

Taking a walk through childhood

Novel of the week

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Repetition by Peter Handke.
Trans. Ralph Manheim.
Methuen. £12.95.

WHAT 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 book. In current German the word means "filiation," but Handke excavates it, Rilke-fashion, and uncovers the meaning "childscape". At one level the whole novel is an attempt to recapture 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 work, such as *Der Hausierer* 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, seemed to fill its own space and establish its own rhythm, and when even the whole story seemed mysteriously to acquire authority and to stand as solidly in the world as a tree or a rock, so it has been with Handke. He has, in his later work, appeared to make a conscious effort to escape from the debilitating awareness of his own lack of authority or authenticity, and tried to write as

though somehow the story were already written, had, in a sense, always been there. This has made his work teeter dangerously on the edge of the *faux-naïf*, but the sense of the seriousness (indeed, the profundity) of his aims has saved him. Repetition is the triumphant climax to his career so far.

In 1960 Filip Kobal, a twenty-year-old peasant from Carinthia in South East Austria, crosses the border into Slovenia in search of his brother Gregor. The father's family had come from Slovenia, where an ancestor was said to have led a popular revolt and been exiled to the North for his pains. Gregor, older by some twenty years than Filip, had disappeared in the region in 1943, after deserting from the German army and perhaps joining 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/Slovene 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 in Austria, and Filip is no exception. But once across the border he immediately feels at ease, even in the nondescript border town of Jesenice: "The free world, it was generally 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 Homecoming*, 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 the Bohinj, in the course of 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 shelter by 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 language and to his own body, learns what it means to live in the world: "Watching the old woman, I learned to pause in my movements; the transitions, 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 "home." However, 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 paean of praise to storytelling, and a prayer to 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 sentimentality we find

in John Berger's recent work is first of all Handke's uncanny ability to convey what it is this urge for pattern has to overcome, and secondly his extraordinary attention to detail, historical, geographical, geological, botanical and linguistic. (No review can possibly convey the richness of Filip's meditation on his brother's two books, or Handke's magical and musical way with images.)

Against the banalisations of Romanticism, that strain in it which celebrates the idea of "the folk" and "the 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 one of the most dignified and moving evocations I have ever read of what it means to be alive, to walk upon this earth.