 1986

On the morning of April 9th, 1986, it was an unusually warm day with the föhn wind blowing, and I met Peter Handke in front of the house where he was living on the Mönchsberg. He first lead me up to the tower, from where one can see down to the southern parts of Salzburg, over the plains and towards the mountains (the Untersberg and the Staufen). I asked him about the Morzger forest, whose southern extremities were visible, and about the nearby area where Loser, the protagonist of Across, lived. He asked whether these settings interested me, and this was what determined the first question I asked after we had gone down to sit at the small table by the well, in the tree-shadows, and I had taken the final, inevitable step, so that the game could begin, and switched on the tape recorder. We regretted that the singing of the chaffinches and the titmice would not be transcribed to paper; again and again it seemed to me ridiculous to pose a question in the middle of this concert. I told of a visit with Thomas Bernhard, many years ago, when, without my asking, he showed me the offices of the lawyer Moro (from the story Ungenach) in Gmunden, as well as the fallen trees infested with bark beetles at the edge of his land that had been reimagined as the General's forest from the play Die Jagdgesellschaft. I asked Handke if he also attached such importance to the settings of his writings.

PH: They're certainly important for me, the settings. But I think that if I were to point someone towards these places, it might just confuse them – and it might also come across as pompous. But when I pass by these places, I'm always aware of them. [...] I could show you many, many spots that – as you said with Thomas Bernhard – appear in my works and are the same places. But one is hesitant to do so, because one thinks: a book is a book, and a place is a place. In the book the places are always different for the reader, they're richer and more fruitful than when you lead him there and, as if part of a pilgrimage or a sight-seeing tour, you say, there's the tree, or ... I'm hesitant to do that. Each person that reads something has the image within himself, and this image pleases him. The source of the image then always disappoints, and it also irritates. – Or maybe if he finds it himself: the reader goes out in search on his own. But when the

author leads him there, or some acolyte of the author leads him there like a tour guide ... I think that's not good.

HG: However, place is more important to your writing than it is to that of Thomas Bernhard.

PH: Yes, I'm a 'place-writer', I've always been that. For me places are the spaces, the boundaries, wherein experiences originate. My starting-point is never a story or an event, an incident, but instead is always a place. I don't want to describe the place, but rather narrate it. That's my greatest desire. It can just be a river, or snow, how it falls in a certain garden or by a certain tree, by a certain kind of bark – and that just gives me a desire to start there. I say 'start' instead of 'write'. And then, by and by, these narratives where nothing happens, they end up forming into events, and unfortunately that's unavoidable; I would prefer them to remain without these events: without the stone throw in *Across*.*

* The narrator of *Across* throws a stone at, and kills, a man he sees spray-painting swastikas on a wall: 'But then the stone was thrown and the enemy lay literally crushed on the ground, as unexpectedly as once in my childhood a rooster which, unintentionally to be sure, I had hit on the head with a pebble thrown from a distance – with the sole difference that the rooster, just as unexpectedly, stood up and ran off as if nothing had happened.' (*Across*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1986.)

HG: I would also prefer the book without it.

PH: Ah, but Herr Gamper, I don't disagree with you. However, the book doesn't work without it. I was writing *Slow Homecoming* and thinking, I'll just write the river and the sky and the earth. But the conflict materializes on its own; the story, and thus history, gets in your way. The only one to do that even halfway successfully was Adalbert Stifter, in the 19th century, with *Indian Summer*: to tell a ... to tell a nature-story, without intrigue, without conflict, without complication. Maybe when one is old or ... I don't know ... when one gets older. But after the events of this century, it's really kind of horrendous to do so. One still wants to try, despite it all, to write a long narrative with no events; but when you try to narrate the landscape without conflict, it slips through your fingers. That's the dramatization of what in *Slow Homecoming* I called the *Raumverbot* ['space prohibited']. You just want to have the landscape and the 'I' – the perceiving, observing, remembering, formulating 'I' – and then history gets in your – I mean, I can only speak for myself – history gets in my way ... and it soon becomes clear that the attempt to render an account only of the earth, or of earthly phenomena, eventually ends in failure, ends in a non-functioning muteness and not a beautiful silence. Maybe it's easier to do that in a poem. But I'm not a poet – that is, not a lyrical poet; and as for the concept of occasional poetry – which constitutes even Goethe's greatness – I simply can't translate it into prose. I noticed that when I ... does this interest you?

HG: Yes.

PH: ... when I was writing *Across*. I really wanted to write an 'occasional prose' – that is, where one sees something, then immediately sits down and writes, without a plan, or structure, or anything preconceived. And I actually realized even at the first

sentence that it just doesn't work. In order to write prose one needs a model, a notation, a structure – structure really just means the recognition of a model.

HG: And the conflict becomes implicated in this.

PH: Yes, the conflict becomes unavoidable...

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HG: I really enjoyed how the first-person narrator [of *Across*] tore down the election poster.

