Repetitions
Scott Abbott, Žarko Radaković

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UNDER THE STONE BRIDGE

ŽARKO RADAKOVIĆ

TRANSLATED BY IVANA DJORDJEVIĆ
We crossed the border about seven p.m.
Around 7.30: on the road to Jesenice. An accident.
Arrived at Bohinj about nine p.m. ("Why wouldn’t Dr Živojin Dacić let me bring paper for Julije Knifer?")

Scott got up early today. He had a shower. ("The water was warm,” he said.)
We discussed the problem of “standing” in the work of Rilke and Handke (standing beneath a tree by the lake). “Heidegger talks about ‘standing’ in An Introduction to Metaphysics,” said Scott. In the text Repetition, by Peter Handke, we looked for passages that referred to the problem of standing. Scott began by reading aloud a passage from page 141: “Mit grossen Schritten, als sei ich der Entschluss in Person, ging ich in die Schalterhalle und kaufte eine Fahrkarte; mit grossen Schritten, wie einer, der endlich weiss, dass er etwas nicht mehr für sich allein tut, lief ich durch die Unterführung zum hintersten Bahnsteig. . . .”5 It was a passage that, in my opinion, had to do with

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5“With long strides, like decision incarnate, I went into the station and bought
“motion.” Scott didn’t claim that it was about standing, but he was not
convinced that it was about “motion” either. For a while I talked about
Robert Walser. Then I thought long about Knifer. Then about
Brinkmann. Then about Šalamun. (I didn’t think about Šekularac.)

The previous evening we had “stood” (“for a while”) by the lake.
We stared long at the water that hardly seemed to move. At one point,
however, Scott said that the water “moved.” In my opinion, the water
was slick (“as a mirror”). To the left, under a stone bridge, the river
could be heard flowing. Out there (“to the south”)—something you
could only imagine in the dark—the water “rolled.” There, the lake,
drained, away. Immediately, the waves turned silence into noise.
said. (“It is now completely dark,” I failed to say. I noticed. I saw.) The
mountains looked, like a wall, or, a curtain, or merely ships “that stand
. . . at anchor.”

For breakfast we had “fried eggs.” She was friendly: the owner of
the hotel. Scott drank tea. I drank “coffee with milk.” She even charged
us the price for the room we had agreed on the night before.

I talked while we ate: “He started by teasing his girlfriend . . . Then
he got scared . . . Late that night he was arrested . . . In the morning he
phoned . . . While he talked about the time he had spent at the police
station, I talked about the time I had spent with him . . . He seemed to
be trying to tell me something else . . . Me too, I meant to tell him
something else . . . We exchanged good-byes and hung up . . .” Scott
listened carefully, observing me as I, looking past him, observed
through the window a policeman who was looking inside through the
window, observing Scott. The moment my eyes met his, he would
concentrate on the food, or the waitress. The moment his eyes met
mine, I would concentrate on the policeman. The moment I looked at
Scott, he would concentrate on me.

The previous evening I had had a row with the waiter. He would
not serve us. We arrived tired, and hungry (and mud-splattered).
Uncivil words aroused a most unpleasant feeling in me. Yes, the waiter
actually swore at us. In the meantime I “went mad.” I immediately felt
like “pouncing” upon that man. I looked at his hair: it was “greasy.” (I
remembered Dr. “Živojin Dacić”: in this kind of situation he would
start “to swear” “at once.”) Then I saw myself as a foreigner: he has just

a ticket; with long strides, like a man who knows at last that what he is doing is
not for himself alone, I took the underpass to the far platform . . . .”: Handke, Repetition, trans. Manheim, 102.
arrived, “from Germany.” I felt guilty. I wanted to defend my people from “the western invasion.” I turned to Scott. The sun had long since set. Scott was silent the whole time. He watched the table with raw fish “on plates.” I thought: “How do you feel now?” I looked, most probably, “like a madman.” Scott was silent. He looked “as though plunged” “in ice-cold water.” I uttered, for a few seconds, “no words.” Scott’s lips didn’t move. I saw gravity in his eyes. And equanimity. Discomposure? Disappointment? “Yet only minutes ago he had talked about Rilke,” and about “Standing,” “so excitingly.” (As if to say, “this is my life.”) (In a telephone conversation once, “Dr. Dacić” was so “agitated” that he could not even complete individual sentences and string them together; instead he would break off halfway through each one and immediately start the next one, so that in the place of “discourse” there was a frantic succession of “breaks,” and his “story” was a series of, say, breaks, “gaps,” “fragments” and “junk,” with “huge chasms yawning” between them into which you, as the listener, would immediately fall, while the speaker always remained “stalled,” while the listener, “desperately” trying to join in the conversation, called out “as though from an abyss” into which more and more broken words kept falling and interrupting the answers you had embarked on, which, just like your discontinuous answers, also returned to “the hole” where you stood for a long time: first “lost,” then desperate, then “zany,” and, at last, an Artist, for, it was only by “intervening” that you endured—by imagination, the only tool available to your muteness, bringing together junk, constructing, working, leveling, amidst pervasive disarray, the solid ground, and erecting a wondrous, almost unreal building that emerged “from the Hole,” becoming more and more solid, clearer and clearer, until, “at last,” it detached itself entirely from its architect; and went on growing, of its own will, by self-extension, while its hapless and unwitting architects, Speaker and Listener, You and Him, became integral parts of it: for instance, the one became a Chimney and the other a Gutter; the one a Staircase, the other a Terrace; the one a Garage, the other an Attic; and so on; and so forth.) I had seen the same agitation on Scott’s face once already, before we had set out on our journey. At the time we were discussing the subject of “Handke and women.” We were reading together an article published in a supplement to the German weekly Die Zeit, liberally illustrated with photographs of the Author and his girlfriend. Although I was embarrassed (on whose behalf?) by the yellow-press approach to the serious and troubled life of the artist, whom, by the way, I knew personally, I was willing to see elements of journalistic experimen-
tation in this article. So, I concealed my agitation. Scott, for his part, was perfectly calm. And grave. And stern. (Unlike me, who was “agitated.”)

Right now it is pouring rain. Scott is sitting on the hotel terrace and writing in his Diary. I photograph him. He raises his head. Pensively, he gazes into the distance.

I talked for a while about the impossibility of storytelling. Before that, I had read a passage from page 47 of Handke’s Repetition, and before that, a passage from page 15. I insisted on narrative-less narration. I immediately adduced the passage from page 15 in support of my position. Here is the quotation:


I was so absorbed in the reading that I saw even Scott as part of the text: He recited it personally. In my voice. From his own belly . . . he “stood” and listened carefully . . . I moved to page 47 of the book. There were a series of descriptions there of sensations with, I explained, not a single event. And even if there had been any, they would immediately have been “reduced” by the sensory-perceptive apparatus of the subject. I said: “Standing is motion in depth. Walking is always

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⁶ “. . . falling-into-one-another’s-arms, loving, being fond of one another, as a constant, forbearing yet unreserved, calm yet exclamatory, clarifying and illuminating telling. . . . And what was I telling? . . . Neither incidents nor events, but mere impressions, a sight, a sound, a smell. The jet of the little fountain across the street, the red of the newspaper kiosk, the exhaust fumes of—the heavy trucks—once I told her about them, they ceased to exist in themselves and merged with one another. And the teller was not I, it was experience itself”: Handke, Repetition, trans. Manheim, 15.
movement and concatenation ‘along the horizontal axis.’” Scott talked about the writer’s static impulse. “To stop and remain standing!” he said. . . . At one point thunder was heard. . . . Nunc stans. . . . I asked him what he now thought of “Postmoder...
manager of the biggest and least productive enterprise in the country, and still to be unaware that Dylan has been packed off before his time as a politician who has gone up shit creek?” . . . No! . . . You cunt! . . . I want!: Gentle concatenation! Tender continuation!—not of events, but of perceptions! and sensations! thoughts! and feelings! . . . Storytelling must be! a tailoring! (“Screw you, shitheads!”?) and a composing! in which the narrator! becomes! a hero! just like his listeners! Because he is! UnObtrusive! Because he is no! LawGiver!” . . . I turned to page forty-eight of Repetition, and I read that bit where the hero, Filip Kobal, Tells the children a Story, “with the help of certain paraphernalia.” “Which, actually, ‘have a calming effect.’” And I thought, along with the text: “Hier versuchte ich mich . . . als Erzähler; rieb mitunter ein Streichholz an, schlug zwei Steine gegeneinander, blies in die zur Hohlkugel geformten Hände; kam dabei freilich über das Beschwören von Abläufen—dem Gehen von Klumpfüssen, dem Anschwellen von Wasser, dem Sichnähern eines Irrlichts—nie hinaus. Die Zuhörer wollten auch gar keine Handlung, die Abläufe allein taten es schon.”