PH: There are also more harmless things than that: for example, these hiking trail markers that are nailed onto trees. That often causes me pain, when I'm in the wilderness and I see these red-white-red trail markers made of styrofoam or fibreboard that are nailed onto trees by hiking clubs – whether it's some Alpine association or whatever. Sometimes when I see that, I bring some pliers with me and I simply rip these trail markers out myself. It's quite difficult because the nails are stuck very deep into the tree, and are all rusted. I don't know if that's bad for the trees, but it's certainly not pretty. And why do I need this fuss about hiking trails in the middle of the civilized world: each person has to find his own path, and will find it. And of course, it's sometimes useful in the high mountains, and it's also even laudable when, for example, boys and girls mark their passages on limestone or granite up there – but not down here, in the lovely lowlands.

HG: In the Black Forest I was also pretty glad to see such markers when there were four or five separate paths leading out from a single clearing.

PH: Yeah sure, sure, but it's also a bit silly when here, in the middle of the city, you see signs like: 'Trans Europe Hiking Path', 'North Sea–Black Sea' or something ... no, that's just silly. But it's also quite irritating. It would be so simple to just leave nature as it is. And besides: getting lost does no harm. Even when using the trail markers I've often gotten lost and ended up somewhere I didn't want to go.

HG: Is it similar with writing: that you sometimes end up somewhere you didn't want to go? Or is this structure that you were speaking of something binding?

PH: Oh no. It's good that you ask that. One needs structures, precisely because they are fruitful when they break down. They set you on a path that is sometimes not walkable. But still, they've set you on the path. I know this, I am convinced of it: that without these familiar structures you can't get started on your way at all – and it's the same thing, it can be felt through reading as well: this tension of the structures breaking down: how it works itself out, how the

breakdown becomes fruitful. This *Raumverbot*, for example in *Slow Homecoming*: that's an exemplary breakdown of a structure. Precisely: this intention (maybe a better word than structure) ... this intention to only accept nature as a subject for narration, only nature and the primordial 'I'. For me what occurs there with the breaking down of this structure, it's still fruitful. I have no idea how else I would have been able to continue with writing, which for a writer is always identical with life itself. And there's another thing, of course: that there's a faith that, through the act of writing, insights will materialize that one hadn't considered at the outset. Without that, a day of writing would be lost for me, without novelty – not in the sense of information, but rather that there, out of the formless vortex of the world, some small form materializes. If that didn't happen during a whole day, just sitting there, I think that on the following day I wouldn't be able to continue. Just sitting down at my desk and writing down what I had already resolved to write, to connect, to realize: that's not sufficient. It's always these two things: the structure, and then this maybe stupid hope that through the work a beautiful detour will appear – that some meaningless thing in the narrative will somehow become a target-thing, or a thing that provides a sense – only for the narrative itself, of course – ... that through the work of writing, an action, that hadn't even been recognized as a specific action – an incident – suddenly finds its place as part of a great occurrence. That's when ... when one feels that this is an activity that has a sense. But to just note down what has already been thought – that functions only when the writing-down revives what has already been thought, or animates it for a first time –, but to simply do that [write down what has already been thought out], that would be, how should I put it, only a renarration of a narrative. [...]

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The tape ends. Part of the conversation, which continued while the tape was being changed, is missing. It apparently addressed the demands made on literature.

HG: ... sure, whether it should is a whole other question; but I can certainly understand it – like how Brecht puts it: whoever describes a factory wall has understood nothing of the factory. Reality is no longer what you see, but rather it's a system of hidden structures, functional connections ...

PH: But naturally, one also wonders – one can really wonder about so much – whether or not the one who describes the factory wall, or an actual factory worker – whether he may learn more about the factory, about his factory life from the description of a factory wall than from a precise description of power structure. I'm really not sure. I'm also not sure if the prospect of describing a factory excites me, if I'd really want to read that: that's just a personal matter. Simone Weil, the Jewish theologian, one can say, who then converted to Catholicism

before the Second World War – she entered the factory as a worker in order to experience it, and wrote her factory journals, and described it from the perspective of those who suffer: all the oppression and all the misfortune and hardship that an assembly line worker has to face, even from his or her own peers. I mean, that’s useful – but I don’t know if my reading begins from usefulness; my reading has always begun somewhere else. – My experience has always begun somewhere else. At times I’ve had to do physical labour and I’ve thought, this will destroy me – I stop thinking, stop dreaming. But at the same time I was never compelled out of indignation to describe this work, or the bondage that goes with it, or to tell a story about it. I would rather read about that in a magazine article, in an essay, or in the newspaper, or let someone tell me about it, and television is good for such things, but not the book, I think. The book is for me always the embodiment of the sun, somehow that’s how it appears to me. The letters, the words are for me ... the sun of the world, and with that you ... you need ... (*firmly*;) you need to do justice to the sun. I just open a book and immerse myself in it and it fortifies me and it gives me eyes and ears, when ... when ... when ... when the sentences are directed by the sun. I don’t mean that in a simple ‘positive’ sense or anything; no: when there’s this longing and this energy present as a design. – But that naturally sounds very pithy. I personally find it all very self-evident, which is why I’m so pithy about it. But I only practice that in writing; in speaking I can only hover around it.

HG: I don’t understand that. First you spoke of the sun as a prototype [*Vorbild*] for what is written, and then you spoke of a design. Is that the same for you?

PH: But the sun provides a prototype, in the literal sense [*Vor-bild* = pre-image]. So when you surrender to the sun, it provides the prototype for what you want to do, and then you make a design that follows this prototype, you understand? – Instead of sun one could ... what could one say? – No, I’ll insist on the word, it uses the least syllables, anything else would take more syllables.

HG: I’m having a hard time comprehending.

PH: And you shouldn’t comprehend it, I mean, not in speaking. I can’t dogmatize, I can just tell about ... For example, Herr Gamper, when I think of the story that I wrote over the past few months* – there wasn’t much sun, it was winter –, and when I think that it will soon become a book, this story, and no one will have read it yet, then for a short time the book belongs only to me, it’s my book that I’ve turned out of myself, and the sun always comes to mind, as if when I open the book, as if, even when no sun is shining, the sun will shine upon it, or we could say the sun shines out of it. A book – and maybe that’s just a dream – in my conception it’s connected with the image of the sun.** The pages, the letters, and the colour of the paper.

* Handke submitted the manuscript for his novel *Die Wiederholung* (*Repetition*) on March 1st, 1986, less than two months before this interview took place.

** ‘Long before sunrise, I saw the valley plunged into another sun, the sun of letters...’ (*Repetition*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. *The Last Books*, 2013.)

HG: Is this connected to the moment of warmth that you alluded to with the Ludwig Hohl quote? [‘Fantasy is just a warming up of what is present.’]

PH: Warmth, clarity, purity, order, the word-for-word, the in-between spaces especially, the pauses, silence, calm. It seems to me that the book, as I understand it, is the embodiment, the human embodiment of this pole star. That’s just in me, it’s my conception. Anyway, it will be wiped away as soon as the first madmen decide to write about it, about what I’ve dreamed up here; it will disappear, and will only come back, if at all, when some translation takes place; then I rediscover what I had written, and this kind of sun-conception comes back. It’s tender, peaceful, and begins to quiver once more. But the solar eclipse will come soon enough. – I’m not expressing these very, very vague and at the same time very deep conceptions well enough, but I think that I can maybe hint at them.

In many cultures the book is seen as something hidden in a cave: the book that is placed in the deepest crevice of a cave as the Book of Life. But for me this doesn’t contradict the sun-conception: that then, maybe after two thousand years, someone enters the cave and sees there in a crevice, just as it’s described in the *Zohar*, the Jewish mystical book, hidden in the deepest crevice of the cave he finds ‘the Book’.

(Pause)

Could I ... how could I say that more clearly?

(Pause)

For me, speechlessness is ... I can’t imagine a worse pain. I always fear this speechlessness, and also the inability to continue, often in the middle of a sentence: that it’s not a matter of course for one sentence to follow another – in writing you must find the Law of Following. One receives these jolts moving from one sentence to the next: from developing, pondering, or also finding [*finden*] (not inventing [*erfinden*]) – these are jolts of warmth. Maybe that’s all connected with sun ... that’s where my parallelism of book and sun comes from, which is a recurring conception.*

(Pause)

Because writing is not just a routine treatment of a story, but is rather an inception and a raising up out of the night, out of the indeterminacy, to see if these shadow lines can really be transcended. And for me, each sentence is really a light of the world: that is, it brings a condition or a situation – ‘situation’ is better – into the light of the world and then links these ... these ... these structures of detail: of course they’re not just details as with the Impressionists, but rather they’re detailed structures, linked together to form an ostensible whole. And certainly, you can also say that it’s just an illusion; but what’s important is that the interconnections be correct. It’s true that every artwork is just a successful, maintainable illusion, and maybe it needs to be added: a reproducible illusion, reproducible for every reader

* “‘I’d like to tell you an idea.’ But how can an idea be told? There came a jolt (the “ugliness” of this word has often been held up to me, but once again there is no other way of saying it). It grew light? It widened? It took hold of me? It vibrated? It blew warm? It cleared? It was day again at the end of the day? No, the idea resists my narrative urge. It provides me with no picture to serve as an excuse. And yet it was corporeal, more corporeal than any image or representation has ever been; it synthesised all the body’s dispersed senses into energy. Idea means this: It provided no picture, only light.’ (*Essay on the Successful Day*. Translated by Krishna Winston. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1994.)

– yet at the same time it’s an illusion that doesn’t deceive you, as with pop songs or advertisements. You also need to be able to stand by it, you need to be able to account for every word, as well as its placement. It’s certainly a *Gegenwelt* to the world of news, but even though there are no catastrophes and no deaths and no sicknesses, this *Gegenwelt* is still a stable world that is familiar to everyone; one has to give oneself over to it. One has to have faith in the medium: that is, in the language, in the form. That can’t be demanded of everyone. But whoever wants to play along, as it were – or purports to play along, by writing about a book – he must give himself over to the manner of the one who wrote the book, otherwise he has no right to write about it. He must play along, in complete earnestness. [...]