In the end, I merely gave the waiter a reproachful look, turned towards the exit, and went to bed. The waiter did not turn to look at me. He took no note of me at all. At one point he may have given Scott Abbott a once-over. Inquisitive. “From top to toe.” For it was clear—as I suddenly realized—that Scott was a stranger here.

Clouds of smog. The sky above the ironworks. The station. A supermarket. A tall building. No picture of Tito hangs in the station bar. The Belgrade weekly information magazine (“NIN”), at the station newsstand, does not contain Velikić’s review of Handke’s The Lesson of Mont-Sainte Victoire in my Serbo-Croat translation. Before the entrance to the waiting room: gypsies.

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7 Cf. Žarko Radaković, Tübingen (Belgrade: Pan Dušicki, 1990), 53.
8 “I would try my hand as a storyteller. From time to time, I would strike a match, tap two stones together, blow into my cupped hands. Actually, I never did more than evoke sounds and sights: clubfeet walking, a stream swelling, a will-o’-the-wisp coming closer. And my listeners were not eager for a story, they were satisfied with my evocations”: Handke, Repetition, trans. Manheim, 32.
As soon as I ordered coffee (in a downtown restaurant), I knew: this was to be the beginning of a text about a restaurant which will tell of the restaurant where I ordered coffee and where men had neatly trimmed hair, still wet from combing. The waiter had a thin, clipped mustache. The short sleeves of his shirt were rolled up.

There are red reflections on the ceiling, from the whisky bottles above the bar.

I ask myself: “Where could it be, the grammar school once attended by my ‘vanished’ hero, friend, and brother, Peter Handke?” The reply was provided by the music that spread through the room, and the bass tone beat against my heart

as a carpet-beater beats a rug that hangs in the yard. And I look, to myself, defeated. And I walk the streets, aimlessly. Acquaintances avert their eyes from my face. It begins to hail; luckily, a hundred meters away there is a large stable; we hide in the hay; cows; in a corner, an almost invisible horse, keeps flicking its tail.

The street is, nevertheless, narrow. Lazy. First I asked an elderly man where downtown was. My final question was: “Which grammar school did Peter Handke attend?” The old man had a green cloak. It was “the wrong man.” Maybe deaf? In any case, he had a furrow, on his brow, so deep. I saw layer upon layer of dust in it. Then worms, too.

The church.

In Klagenfurt, after I asked the old man in the green cloak and with a blue blemish on his lip if he knew which grammar school Peter Handke had attended, and he replied that he didn’t know—he walked with a stick and trembled—I went on down the street. I passed a poster with the words: “Vom Konstruktivismus bis zur Systemkunst.” A girl knelt at the edge of a fountain, photographing the facade of a nearby house. Two men came up to her and at once turned to me, who was just addressing the girl with the words, “which grammar school did Peter Handke attend?” Instead of the girl, a man answered. With the words: “the grammar school at Viktrim.” “Who is Peter Handke?” she asked; “A writer,” another man said. In the middle of the road, the asphalt was inlaid with a path of cut granite. In front of a grocer’s I
stopped a young couple. The boy was inordinately fat. Fair hair, downy beard. The girl was smooth-complexioned, warm-haired and soft-eyed, all winsome, shy, slim, with a serene smile and profound eyes, “sexy.” I asked the question, “Where is the grammar school building?” The boy spoke brusquely and with supreme confidence. The girl’s head clung to his shoulder all the time. I looked towards a crane that stood between two buildings, in the direction indicated by the boy’s pointing finger, then down the street towards the church spire. There the sky spread in clumps of fog and all of a sudden I saw in it a fruit bowl, upturned, and from the very top, of the figure a drop of a squashed strawberry’s red juice slithered down.

We reached Tanzenberg on a beautiful early evening. The monastery is like a tanker, heavily loaded, anchored in a port that has long since lost its former importance. (Not Trieste. Not Pula . . . not the pleasant smell of Dr. Živojin Dacić’s garage.) Before the entrance to the left-hand wing of the building cars were parked: an Opel-Kadett, a Toyota, a Fiat, and a Mazda. Through the glass pane of the door one could see a corridor leading inside, into the heart of the monastery. I climbed the stairs before the church door. Whiteness had practically swallowed whatever was in the room. Like a whale. The walls dissolved into frescoes. Like fat in a pan. Chairs were neatly aligned. Flowers, in a few places. Like a meadow. On a platform before the altar there is a microphone. The window is stained-glass. Silence. I hear my own breathing. Outside the building, on the very edge of the plateau where the land drops away steeply towards the picture of a beautiful landscape, a man, descending towards the little soccer field in the background. There are boys there. They are shooting at the goal. A green net has been stretched between the posts, so that the ball bounces back and a boy immediately dashes at it and “blasts” at the goal. “Who is Peter Handke?” we ask. One of the boys has yellow hair and “flashing eyes.” He explains that the boys are not boarders at the monastery school but day students. To our question “where can one spend the night?” he said that there was a place close by that, “long ago,” used to be “always open.” We made for the first entrance at left, to the right of the church door. In the dark atrium there is a plaque with the history of the monastery engraved on it. To the right there is a door and from behind it there comes the voice of someone “who is on the phone right now.” To the left is a door, behind which music is heard. We go through the middle door. A colonnade runs around the courtyard. There is a vase with a flower at one of the windows. The air is clear. Suddenly a pigeon soars. Its wings flap. Silence alights on the
landscape that rises high, high and narrow, as a view from a prison yard. Damp air washes the smooth walls. Darkness drops tear-like through the windows. The smell of potatoes and onions wafts through an opening. Is there anyone here, today? You gaze, as a twelve-year-old boy, you stand before the beginning of the “distance” that spreads in the distance, your gaze comes to rest on the boy scouts who stand around the flagpole in shorts and neckerchiefs, looking like “Nazis” who, instead of holding guns and wearing leather overcoats, wear “shorts” (which doesn’t mean that they aren’t Nazis). They are all polite. They return our greetings. We ask a man with a child a few questions. Both are pushing bicycles. The man has a beard, and teeth blackened by smoking. “Artists are sensitive. They don’t brook constraints. Others don’t brook constraints either, but then others hardly notice them.” He spoke slowly and convincingly. “The school-teacher predicted Handke’s future course quite early.” “We went to church five times a day.” “The former headmaster is deaf.” “The young headmaster does not know Handke.” “Has Handke ever been to Tanzenberg again?” I asked. At one point the man gave me a short, slanting look. The road before us meandered towards the sky, where a bird, a swallow, performing acrobatics at breakneck speed, traced the following words from Repetition:


9 "And what about me? It came to me that during my years at the seminary my youth had passed but I had never for one moment known the experience of youth. I saw youth as a river, a free confluence and flow from which I was excluded when I entered the seminary. My years at the seminary were lost time
For breakfast we had bologna, tea, coffee with milk, butter, jam, cheese, pastries, brown and white bread.