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HG: [In your writing] there are also formulations that remind me of Idealist philosophy: ‘The world that thinks itself’, and so forth.

PH: Yes, I’ve also experienced that in writing. I tried to account for it formally. But it’s never a dogma, it’s just steps or stations: stations of writing and of thinking. I didn’t know where it would lead me. I also willingly and almost thankfully let myself be led away by every detour. One of the most significant sentences of *Slow Homecoming* for me is the one that takes place in New York, before he meets the stranger, where it says: ‘He had time and made detours.’ I was so happy that for once I was able to write such a short sentence. (*Laughs*). But I find that one very significant, also the conjunction: ‘He had time’ – someone else might have written it differently, to make it clearer: ‘and therefore he made detours.’ I find it very beautiful: ‘He had time and made detours.’ Period. I wanted nothing to be justified, but rather to have the rational pulse in each sentence, even in one as reflective as that.

HG: And that’s why the connections are so difficult?

PH: Right, I almost couldn’t go on; it was such an effort, each sentence, it was like a festive yet calm music, where you don’t know what the next bar will bring – where you need to lead the subsequent bar out of the previous one. I always went back, tried again to experience the sentence, in order to go on, to find the bridge. I also mentioned that in *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*, where it says: ‘In order to write a sentence, I first need to completely calm myself down, and then the excitement needs to come from the experience of the object or situation – and then, in order to develop that into a form, I need to completely calm myself down once more.’ So it’s this tripartite procedure. And then I added impertinently: ‘Now you finally see how difficult writing is.’ (*Laughs*). I was sometimes pleased when, after a fifteen-hour workday, I had written ten lines. I thought: yeah, better than none, at least. I need to go on, I must go on, I must go on day by day.

HG: But that's not your average writing speed, is it?

PH: Oh no, earlier I was much more brash; when I was writing *The Goalie's Anxiety*, that was a hundred and twenty lines a day.

HG: And with *Slow Homecoming*, were there especially difficult periods, when you could only manage ten lines?

PH: Or none at all, it was complete muteness. Imagine that: seven, eight hours long sitting at your desk – and you're not distracted, you only want to grasp the object, concentrate yourself – and the object has no language, and it remains without language. Maybe one word lights up, then another lights up: then you have, maybe, if you're completely calm ... – I mean, the danger of panic is very near, that you won't be able to continue at all; not only not continue with this sentence, but never again go forward: if you don't manage it, you'll never write again. And then one or two words arrive, and you think, ah, these words, they belong in the sentence, and then that's just how it works, that from these two words the pulsing sentence has taken form. I don't mean that one waits to hear a voice, which would be ideal: that one just listens and writes along with it – the ear does belong to it, though – that one, as it were ... all at once the rhythm of the sentence takes form, before the words. And from the rhythm – how sentence and clause and everything functions, there forms the ... the ... the ... how do you say ... the object, to which one is able to do justice through the pulsing and the position of the words. It's basically, if you take prose seriously, it's just as important and just as difficult and precise a process as writing poetry.

HG: Like how Hölderlin only noted the verse meter for certain lines ...

PH: I was just thinking of Hölderlin; but I can assure you that with *Slow Homecoming*, or really with any sentence that I've written in prose – and I am a prose writer – ... that it's exactly the same thing. And if the rhythm doesn't take form, then not even ... then you don't have the object either: you've lost the object ... you don't have the ideal image – which is the prerequisite –, you don't have the ideal image and thus you can't contemplate anything. Pure thinking: I can't do that – I'm not a philosopher and thus can't make a process of thinking. I can't bring thought into a sequence, I just can't manage to do that ... and it's also not my thing. I have to be able to contemplate something. When I don't have the ideal image, I can't contemplate anything, and no pulsing, no rhythm comes from the contemplation, so I sit there like a poor sap (*laughs*). [...]

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PH: Simply put, it was also a naming problem. In the beginning [of *Slow Homecoming*] I stripped all places of their names; I never wrote:

'Alaska' or 'Yukon' or 'USA' or 'San Francisco' or 'Anchorage'. My problem then became centred around names, naming. It was this purifying mythology that I pursued in *Slow Homecoming*, where I left off the names and just had the river be 'river', the Great North be 'the Great North' – but then, as I approached so-called civilization and history, this practice gradually became more difficult and ... more improper, more impossible, more unreal. Not calling the metropolis 'New York' was a big problem, I could no longer mythologize that. And then, when I planned to have Sorger return to Europe, how would I do the nameless landscape there? That doesn't work at all. I would have to say: 'Kitzbühel' or ... I would have had to continue differently. Not being able to use the street names was already a problem in New York. So I ended up using them anyway, and I felt like the story finished at that point (*laughs*) ... when I say 'Madison Avenue', 'East River' or 'New Jersey'. I had planned to complete the story with no names, no place-names. [...] And then I realized that I had to stop, or else I wouldn't be able to go on ... I would have to write a second volume where it says: on the 17th of June he arrived in Trieste, at the Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia ... the roller-skaters there, and so on. That's why *The Lesson of Mont Saint-Victoire* begins immediately with names. But that was a real about-face for me, and it was also a relief: to be able to, and to be allowed to use names. *Across* is also an orgy of names: because I can say 'Salzburg'. I could never, for example ... not until I turned forty – this is kind of funny – never was I able to use Austrian place names in a story. In *The Goalie's Anxiety* the word 'Naschmarkt' is used once, referring to the one in Vienna, but the name 'Vienna' doesn't appear – that was impossible for me then. *Across* was the first time in my life that I was able to write: 'Salzburg', 'Almkanal', 'Untersberg'. For me, this meant defying my conviction that this was no longer possible. And to this day I still think: that doesn't work. But I did it anyway. That's also something very important for writing, that each new progression transgresses into something impossible. In *Short Letter, Long Farewell*, I began with the word 'I': having a first-person narrator that says 'I' ... and I thought, you just can't do that anymore, even seen from a literary-historical viewpoint, and then I did it anyway. And it's precisely in doing what is wrong – for me this was a realization – ... doing what is wrong not to be contrary, but simply because there's a desire and at the same time a need to do so: this is essential in order to go forward, in order to continue writing. When one is aware that one is doing something wrong, and that one is compelled to and at the same time longs to do it, it can become something fruitful. Always following the plan that one had devised at the outset: that simply leads to idleness and muteness, or to serialism. – I'll mention once more the example of saying 'Salzburg': to write an Austrian name, a name from my country, in a story: that always seemed ridiculous to me, embarrassing – I can't say why. 'Paris' was okay, as in *A Moment of True Feeling*, or to say 'Arizona'. But then in my country, to refer to Salzburg, or the Drava, or to say 'Carinthia' without feeling disillusioned, it's a very fine line.

HG: Is it perhaps a matter of being in a position to accept your own history, to accept that you're Austrian?

PH: Yeah, I wonder. I often say that I'm Austrian simply out of spite.

HG: But accepting a history doesn't have to mean being thrilled to be Austrian – but more like the way in which Peter Bichsel is Swiss.

PH: Yes, I accept it and I affirm it.

HG: Only as a contingency that needs to be dealt with.

PH: I can't explain it. With the new book that I've written, the mere prospect of using a village name from the area where I was born, or to refer to a small city by name, or even just 'Klagenfurt'...

HG: You've done that?

PH: I did that. I thought: I just have to do it, I can't just say 'the capital city' or ... I just do it, or I write 'Maribor' or 'Marburg' or 'Ljubljana' or 'Laibach', I just do it. Each time I did it I felt a slight reluctance, I never really got used to it. I can't totally explain it. Maybe I can clarify it a bit: someone like Heimito von Doderer inserted all these place names from Vienna, inserted them properly, with tremendous care and self-awareness; and then I just dash them off very quickly, right? In *Across*, all the place names are just lightly dashed off, or at least that's how it seems to me. And I think that a partial explanation is maybe that Doderer was living there, he really occupied these places and these names, and thus they belong to him, and maybe if I had stayed in one place – I mean I've always moved around ... I pulled up my Austrian roots and changed my residence every two years at most, from here to there to there – and now that I've lived here for almost seven years in the same place, I've acquired not only a visual sense for the place, but also a sense for names. That's an explanation that I'll offer myself.

HG: It could also be that, for Doderer, the memories that are connected with the places are less painful ...

PH: Yes.

HG: ... or are maybe not painful at all.

PH: Right. I mean, it's also one's habitual paths over the decades, and the changing light ... they remain valid for him, maybe like what you can observe with people as they age, the seasons and the light. I also think of someone like Hermann Lenz: he can repeat himself so much, he can repeat himself over and over, and simply through the slight variation, the repetitions become a great epic movement; and that comes from his having grown up in a single house, in a single city ...

that he always repeated his habitual paths, that he wasn't a traveller, that he was a real homebody ... and from his affection for his parents – which is really a gratitude, insofar as it's an affection for those who begot him. [...] But certainly it has to do with love for humanity and self-esteem, and also social awareness – that you don't constantly change your acquaintances, but instead always keep your eyes on the same people (a nice phrase), and also to – what verb belongs here? – exercise, from *exercitium*: exercise the patient repetition of the everyday ... and also just getting older. I've always felt pulled away; I've always thought that wherever I am, I'm just there provisionally. But still, even now, when I pass by a house I sometimes think: they've installed themselves there forever, until death – and I feel a slight uneasiness: in one house, in one spot, forever, until death... to have that be predetermined. Then I see the plants and trees in front of the house – like the oleander here in front of the neighbours' house, which is in rows that are almost tree-height –, and then in this moment one thinks, yeah, that's really how it is, they've set themselves up there forever, the oleander was once this tall (shows), and now it's the height of two men ... it always makes me think.