The water we showered with had been heated to 70°C.
The towel is white this morning, “with pink stripes.”
I had no toothbrush.
Scott was the first to get up.
I wanted us to go down to the dining room at once.
“The woman behind the bar is a fat sow,” I thought.
The man who sits at a table behind my back is whispering, his voice “like the hissing of a milk-warmer.”
Three boys, bikers, like “three he-goats.”
I was telling Scott about the trouble I had with my pants this morning, and my voice rumbled like a washing machine.
Scott looked towards the ceiling.
Nuns are waiting for us at Tanzenberg.
At the entrance to the area before the monastery building: a fire engine will be standing.
For a long time a group of Japanese will be entering the church.

At the exhibition Exacta—From Constructivism to Systemic Art.
Before the paintings of Francois Morellet—1. Two raster patterns with vertical lines, 1952; 2. Blue-Red, 1982;
To the left: Leon Polk Smith—1. Encounter on an intersecting line, 1942; 2. Black-Yellow, 1983;
Then before the paintings of: Henrik Stazewski—1. Composition, 1931; 2. Structure of a plane, 1980;
To the left: Jeffrey Steele—1. Form II, 1961; 2. Syntagma IV, 23 . . . 31, 1980;

that could never be retrieved. In me something was missing, and would always be missing. Like many young men in the village, I had lost a part of my body; it had not been cut off like a hand or a foot; no, it had never had a chance to grow; and it was no mere extremity, so to speak, but an irreplaceable organ. My trouble was that I couldn’t go along with the others; I couldn’t join in their activities or talk with them. I was . . .”: Handke, Repetition, trans. Manheim, 31.
Richard Paul Lohse—1. Twelve vertical and horizontal progressions; 2. A row of series in four vertical rows;
Gianni Colombo—1. Four free lines crossing a rectangle at twelve temporal intervals, 1961; 2. Radius, 1973;
Cesar Domela—1. Geometric structure No. 4; 2. Relief No. 169.
A board on one of the walls said:
“Some of these artists’ works are obviously concerned only with Watching, only with the Experience of the ‘flow of Watching’ . . . The forms, which do not seem to refer to anything, do not leave us indifferent nevertheless . . . .”
Elsewhere it said: “An artist’s interest in the art of other artists is in itself already art . . . .”
At one point I thought: “Why is everything so simplified in the German language?”
Scott is in another room of the museum.
The museum resembles a monastery.

A nun is feeding a cat.
Two nuns in the grass.
A nun carries a head of lettuce in her hand.
A nun opens the gate of the right-hand (in relation to the church) wing of the monastery.
A nun holds a blade of grass in her hand.
A nun opens the gate of the right-hand wing of the monastery.
A nun holds a blade of grass in her hand.

At thirteen hours sharp we stopped before the church in Griffen. A small, placid street. The houses are gentle. Grass sprinkled with white polka dots. It rains.
Before that, we had climbed to the top of a nearby hill. It offered an unrestricted view of the town. On our way there we saw cows, a van (full of children), two ruins, a church memorial (covered with lilac), a pile of manure. From a wooded slope the song of a cuckoo was heard. Fog rolled, cotton-like, down in the hollow. The trees were all
smothered by the exhalations . . . .

I run out of the car. I walk towards the church. Scott steps up his pace. His turned-up pant legs are suddenly transformed into feeding troughs. Unusually solemn and exalted noises, smells, and voices reach us from the church. Catholic and baroque, the large and heavy church suddenly turns into an Orthodox one, squat, broad, and rounded. Festively dressed couples come out of the building and start to dance.

Opposite the church there is a shop that makes and sells black pottery, *Terra nigra*. It is owned by Frank Kerhowetz. He spoke English with Scott, although Scott’s German was good. He spoke Serbo-Croat with me, although my German was good enough.

A boy was also present, whose name neither Scott nor I have ever been able to remember. To Scott’s question, if he knew who Peter Handke was, the boy said that he did. To my question, if he knew where the house of Handke’s brother was, the boy said that he did. To Scott’s question, how far it was from the house of Handke’s brother to the *Terra nigra* workshop, the boy said that he would take us “there.”

On the way to Altenmarkt he told us about Peter. He had never seen him, but he knew that “for a while he taught German language and literature in the school at Pustritz.” “He lived there too.” Maybe he did see him, but was never sure that it was actually “he.” The boy stopped before the pizzeria on the main street and said, “That used to be Handke’s elementary school.” We stood some time in front of the huge window. “The school is now a restaurant,” I said. Scott laughed. The boy stood and looked at us proudly and significantly. He spoke very fast. He switched subjects. I couldn’t follow him. I walked slowly alongside him, yet felt as if I were cantering.

At the entrance to Altenmarkt the boy shows us the house of Handke’s half-brother. It stood on a bluff under a huge cliff. The roof structure peeps put from among the green branches of a thick wood. “There’s the house,” said the boy. I looked at him and felt as I did in Marrakech, in 1981, when a swarm of boys took me round the city and afterwards asked for change. The boy, who reminded me incredibly of a girl in the village of Kosovo polje, in 1977, was silent and looked me straight in the eye. I didn’t blink. He smiled. “There’s the house,” said Scott. It was as if we could hear the soundtrack of Howard Hawks’s *El Dorado*, The sky suddenly turned clear and blue. Clouds were noisy as they moved across the sky. I saw arrows raining on the tiny cemetery before us. “There’s the house,” I repeated.

We part from the boy.

At the bottom of the slope there is a tiny cemetery, surrounded by a
low wall. A little church stands in the middle. We spread out and go to look at the graves. I walk on the left side of the central alley, Scott walks on the right. It begins to rain. The graves are lined up in very strict order. On one of the graves it said, “Jovan Savic (1923-1977).” At one point Scott shakes his head. I stand and watch the graves on the slope and at the foot of the bluff under the cliff; they look like rows of vines in a vineyard. A wind is blowing. We leave the cemetery, visibly moved. And tranquil too. Now we are climbing up a path towards the macadam road that leads uphill to the right and, to the left, to a yellow house whose rear gable we can see. In front of it, one can see it from the distance, is a garage. In front of it, clearly recognizable, a black Opel Ascona is parked. In front of the house itself is a woman. She is moving towards us. Slowly. She wears a grey coat. Only when she came up to us did we notice that she wore glasses.

The Stift cemetery is opulent. True, the graves are aligned, but not that strictly. A white stone on a grave bore the words “Maria Handke (8 October 1920—20 November 1971).” On a wooden cross laid over the white stone it said “Bruno Handke 21—March 1988.” “Aren’t the communist party and Tito for me what the church and religion were for Handke,” I thought. “And the seminary,” I added. “The church is opulent.” “Tito always wore a white suit too.”

The stones on the graves of the Handkes and Siutzes are of irregular shape. No right angles. Broken grey-and-white stone.

The woman with glasses was old. She seemed to tremble. Asked, “Where do the Handkes live?” She pointed to the house and immediately fell silent. Asked, “Where was Peter Handke born?” She replied that the house no longer existed because she and her family had bought it and pulled it down. Asked, “What was Handke’s grandfather’s name?” She replied “Siutz.” Asked, “What is Handke’s sister’s name?” She replied, “Monika.” Asked, “Where is Maria Handke buried?” She replied, “At the Stift.” Asked, “Is Peter Handke really a Slovene?” She said, “To a small degree.” (She emphasized small.) Asked, “Who among the Handkes was a carpenter?” She replied, “Peter’s uncle.”

As we walked down a street in Altenmarkt, I saw a curtain shifting in a window and through it the inquisitive heads of an old man and an old woman. “They must have been sitting at the table, drinking their
afternoon coffee,” I said to Scott. The road meandered among houses that stood amid flowers and trim lawns. It was unusually quiet. I thought, “How trim!” While we ate at a place not far from the pizzeria/school, I thought, “What a terrible place to live.” The sign at the crossroads said, “Yugoslavia 31 km.” In the church I recognized the Slovene script under the icons on the wall. “What determination!” I said aloud in Serbo-Croat. Scott, who was sitting on a chair at that moment and thumbing through a Bible, heard me, glanced back, but did not understand me. I saw a smile in his eyes. The church was so gaudy and bedizened that it immediately recalled the restaurant in Klagenfurt where I had had coffee while Scott was asleep in the car. Still, darkness swallowed the gaudiness and subdued it with an unreal mist that seemed painted in oil on wood. I remembered the trip to Griffen and the tiny bridge where we had watched a game of village soccer. That, too, had seemed unreal, like something described in a book or seen in a film. The goalie had stood “stock-still.” Scott had said, “They play a rough game.” Girls had sat behind the goal, together with boys who didn’t watch the game but the girls who didn’t watch the game giggled. Not for a minute could I imagine Peter in the church. I saw him among the spectators by the soccer field. He stood aside, just behind the sausage stand. “A strange man,” the nun had said at Tanzenberg. She carried a bunch of flowers in her hand, and a head of lettuce, the leaves of which fluttered, as the old woman’s hands trembled visibly. The other nun had talked long and volubly. “Yet she had said little,” I said to Scott. “The novel Wunschloses Unglück was not received well at the seminary,” the other nun had said. Scott remembered the tunnel that we had sought in Jesenice and, having failed to find it, decided that either it was not yet completed or it had not been started yet. We had looked for it even before we crossed the border between Austria and Yugoslavia. We cruised along the border for a dozen kilometers, on the Austrian side of the Karawanken. We resembled policemen in a patrol car. Afterwards, at Jesenice, we found the old railway tunnel. It was not real, more like an image from a novel. It rained, “cats and dogs.” We strayed around, soaked to the skin. I carried a camera in my hand. I was afraid someone might see us. I was afraid of the Yugoslav police. I photographed the tunnel furtively, through the branches of a tree. I looked at Scott, whose face was drenched with rain and the wet wind. He was, nevertheless, “so clear.” “A handsome man,” I thought.

Scott was born on 14 August 1949, I remembered at that moment. Zorica was born on 10 May 1949, I immediately added to that
thought.

Peter Handke was born on 6 December 1942, I solemnly concluded. I pitched into a hollow filled with water. A train was just emerging from the tunnel. It rumbled along importantly, entering the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. At that moment I heard the national anthem, “O Slavs!”


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10 “Late in the afternoon, I was in the town below, standing on the big bridge across the Drava. Less than a hundred kilometers east of my native village, it had become a different river. At home, sunk in its trough-like valley, hidden by rank growth, its banks almost inaccessible, its flow almost soundless, it emerged here in Maribor as the glittering artery of the plain, visible from far off, flowing swiftly, with a wind of its own and sandy coves here and there, which offered a foretaste of the Black Sea. Looking at it through my brother’s eyes, I thought it regal, as though adorned with innumerable pennants, and its ruffled waters seemed to repeat the empty cow paths, just as the shadows of the railroad cars on the parallel railroad bridge seemed to repeat the blind windows of the hidden kingdom. The rafts of prewar times drifted downstream, one after another. Close-of-business hustle on the bridge, more and more people, all in a hurry, their eyes widened by the wind. The globes of the
And I decided, then and there, to tell a story.
Yet the story kept eluding me, drawing me into itself.

16 MAY 1989
TUBINGEN, 15.30

In St. Veit a. d. Glan we got up a little before eight (8 a.m.). (That was yesterday, 15 May 1989. I’m repeating my account of the events.) Scott showered first, then I had a shower. For some time, waiting for Scott to return from the bathroom, I wrote these lines. At one point I saw Scott’s pants and shirt on the floor. I wondered, “Will he put them on again or will he change?”

At one point, waiting for Scott to return from the bathroom, I saw, in my mind’s eye, Scott crouched over his bag in front of the wardrobe. He was wearing long johns. His body was tender, and frail. He looked like a boy. On the other hand, he resembled James Coburn in Peckinpah’s last movie (Cross of Iron). I thought, “This man must be protected.” When, in this half-sleep—it was early in the morning—I felt like putting my arm around him, I saw before me a rocky cliff, identical to that in Griffen, above the town and the road to Altenmarkt, the one that we later, having walked for several hours, observed from below, filled with a [Kantian] sense of the sublime. And: Images of some familiar heroes appeared before me: King Kong, John Wayne (in the movie Rio Bravo), Kit (from a pulp novel by the little-known Georges Clinton), a steamroller (from the road that was just being repaired), a tank truck (on the Belgrade-Zagreb highway in distant 1986), the Federal Government building in the Yugoslav capital (in distant 1968), Volume II of Karl Marx’s Das Kapital, the absolute boxing champion of the world in (distant) 1987. (One of the heroes could have been Peter Handke in some passages of Child Story, the book I translated into Serbo-Croat in distant 1988.) I felt safe.

So, in the dining room of the Pension, at breakfast, I sat with my back turned to a roomful of guests. Three young men in leather jackets, with long greasy hair, who had arrived last night on motorbikes (that lamps glowed white. The bridge had those lateral salients which at that time I looked for in all bridges. The endless flow behind me shook the ground under my feet; I clutched the railing in both hands, until I had transposed the bridge, the wind, the night, the lamps, and the passersby to myself. And I thought: ‘No, we are not homeless’.”: Handke, Repetition, trans. Manheim, 237–238.
“farted” loudly), as if they were tanks—I had run into them in the corridor (last night), they wore helmets on their heads—and, scared, I escaped to the toilet. Now the “boys” were tame, “friendly,” they wished the waitress “good appetite,” one of them even said to everybody in the room “all the best” and “Hi,” and, to the girl by the window, “cheers.”

The waitress was an unusually stout, I’d say even fat, woman. She walked in a long black wraparound skirt with slits. She kept moving. If she hadn’t been a waitress I would have wondered, “What’s the matter with her?” As it was, I merely followed her movements through the room. She disappeared, going past us, behind the kitchen doors behind Scott’s back, stayed there for a while, came back, this time with her arms full of plates, breadbaskets, jugs with tea and coffee, egg cups and cutlery wrapped in napkins, went past our table again, but, this time, back to the dining room, towards the guests who ate placidly at their tables (like stabled horses before brimful troughs), or patiently waited for their breakfast (like “Chinamen” in “a rice line”).

At a table slightly to the left, a stout woman was sitting. Almost indistinguishable from the waitress. The only difference was in a few decorative details on her dress. Obese, (charmingly) “sow-like,” at one point she came up to our table, and addressed the waitress just as she was writing out our check for the room and breakfast. I thought I saw double. I looked at Scott. Now, I thought, the newcomer will pounce and strangle the two “tender men” with both arms. Mirrored in Scott’s pupils, I saw the other woman too, the waitress: she was pulling us by the ears, slapping our faces, and pressing us to her huge breasts.

We settled the check with the waitress. It was already nine. Light was creeping through the window curtains (like a stray dog through a broken fence). Suddenly, in the aroma of white coffee and cheese I smelled the fresh asphalt of the road, where the “boys” were revving up their engines, about to leave. We rose, slowly, from the table. I turned to face the dining room. It was empty. Only one of the tables had guests, a “happy family”: father, mother, two children and, under the table, a dog. They munched in silence. From time to time the man would caress the dog with his foot. At one point, the woman uttered the names of neighboring villages in a low voice: Reipersdorf, Unterbrückendorf, Bruckl, Klein St. Veit, Obertrixen, Völkermarkt, Haimburg, Poppendorf, Zellbach, Pustritz, Rausch, Erlach, Hirsch-enau, Weissenegg, Lind, St. Kollman, Haberberg, Griffen. One of the children was spitting pieces of unchewed food onto its plate. The other looked in our direction. We walked, huge, tall, like poplars, cities, or
mountains. At one point Scott Abbott turned and looked, triumphantly, at the dog on the floor. I struck up a song that resounded through the hall, and was even multiplied in some of the parts, so that my voice was transformed into a chorus.