HG: Farmers in the canton of Bern used to plant a tree when a child was born, and the tree would then grow bigger along with the child. – But I would see it differently than you: to live in a house, with the oleander growing in front, that can also mean a life-long freedom.

PH: Yes, I didn't mean to say otherwise; this feeling was also one of admiration, it wasn't just this feeling of mild revulsion: they've set themselves up there for the rest of their lives; it was something else...

HG: You mentioned Hermann Lenz earlier. He's a writer that concretely recounts historical events, the Second World War, but despite this his narration doesn't become a series of historical dates. [...]

PH: You're right about Lenz: [...] that everything is one – it's the saying *hen kai pan*, everything is one in his writing: the puddle, the running dog, and historical events, history. I find it tremendous how he managed that, and still manages it – although naturally, there is an interpretation contained in his historical events, and also there's his position of the dreaming conservative, that's very clear: I always had a kind of hesitancy with that, because I don't at all ... I mean, sometimes I think: yeah, am I a conservative? or what am I? Am I a rebel, am I a raging maniac? I just don't know. It changes with me, and somehow it never resolves itself, it can't be resolved. I can't make up my mind to be a conservative because I'm not living in the society in which I would like to live. I also can't decide to become a pure social-democrat, even though I see the socialist idea as the only social idea I've experienced that will always remain fruitful. Doing so [becoming a social-democrat] would be hugely restrictive for me, and I also wouldn't find any language there that I would understand, nor

* ‘But how would it ever be possible to “narrate” forms which knew no “little by little”? [...]

“Falsification!” But this was no longer an accusation; rather, it was a salutary idea: he, Sorger, would write the Gospel of Falsification; and he triumphed at the thought of being a falsifier among falsifiers. (An isolated individual was capable only of a patchwork.)’ (*Slow Homecoming*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1985.)

** ‘I could never have described myself as a believer, in childhood still less than now; but didn’t I, very early in my life, have a “picture of pictures”? [...]

This picture was an object in a receptacle in a large room. The room was the parish church, the object was the chalice with the white wafers, the receptacle was a gilded tabernacle, which opened and closed like a revolving door and was kept in a recess in the altar. This so-called holy of holies was for me the *reality of realities*.

And this reality had its recurring moment: the moment when, by virtue of the words of the consecration, the particles of bread, which had, in a manner of speaking, become God’s body, were enclosed in the tabernacle along with the chalice. The tabernacle was opened; already wrapped in its cloth, the object, the cup, was placed in the glorious colours of its silken grotto; the tabernacle closed – and behold the golden radiance of its rounded exterior!

That is how I see Cézanne’s *réalisations* [...]: a transformation and sheltering of things endangered – not in a religious ceremony, but in the form of faith that was the painter’s secret.’ (*The Lesson of Mont Saint-Victoire*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1985.)

anything musical (in the old sense), nor any love for art – it sounds a bit strange ... Nor can I see myself as ‘alternative’, since there’s no tradition there, and over the years tradition has become the most important thing for me – certainly also as a result of what I learned of ancient languages as a student, and an immense attraction and an almost filial feeling towards all ancient epics. (*Inhalation and heavy exhalation*). Yes, the only thing I know is that I want to study the traditions, reading them, as an amateur naturally, and leading them forwards, or simply affirming them. In this I’m probably ... a conservative, or what? ... I can’t even say it, not even once.

HG: It seems to me that tradition is a reservoir for you, and not...

PH: It is transmission [*die Überlieferung*].

HG: Yes, but not as a linear development, but rather as things that are all there concurrently: so that Virgil is concurrent with Goethe, Thucydides, Stifter: in a non-historical space.

PH: For the most part, yes. [...]

* * *

HG: Something else remained problematic to me relating to the ‘Gospel of Falsification’*: I can’t manage to reconcile it with *réalisation*, which you identify in *The Lesson of Mont Saint-Victoire* as the aim of writing. ** *Réalisation* is not a falsification – or is the moment of falsification actually included within it?

PH: Certainly, *réalisation* is not falsification; it means to do justice to the appearance of the object. I mean ‘Gospel’ in the literal sense of ‘good news’: the good news of falsification – I can only repeat myself: that it has nothing to do with a parallelism to the experienced object; rather, falsification is just the simulation of unity – at least that’s how I’ve experienced it – ... and also, maybe, something deeper: the beginning of a desire to do justice to the experienced world through writing. In the beginning – yes, that’s true: at each new beginning I felt that I didn’t have the right – that’s strange, it’s a kind of anti-mystical tendency I have, to feel that I don’t have the right to affirm unity through writing – which is basically what writing means to me. – I’m not saying it well, not precisely enough. Just to sit down and begin, to utilize the imperfect tense, for example, to narrate, and to write all that down: every time there is a threshold that must be overcome – each time a new one, a higher one – and I believe this threshold is a forbidden portal – not ‘believe’, but rather I feel it. Which is something I can’t really explain to myself. When I began work this past autumn I would suffer from cold sweats all night long, not because I had written something that I couldn’t stand by, but simply because I had written something. And then it went away after three or four days. You could say I was like a pilot in his cockpit, in

that I had to just set myself straight, to realize that I was flying the plane, that I could fly the plane. But the first few days were odd, to say the least. I can't explain it. Maybe some doctor or psychoanalyst could – I think some psychoanalyst who had studied the history of cultures... who was also an ethnologist: I think he could explain to me where that comes from. But I don't really want to look into it too much (*laughs*).

HG: A kind of hesitation. With each work you're entering an area that is unknown to you.

PH: It's more than hesitation. As I said to you before: this anti-mystical tendency ... it's like I had been ripped in two; mysticism is always a kind of unity, a unity between two separated things, or at least an ostensible unity (which is nevertheless effective) between two things that are actually separated. And in this case, the separation ... it's not the state of being separated, it's the act of separation: it's an act, the act of becoming separated. You don't experience an eternal state of being separated, rather you experience the act of separation anew – now I'm saying you as if you were I.

HG: Whenever you begin to write?

PH: At each new beginning, with increasingly intensification. That's how I've experienced it. I would rather not experience it at all, not even once. It's a bit like this *Lord Chandos* story, which I've never totally understood. I've never experienced it as philosophy or as orientation, but rather in practice ... that the words fall from the paper, that's my ... I mean, with the typewriter ... I manage to get that far, but the letters really just fall down, they aren't solid, they don't get stamped in; I can still tap away, and then I can gradually become convinced by words and by their coherence. That's how it begins. And this beginning gets increasingly longer, that's my experience. I need more time to overcome this initial separation.

HG: And through the impetus of writing this separation can be reversed?

PH: Yes, kind of like someone who's had a bad accident, and who then gets right back into the car in order to not be always afraid of getting into a car. A banal comparison – not necessarily a car, whatever; anyone can come up with a more fitting example of an accident.

HG: And that's connected to this ...

PH: It's connected with *Slow Homecoming*, with what's described there as 'space prohibited': that nothing is valid anymore, that nothing is describable anymore; spaces can't be described anymore, there are no more spaces that are describable.

HG: And you've experienced this since then?

* 'So I fled. Not from dread of the tunnel's history, not from the silence or the stifling air, or for fear of a cave-in or a lineman – I'd have been only too glad if the lineman had grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and cursed in me every known and unknown language – but in a single impulse of horror at the otherworldly speechlessness that was pressing in on me, for over and above bodily death it meant destruction of the soul, which, now that I am trying to speak of it, is recurring more violently, more devastatingly than ever. Then I had only to run a few steps to be out in the open, whereas today I am confined to the tunnel; there is no escape, no niche, no parapet, and my only way to humankind is to equip the objects of a mute planet, whose prisoner I have become through wishing (*mea culpa*) to be a storyteller, with eyes that look at me forgivingly.' (*Repetition*, *ibid.*)

PH: Yes, exactly. You could also call it ... maybe it's the fear of speechlessness.*

HG: With which Lauffer threatens Sorger.

PH: Yes. It's not silence; speechlessness is not this beautiful silence that one wishes to have and to generate through writing. (*Soundlessly*.) Speechlessness. I think I've already said that. It's probably one of the worst experiences that a person ... I've experienced it often from childhood onwards, not only in writing, but also in speaking or in social existence. It's very strange, these attacks of what I think is called autism: that's no fun.

HG: How's it called? Autism?

PH: Autism. When one hears people as if they were behind a glass wall, one hears them and can no longer move, thinking that what's being talked about is horribly ridiculous and offensive, and not being able to join in the conversation, nor to intervene, nor to yell out ... The others don't notice, and continue to talk even more banally and more stupidly, at least that's how it seems. But one is completely unable to act or speak and just wants someone to ask: *hey, what's wrong with you*, or ... – not in that sense, but rather that someone would find the magic word that would then free one from this glass mountain in which one is imprisoned. That's often how it's been for me. And it's still like that; right in the middle of speaking sometimes I think, 'what's this?' and I can't go on at all. Everything's lost, it can be quite dramatic. So it's not only the case with writing.

HG: But you feel it more strongly with writing.

PH: Yes, certainly, there's more at stake there. In speaking I can just go away, and it's generally not a case of the glass mountain.

HG: So the experience is not engendered by writing, but just manifests itself more intensely there.

PH: I think that's how it is, yes. Somehow it comes forth in a more exemplary, and naturally more dramatic manner; it also becomes something formal there. – You look as though you know what I'm talking about.

HG: Yes.

PH: One can only speak of something, or sketch something out, if one is instinctively convinced that this is something everyone actually knows; and I think that's my delusion: that everything I experience deeply, and everything that I believe is something, I mean, precisely

because it gives me this impulse, something that everyone knows (*laughs*), and over and over I'm confronted with complete and utter non-comprehension.

HG: But in order to write, you need to be convinced that it's not only relevant for you.

PH: Yes, of course I need that, otherwise I wouldn't write a single word.