I remembered Tanzenberg. It had been late afternoon. To the right of the road that led to the plateau before the entrance to the church portal there had been a group of boy scouts. They seemed utterly reduced in size. There was barely any distance between us. Scott thought that they were “high school students” from the “castle.” I concurred with his opinion, though with some reserve, this time unvoiced. I merely empathized with Scott’s perceptions. Besides, everything favored my expectations in our search for Handke. Perhaps there existed, throughout this brief “field” trip, a “borderless zone” between Scott and myself. We were together every minute and we experienced every minute “in parallel.” Yet, were our experiences identical? As soon as anything occurred, I would immediately see Scott. As soon as I immersed myself in an event or role—in the courtyard of the convent, for instance, I walked between the colonnades softly and alone, imagining a cowled figure behind the corner, a dagger in his hand, or, elsewhere, in a curving corridor, I imagined myself running into two naked nuns in a passionate embrace—I would immediately see Scott and his eyes that looked in the same direction and saw the same images. However, when our gazes met, I realized that his impressions ran in a different direction after all. “Perhaps they were always a step closer to pure thought,” I thought. “Or else they shortened and filtered imagination,” I wrote in my notebook. True, there was no tangible proof of the difference of our impressions. At a crossroads a man on a bicycle wished us both a “nice day!” which might have sounded as though he had addressed only one of us (for we were indeed as one). In a field we stood and watched boys play soccer, and when the ball flew our way and landed between us, a boy cried, “Return the ball!” (to whom?); and when Scott kicked it back, hitting his shoe against a stone, it was as if I had kicked the ball and hit my shoe against a stone. I even said “Sorry!” to which Scott replied, “That’s all right!”—On the other hand, some conversations brought out subtle differences between us. For example, as we strolled round the convent, I said at one point, “There are onions and potatoes in the cellar, therefore, somebody must be living here,” to which Scott added, “I imagine Handke ‘standing’ there in the corner in a posture of ‘delicate balance.’” Or, to my statement that, “The nuns seem to have run off to town to a clothing accessories sale,” Scott remarked, “I see them as they
make dinner, and one ‘stands’ by the table chopping parsley, another ‘stands’ by the cooker stirring the stew in a pot, a third ‘stands’ in the doorway looking in the direction of the cooker, while a fourth walks into the kitchen saying, ‘move away and stand there’.” So, our positions were quite different after all, I decided, and wrote that down in my notebook. One thing, however, we shared at all times: our conversations were like clothes that you could always take off or change, or an umbrella that you could always fold and put away, or the “beginning” of something “else” that opened beyond “what was said” and extended far and wide in its texture and its course, which formed a world, unequal, though close, to the simultaneously existing other world. Naturally, my sentence, “You have to tell the border guard how long you mean to stay in Yugoslavia, in order to get a visa”—spoken in the context of a situation that we both found ourselves in at the border, around 7 p.m. on 13 May 1989, about to cross into Yugoslavia—was intimately related to his sentence, “In East Germany the border guards were really rude.” Both sentences were truthful accounts of actual facts. But whereas I did not worry about Scott at all, knowing that he would certainly get a visa, and worried much more about myself—I expected the guards would interrogate me endlessly and subject me to a “body-search” (in fact, one of them, having stared long at my passport, told me, “Get yourself to that office over there!” in an unpleasant tone)—Scott was afraid that he would not get a visa at all and that he would be forced, at best, to travel under the control and in the company of security agents, which would have jeopardized many things, chief of all our search for the tunnel at Jesenice (from page 1 of Handke’s Repetition). Scott was white as a sheet. I was white too, as a sheet, but also as the pale and drowsy face of a beautiful woman who was just emerging from the city hospital, having been told the news of her husband’s death, still unaware, in these first few drunken-like paces, that she had just become a widow.

[Finally, I also have to say that today, the 16th of May, 1989 (at the end of our journey “to the center of the earth”), the “Congress of the Raspis” is actually being held in Belgrade, the (premature) gathering of a tiny group of corresponding Yugoslav authors, which ought to have been preceded by a longer period of mutual correspondence.]
After all, the border guard (who thumbed Scott’s passport at length) never looked Scott in the eye, nor did he even check the fidelity of the passport photograph, but (with an angry look on his face, now and then compressed to the ellipse of a murderer’s look, or the muzzle of a Doberman pinscher ready to snarl and bark most ferociously) he turned to me, in a voice out of an Alban Berg opera: “Get yourself to that office over there!”

On our way to Tanzenberg from the town of St. Veit a. d. Glan, in the village of Hörzendorf we stood for a while by the little village soccer field, watching a local match. The players run across the field, shouting “here!” At one point the referee raises both arms, the ball whizzes past his head and grazes his ear, the spectators laugh, they sit behind the goal in front of which the goalkeeper walks “back and forth” all the time, upright, never once bends, never pulls up his socks, never adjusts his shorts, stared at by the “girls and boys” who “lounge” on the benches, drinking beer and eating sausages, “eyeing” one another, grinning, giggling, and never for a moment looking at the field or the players, as if the latter played for themselves alone, as if they didn’t need an audience at all, or else, as if they needed an audience’s presence only, but not its attention, in which case it ceases to be an audience and becomes “friends,” “girls,” “buddies,” “pals,” “brothers”; there are two men in front of the beer and sausage stand, their elbows on the counter, “staring” at a chubby girl, the “vendor”; in front of a tree, to the left of the stand, another “team” are “training,” in red jerseys, independently of the match being played on the big field, one of the “players” stands by the tree as “goalkeeper,” among the “shooters” an older man stands out, with a mustache and in a tracksuit that clings immaculately to his body, he keeps adjusting his clothes, pulls up his shorts with his hands, smoothes his hair, glancing at the benches and tables by the sausage stand where “girls” and “boys” are sitting, as I’ve already said, while all around him younger “players” are darting “like chickens” or like a “posy,” wearing soccer shoes known as “boots,” which resemble boxing gloves for the feet, or metal “knuckle-dusters” worn on the hand in gang fights, or “bricks tied to the feet” of the victim to be thrown into a river, or (if we like) “mammoth feet.” Scott was standing close to the touch line, ten meters from the corner flag, level with the “penalty spot,” where the “goalkeeper” was going back
and forth, upright, never once bending, never pulling up his “socks”; at one point the ball of the “team” that were training by the tree rolled up to Scott; Scott kicked the ball towards the mustached player who was just pulling up his shorts and smoothing his hair with both palms; the girl at the sausage stand looked at Scott with longing, as if spellbound by his technically flawless and accurately directed kick, but also as if she knew that he was an “American”; and I saw in her eyes soft and gentle cleaving to the strong body of a man whose one arm encircles the girl’s waist while the other supports a Harley Davidson motorcycle with high handlebars, and before them, across the endless expanse of the prairie, on a background of shimmering bluish-red mountains, the sun, a fiery ball, setting, scatters the brightest and “loveliest” colors; Scott stood by the touch line and “followed the game” attentively; at one point I had the impression that he squatted and touched the ground with his hand, picking up the dust with his fingers, that he wore jeans, tall boots, and a blue (or red) bandanna round his neck; a moment later he said, “Rough game”; I said, “Your sons would like to be here now”; he turned to me (and the sausage stand behind my back, and the “team” that was training between the stand and me); and I saw him looking at me as if I were the stand or “the team training” over there; I suddenly felt like someone “else”: I wore a mustache and a sweater of un-dyed wool, my hands were huge, my hips like beech joints, my face furrowed, I was spitting in the grass, kicking the ball sky high, and shouting, “Jump, for fuck’s sake!” “Give me the ball, you ape!” “Go on, there!” “The head, the head!” Then I stopped to watch the girls; I moved, slowly, and heavily, towards the goal post, leaned on the crossbar and roared my head off, imitating “jungle howling”; whenever my gaze wandered from the mountain tops of the Karawanken to Scott’s eyes, his gaze would wander from my eyes to the mountain tops of the Karawanken; I felt as a man “with no superstructure”; as if I were sitting in an auditorium where “by raising their hands comrades voted to elect a new party secretary, whose candidacy has been unopposed”; I saw myself in front of the TV and watched the “TV news” and quarreled with my family, claiming that what had been “said clearly and in public” bore no relationship to “the actual state of affairs”; I heard reproachful words; I felt the reproachful looks of my nearest and dearest; “You have betrayed us, you have brought us nothing, you are doing nothing tangible for us,” I heard; I felt like someone who drives a huge limousine but hasn’t got “a red cent” in his bank account; I felt like someone who listens to disco music all day long and “never even reads” the newspaper headlines; I
felt like a man in his “Sunday best” who stands in front of the village church, having just got out of a car, the suitcase in his hand full of million-dinar notes with which he pays for coffee in a restaurant, for mineral water in the station café, cigarettes at the fairground stand, the soccer ball for his child, sold to him by Gypsies in the underground passageway; I wear a straw hat, a sombrero; the shoes are black, “pointed,” with a hole in the sole, which I raise as a horse about to be shod. Scott calmly watches my “standing” and “observation”; he is silent, no muscle twitches under his eye; from time to time his lips spread in a serene smile; he shows white teeth, does not grin; his wide-ranging look encompasses both the space before him and the people in the space before the space before him: an expansive landscape, complete with mountains, lakes, and the rain that drizzles, with quiet dignity, and solemnly, so that one has the impression that the weather is sunny today.

We arrived at Klagenfurt around 11. (All this was the day before yesterday, 15 May 1989; I repeat my account of those events; my memories are elastic like dough; the fog, that morning, seems to be dispersing only now.) We stopped at the “Theaterplatz” square.

Seen from the street we arrived on, the space is like a huge film screen, semicircular, and also resembles an amphitheater. At one point I felt both as a man returning to his own homeland and as a tourist in a foreign country. The houses are familiar, yet beautiful. I see every detail more clearly than ever, some for the first time “in my life,” others for the “hundredth time,” and “there’s the coat of arms on the facade,” I tell Scott in my mind’s eye. In reality I step firmly on the accelerator, gently release the clutch, and reverse the car. I park (according to regulations) at the end of the street (neither a boulevard nor a “back street”) and we are already entering the square with determined steps. We seem to have just crept onto the terrace in front of the museum building we had been looking for. Tracker-like, Scott “marked” the target with a flash of his eyes. Attuned, like a warrior in Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, to all kinds of group movement, I walked, as if following the paths of victory and glory, only a few paces behind Scott. Excited as a randy dog, I entered, through the gate, the hall of the museum: I looked for the toilet at once; I failed to find it; appeased, balanced, with
unconcealed curiosity, I made my way to the exhibition room.

The exhibition could be taken in at a glance. There was little there to drive a real connoisseur of “exact art” to move from painting to painting; instead, the viewer was “required” always to place himself at the vantage points that allowed him to embrace all the individual works in a single (frozen) “look.” And even if there was no such “position,” one could quite easily imagine a viewpoint such that paintings “beyond one’s ken” could not only be imagined but also ordered and harmonized, whereas those who possessed that insane urge to play could also draw imaginary lines: imaginary lines, indicated in geometry by intermittent lines (-----), could delineate the invisible remaining part of the rectangle of the room, and it was also possible, by means of imaginary lines (-----), to draw the shape of those subtle and secret connections between individual paintings that, “standing” at a vantage point of the kind that I have just described, I, strangely (unable to explain to myself “why”), always observed three at a time, my gaze drifting from the first to the second, on to the third, and then back, encompassing quite clearly the space between the imaginary lines, which was always, of course, triangular. So that, at one point, by means of “imaginary lines,” “intermittent” and “curved,” like furrows in poor, rocky, calcareous soil, I connected the paintings Syntagma IV, 23 . . . 31 by Jeffrey Steele, Four Free Lines Crossing a Rectangle at Twelve Temporal Intervals by Gianni Colombo, and Twelve Vertical and Horizontal Progressions by Richard Paul Lohse. In the process of drawing the “furrows,” I saw a farmer too—it could have been my grandfather, Miloš Pantić—with sweaty armpits, breathless, bent-backed (like a camel), his sun-bleached shirt untucked: he drove skinny “cattle” before him: he shouted “Shoo, ox, shoo!” He bent to remove the dry branches that got tangled with his peasant shoes. And I heard the crushing of heavy stones under the plowshares. I saw the plowshares twist on the hard calcareous rock. A moment later I had problems: In an attempt to construct the next triangle I sought the paintings that would “exactly” fit my experiences and, especially, emotions (“experiences” were here crucial!). I searched, carried by the power of “linking intuition” (the ability to string together logically unconnected events that are still subversively contiguous and establish relationships of “kin” in which the “experiential subject” and “construction principle,” is both a “moving viewpoint” and a “premonitory instance”). I sought, driven by the “lust for spatial expansion” (a desire to establish a fulcrum in space, an act similar to opening a window or door or poking holes through the newspaper in the middle of reading
and entering, by looking through the hole, into the “beyond of reading” and of the newspaper itself). I sought, driven by “productive horror of the void” (a state of body, and of mind, in which trembling spreads like a rising tempest, turning all the superabundance of life into a hollow vessel that the waves of trembling, shuddering, and horror sink at once, so that the vessel fills up, and the erstwhile exuberance of life, the erstwhile void, becomes an absolute swarm, a thick mass of light and dreaming, a hard and serene sky, and the sloughed off skin of the naked clap of seeing; the state lasts no more than a fraction of a second, an instant; it cannot be expressed; it must be described). I discovered a triangular conjunction. I started from the haphazardly “discovered” Blue-Red by Francois Morellet (I think that at the same time I felt the duration of spring, my own body as a phallus that old women danced about, becoming more and more clearly virgins with each round, while out there, in the Theaterplatz, the raindrops were like tiny bees that buzzed gently and let fall warm and balmy drops of sticky honey from their hot proboscises). I took my cue from Henrik Stazewski’s Structure of a Plane, where, I must say, the warmth of old age was such a primary and corporeal sensation that I turned into my own ancestor, going on to transform myself into my own offspring, so that all three of us—the ancestor, myself, and the offspring—closed the “circle of joy” in the midst of the idyll of field labor, in the ring of soft end-of-day chatter, and, metamorphosed into an old woman sitting on a bench beneath a walnut tree. We told each other fairy stories, the church bell from the steeple roused the waves of dusk, the crickets chirped, a dog barked, the warm smell of manure, lilacs, the only barber shop in the village is only a few houses away towards the crossroads, the chest heaves, I embraced the Trinity, I was Happy and Good, and Whole, and this state lasted a short while only, for I was suddenly yanked (a father and daughter entered the hall at that moment) to the Northern City: it was an exhibition space, cold as a cellar, empty, with marble walls hung with paintings by the same master, familiar and close to me (father, brother, and companion), I heard him call, I felt his head on my shoulder, I saw the Look of the incurably ill, I felt the Twitch of the skinny, shrunken hand and icy fingers of an Artist with no self, an Artist with no paintings of his own, an Artist without Paper and pencil, without Space, he changed Thoughts and Words, driving them, rolling, pushing, and kicking them, in meanders that interlock, yet never really touch, with no meaning, no beginning or end, forever Sketches, endless Labor, Creation and Destruction, and I opened, wide, my eyes, pushed them out
until my gaze came to a halt, looked for a third painting, and that was
the final act of my “triangulo-inventive-activity.” And my gaze shot out
as a ball in a pinball machine. It wandered, bouncing off the walls and
paintings, which now turned into cold gravestones (uninscribed). Some
paintings were metal partitions of an industrial-waste dump. Others were
glass panes on skyscrapers. I couldn’t point my gazes in any
direction. I could give them no orientation. They moved out of
control. I did not “experience.” The space expanded and contracted.
Desire turned into rage. All internal receptors turned into a “system for
the dissolution of systems.” I felt a physical *horror vacui*. In the
exhibition hall containing the exhibition *Exacta, From Constructivism
to Systemic Art 1915-1985*, I looked in vain for Julije Knifer’s painting
*Meader Tu-A-Bi-Ha-Da I/II 1977*.