HG: Is this connected to the threshold metaphor you mentioned? – that you need and desire to re-enter this forbidden space?

PH: That's not connected; the threshold-experience was for me very concrete and also very small. That was back with *Slow Homecoming*. [...] This experience occurred not in fear of confronting a threshold, but rather in the appeasement of being able to cross over a threshold, towards other people. The experience of the thing, of the object-threshold was also so strong that it shook my entire body. [...] I had just been fumbling about, and then sat down – I intentionally use the word 'sitting', which is often how it works with mystics, or with the enlightened or the pseudo-enlightened – I practised sitting, enduring a single place, only moving in language, which resisted me: and then I would stand up, and step into another world – in this case, for example, I would step over a wholly inconspicuous threshold into a kitchen, where I would encounter not the world of letters or the world of language, but rather the world of smells, of things, of sounds. That was a ... that was a – as I said: that was the appeasement. And that was also the realization that these two things belong together: the letter-world and the world of things that one can touch. [...]

HG: You search nature and history for the objectification of your experience, and the traces you find then help you to reactivate these experiences?

PH: They make experience more describable. They also help me to translate that to the external world – I think 'translate' is the right word. To take sentiments [*Empfindungen*], which are speechless, and by way of individual clarities, give them language, or however it may be done.

HG: And that then retroactively strengthens these sentiments.

PH: Yes, it is through this that one recovers sentiment. If I were to only write sentiment, that would be nothing. Without objects sentiment is not language. – But without sentiment, it doesn't work; sentiment is the starting-point. The problem is just that sentiment needs to strike someone who can then turn around and look outwards. That's also something that I try to practice: that with each sentiment

I try to look outwards, or I try to maintain my observation of the corresponding thing.

HG: Doesn't the sentiment automatically collide with the image?

PH: Sometimes it's like that, but there are some sentiments that are just – and I don't want to use the word in a pejorative sense – ... that are purely inward. And then some sentiments force one to turn outward and find the correspondence, find the corresponding thing. But some sentiments completely close off a person. And then as long as he has a certain amount of self-knowledge, he can command himself to look outwards. And there he'll see this and that thing that then describe his sentiment to him. It's a complicated thing, one could almost make a casuistry from it, like in Spinoza's *Ethics*, but that's not my thing. [...]

* * *

PH: One's manner of reading changes throughout life. I believe that I've only now reached a point where I've finally learned to read. Or at least that I've realized how I used to read. Not even when I was reading Stifter could I really read. It was often ... for example, Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or Hölderlin's *Hyperion*: I read them at the wrong time, I didn't understand anything of them, and I also didn't understand, as Ludwig Hohl says, that different authors have different reading speeds. The reading speed I had earlier was much different than the one I have now, which I think is finally the one that suits me best. I now only want to be able to, to be allowed to read slowly.

HG: And you write this way as well. That brings to mind: one student found this slow tempo an imposition: how at the beginning of *Slow Homecoming*, with these long sentences, you force this slowness onto the reader, like in a Wagner opera.

PH: I can understand that very well. At twenty I probably would have stopped reading after two sentences.

HG: Yes, one can only either stop reading or fully give oneself over to it. But to superficially take it in, 'informative reading', as it's called, that doesn't work.

PH: Nor in the evening before going to sleep, reading in bed, that doesn't work at all.

HG: Carefully reading a few sentences, that works. But so quickly...

PH: You also can't force anyone to do anything. You can't say: you must read at this precise speed.

HG: But otherwise it doesn't work; one has to read at that tempo.

PH: But I really can assure anyone, if they give it a try, if they want to and are able to read so slowly, they'll get something out of it.

HG: Yes, then and only then. And that shouldn't be a reproach!

PH: I have a great need: not simply to read slowly, but rather to slow myself down through reading. But it's more than that. If it doesn't work that way, then I lose all pleasure in reading. When I start scanning again, devouring the pages like I used to, then I start to feel my limbs and extremities becoming cold – which is for me a physical sign, when I get cold – only the cheeks remain hot. Then I know that I'm not reading correctly, or that the book's not the right one for me. But then when everything becomes warm: the heart, the mind, the senses, out to the smallest fingertips; when I also stall – not falter: when I'm able to stall, to pause, then my reading is an all-embracing perception, then it's ... then out of this self-immersion there arises a vision, a completely natural, logical vision of the outermost world (not just the outer world). For me that's just ... it's completely organic ... for me that's the only way it works with certain things – so that I can ponder them, pore over them. Although there are moments of longing for the old speedy 'page-turner' reading – not 'longing': rather nostalgia for the page-turner era. Then one puts away the Hölderlin poem, or whatever ancient text, and one picks up something by an author like Simenon, and for a while it's like being in a speedboat. But for the duration (and I say that expressly: for the *duration*), the other kind of reading – the reading I have now learned, have now acquired – is the only kind that deserves the name.

Translated from the German by Nathaniel Davis; annotated with passages from Handke's books by Philip Baber.

Originally published as *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1990).

This translation was commissioned and published by The Last Books in 2015.

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