19 May 1989

Tübingen

“We are left speechless.”
“Indifferent.”
“I feel that conversations are superfluous.”
“Ever since I saw Tarkovsky’s movies . . .”
“The dinar isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on . . .”
“Irrational . . .”
“Heroes . . .”
“East, West . . .”
“A prostitute since the age of seventeen . . .”
“He broke into a parked car and stole a leather bag and tools.”
“They don’t like him. They don’t read him much. But they are
proud of him.”
“I was absolutely plastered.”
“She got the award.”
“He waited slyly for others to make the first move. Then he would
step in as if he were in charge.”
“They betrayed the people.”
“He copied it all word for word.”
“She lay on her back and masturbated.”
“On our Republic’s anniversary . . .”
“He wasn’t pleased . . .”
“There’s been no rain for weeks . . .”
To read “the thing,” and “the way,” “what,” and “how,” one wants. Not to reach the goal. To talk about the goal. To be the goal.
First we waited for him at the railway station. People were getting off the train.

In a conversation with me, in 1985, Peter Handke spoke about the difference between remembrance and memory, saying that he preferred “remembrance,” which he called “a pleasant state” in which you are “active,” a “searcher” . . .

For three days now, like a “Lonesome Cowboy,” I have roamed the mountains and stage sets, searching for Tanzenberg, the bastion of a childhood, the “shelter” of parental pride and “base” for intended conquests . . . (All that was seven days ago. I am in Tübingen now. This is “Repetition!”)

Boy scouts, arranged around the flagpole with a fluttering banner, were (as I have already stressed) a sign of welcome. Only afterwards do I picture—their camp. The field is like a fairground on the outskirts of the town; the boy scouts are like the Hitler-Jugend, like adults disguised as children, children in power, reprisals in miniature, an animated cartoon about landscape and the foreign legion, an ant-like economic system . . .

The air is unusually clear, and washed out. Clusters of mist, driven by the wind towards the east wing of the castle, merged imperceptibly with the linen hung out to dry, and the entire area of the plateau in front of the church was redolent with fabric softener. And I saw an Opel Kadett, 1.3.1—I, sitting in the front seat, saw it as a silver, smoothly groomed, shining, grey-coated, fleet-footed, gently-leaping, yet-like-a-rocket-in-the-sky, horse. Gently trotting, like an archer in a saddle, I bent the field of vision. Riding a gentle curve, my gaze hit the rear-view mirror. There, with a partisan bomber’s bang, which at once quietly resounded across the surrounding hills, I ran into Scott’s gaze, which gently melted into the colors of a smile: the purplish-grey mist of sunset; the wind bends blades of grass in the spacious sports grounds;
to the left of the goal where no-one is standing: a fish pond; to the right of the pond boys are practicing, arranged in a line, they shoot, they ram the ball into the vacant goal. We went down a narrow path amid snails, like letters of an enchanted alphabet, their horns pointing to all the four corners of the world and all the intermediate points. “Do you know Peter Handke?” was our question. The boys replied with sneers. One even opened his mouth. He didn’t choke, he didn’t belch, he didn’t shout. He merely breathed out hard and kicked the ball fiercely into the goal. We enter the goal area, approach the goal posts, touch the crossbar, Scott swings from the taut net. We are in the goal. There is whizzing from all sides, like a battlefield. We talk. We kick. We shout. “These are not Tanzenberg boys!” we say in unison. “These are not Tanzenberg boys!” Scott says. “These are scamps!” I say. “These are scamps!” we say in unison. “Wags!” I say. “Wags!” Scott says.

Evening falls. The horizon changes colors. First it is Dark-Green. After a while Blood-Red appears. Dark-Blue comes on somewhat later. Then Black descends, solemnly, like a cape. “So, that’s Night,” I said to Scott. She threatened to creep into the corridors of the monastery building. As if dressed in transparent robes. She moved soundlessly upstairs. Her face was white, quiet, soft, and enticing. I slid my tongue across her lips. I felt her breath on my cheek. “Night” followed us, joined us, and stayed with us.

And the next day, on the way to Tanzenberg, fog caught in the tree branches here and there.

The road led through a picturesque landscape. Women in white coats emerged from solitary houses on hilltops and in meadows. They looked like doctors. They emerged, white-coated, mostly from stables, where they had just milked the cows, and they wore white coats—“for reasons of hygiene!” I said aloud to Scott, whom I pictured as a farmer who had forgotten to wash his hands before milking the cows, but remembered, afterwards, that the milk would not be drunk by himself or his household anyway, but by strangers in the city, so he mixed it with water and sold it to the cooperative, the local authority, or a company that buys products in bulk, and, on second thought, decided that he hadn’t got all that much out of it, for the price was set by Me, chairman of the city’s economic board . . . . Scott calmly drove along the winding road that threaded its way between fruit trees and white milestones.

Two kilometers from the monastery we overtook two nuns. They carried plants they had picked: herbs, vegetables, twigs. They walked
on the left, as the regulations say they should: facing the vehicles. They wore black robes. I didn’t feel their presence physically. Yet they were present in my mind. (In my soul? Well, it wasn’t physically that I felt them!)

We parked in the same place as the previous day.
We walked round the castle.
We stopped in certain places.
We stood, talking.
We walked, silently.

One of the wings of the building branched into several houses that had been “built onto it,” which reminded me of primary school. It was, in fact, a grammar school. The additional wing: a student hostel. In one of the rooms someone was obviously on the phone. Hard rock was heard from the next room. For an instant I thought I was merely entering one of the many discos. Out of the corner of my eye I registered details that reminded me of “old churches,” “warehouses,” “caves,” “wells” . . . .

From the room whence telephone voices came there suddenly “shot out” a young man in a red parka. He vanished in the direction of the boy scout camp.

Stacked behind the hostel—“a pile of wood.” In a shed, “things” are scattered “all over the place.” A “shovel” lies behind an upturned wheelbarrow. The rake that leans on a tree by the shed is tall; it reaches all the way to a fork in the branches where an old “straw hat” hangs from a nail, its front frayed to a “hole” through which Scott sees a butterfly and exclaims, merrily, “Look, a butterfly!”

Looking from the shed towards the entrance of the monastery, you see it clearly: a large mottled cat drags itself along. Its tail is curved, and the head, like an extension of the body, which it actually is, points to a bowl placed by the wall, where the tips of black shoes can be seen on the trampled earth, beneath the hem of a faded blue habit, tied with a chain up there, at the waist, gathered in folds further up, at the breast, its top, around the head, extending into a white wimple. Asked whether she knows Handke, the nun says, “Yes!” She couldn’t tell us more about him, but, “There are people,” she says, “who know all about that.”

The cat pushed around the bowl into which the old woman poured bones, chicken necks, feet, offal . . . from a plastic bag. Suddenly I realized that nuns lived like everybody else. I turned towards the hill that rose, right behind the shed, fronting the back of the monastery building. I saw two nuns there. They were the same nuns we’d driven
past in our car only minutes before. They had just arrived. Their arms
were full of: wild flowers, twigs, sprigs of herb, and heads of lettuce.
Behind them in the picture a mild slope rose up. At the top of the little
hill stood a shack and a greenhouse. In front of the latter, vegetable
beds. They stretched between rows of plants. A small group of people
stood in the distance.

We went through the space between the shed and the back of the
monastery. We ran into the nuns. We were unable to avoid them, and
they were unable to avoid us. Asked if they knew Handke, they replied
in unison, “Of course!” “What kind of a man is he?” we asked in
unison. “Strange!” they said. One of the women seemed to speak “for
all the others.” As if repeating the opinion of everyone else. For exam-
ple: she stated that Handke’s book Wunschloses Unglück (my
translation of it has been published by Decije novine, who entitled it
Horror vacui) had been “unfavorably received” at the monastery. She
didn’t say that she agreed with this opinion, but she didn’t reject it
either. The other woman—let us call her, also, an “old woman”—was
left out. She kept trying to join in the conversation, but with no
success. In her hand she held a sprig of some herb and a twig. (The first
woman—another “old woman”—held a head of lettuce and a bunch of
wild flowers in her hand.) “Are these wild flowers?” Scott asked. The
old woman replied, in the affirmative: “Yes, these are wild flowers!”
addressing both Scott and the old woman with the cat, but not the old
woman with the twig. And then I felt a powerful urge not to disturb her
in her quiet benevolence. The woman—who reminded me irresistibly
of my grandmother—suddenly spoke out most clearly: “In that house,
up there (she pointed her finger towards the top of the hill), lives a man
who knows a lot about Handke!” We turned to look at the hill. “The
man, however, is away!” said the first old woman. The other old
woman merely looked at the front door. The old woman with the cat
sank deeper still into the bowl, where the cat was devouring the few
remaining shreds of bone, feet, and offal. Scott looked at a branch of
the tree in front of us. I gazed sadly at the cat. I felt pain. I thought
slowly. Then with lightning speed. I watched horror movies. I read
books on conspiracies. I didn’t answer the phone. I felt harassed from
all directions. Still, I didn’t cry.

We parted politely. Smiling.

A bit later, as my finger touched the doorbell at the entrance to the
monastery wing—Scott photographed me at close range, then came to
the door and rang the bell once more—the Second Old Woman
appeared again, now with only two sprigs of herb between her fingers.
She was unlocking the door. She opened it wide. She said quietly, benevolently: “Everybody is at church.”

Scott sits at my desk. He writes. From time to time he gets up, takes books down from the shelves. He writes down some of the titles in a grey notebook. He takes some books with him to the desk. He stacks some books on the cabinet.

I sit in “Scott’s room.” I write. From time to time I get up, take books down from the shelves. I write down some of the titles in a brown leather-bound notebook. I take some books with me to the desk. I stack some books on the cabinet. I stack Bruce Chatwin’s books apart, one on top of the other. Then I pile three books by Ernst Jünger on top of them. But, only moments later, I return Jünger’s books to the shelf, and add to the pile the few books by Kenneth White that I own. Moments later, I place all the books by Robert Walser next to the Chatwin-White pile, and turn them into another pile. I immediately add to it all my books by Handke. On top of them I place Segalen. On top of Segalen, Fulton’s picture books. On top of Fulton, Mandić. On top of Mandić, Brinkmann. On top of Brinkmann, Jünger again. And so forth.

Last night the Swiss poet Jürg Beeler arrived in Tübingen. The man has had a collection of poetry, Tag, Maulschele, Tag, published by Ammann-Verlag of Zürich. He won a prize for the book. He arrived by train. After protracted deliberations, he decided not to stay with me but with Tilo Klaiber.

At one point I thought I was sitting in the shed in front of the back entrance of the monastery. Instead of the cat, I saw Handke, who sat on the bare ground, wore hiking boots, and propped himself on a hiking staff. He laughed and spoke softly: “I am a profoundly . . . a thoroughly dialectical writer. That is part of writing . . . . Instead of dialectics one might say: weaving: to-and-fro. . . . It’s the to-and-fro that one thinks through. . . . In the thinking through of the to-and-fro, the delight of storytelling emerges . . . . Do you get my meaning?”

“Children have an especially developed sense of repetition.”
“Roads, even when they aren’t circular, are repetitions.”
“Repetition is slow progress.”
In a sanitarium at Steinhof, near Vienna, I listened to a woman who kept repeating the words “Eine Verstellung.”
Every morning, as I walk to work hurriedly, breathing seems to me a horrid repetition. . . . Later, on my way back home, breathing is the repetition of the loveliest passages from the loveliest operas. My motion is ballet. My steps are rhythm. And my thoughts: a repetition of the world’s history.

22 MAY 1989
TÜBINGEN

“The homesickness of my years at the seminary was a thing of the past” (Repetition, 46) . . . “I came to feel at home while on the move” (Repetition, 43) . . . “the glossy-black wooden ticket office floor; the roaring of the cast-iron stoves; the banging of doors; the flapping of posters against the bus-ports outside; the trembling of a starting bus, the crackling and banging of another that was parking; the blowing of dust, leaves, snow, and newspapers through the windy street; faint yellow. . . . high up in the trees; the cracked supports of the ports; the rusting sheet-metal signs indicating destinations” (Repetition, 45).

“That is enough action for me,” Scott said.
“No need for anything more to happen,” I said.
“This in itself is Plenty,” he said.
“Here is the ‘hub of events’,” I said.
“True, ‘in a story’ ‘the hero’ can ‘be’ ‘someone who claims to be God, or an idiot who, ridiculed by all when he got in, avenged himself during the night ride by steering the bus off a precipice,’” Scott said.
“Yes,” I said.
“Well, yes,” Scott said.
“The hero can also be someone who is never detached from the observer, but always identifies with him and approves, until a moment comes when he becomes ‘it,’ and hatred is there instead of distance . . . . Afterwards he remembers ‘it’ with some pangs of conscience, and conscience is there instead of identification . . . And he runs away from ‘it,’ and from ‘himself,’ and from everything,” I said (or merely narrated).
“Once upon a time there were ‘peasant women,’” Scott started narrating (or saying). “Their ‘movements’ ‘around the house,’ ‘from spot to spot,’ ‘resembled walking.’ ‘They walked from the table to the cooker, from the cooker to the kitchen cupboard, from the cupboard back to the table.’”

“This walking within a constricted space begins with ‘standing,’ doesn’t it?” I said.

“It is the swift sequence of hurried striding, not standing on-tiptoe, rushing from place-to-place, shifting from foot-to-foot, turning round and further-hurried-striding,” Scott was saying.

“Once upon a time there was a man who ‘sat in a circle with similar men’,” I started narrating. “They were telling jokes,” I went on, “The man always showed his approval by laughing, yet every time a sigh too late,” I continued from what I had already said. “He understood what was being said, but couldn’t see the point of the joke,” I went on. “He had no sense of ambiguity and allusion,” I continued from what I had already said. “He took other people’s stories quite literally,” I went on. “During brief moments of silence you could see in his eyes that he experienced the narrated bits as very serious indeed,” I continued from what I had already said. The story was developing in Triads. It went on and followed from earlier segments. It spun itself out. It drew in the listener, who tumbled in as if standing “where three borders meet.” (At a crossing? traveling? on a bridge?)

“That’s exactly how I once lounged about with my pals,” Scott followed on.

The wind bent the huge tree before us, every leaf moved separately, the branches seemed to breathe, some seemed to whisper . . .

The road to Griffen led through a landscape that we crossed, for the first time ever, yet, seemingly familiar . . .

There is a quiet place at the entrance to “The Dream.” It is fringed with a line of variously colored houses. A garden with fruit trees in front of each house. Soft mown grass beneath the trees. A woman with bared breasts lolls in the sun beneath a fruit tree. A cat with its prey in its maw. The river runs silently. The noise of children on the other bank. Silence. Water splashing. A man sits at a table and yawns. His mouth stretches out and turns into the rim of a soup cauldron from a hospital kitchen. As if there will now be a general rush towards him, to start lunch. He slurps some soup, then pours it from his spoon over the plate, which produces a tiny rattling noise. A bone jumps out of the pot, straight into the mouth of a dog, which, abruptly, stops barking.
Heaven’s gate is the window of a shed through which we see logs scattered over the floor planks. Footsteps in the dark are the soft shuffling of sandals. The wind rustles, drawing the curtains over the window, whose pane suddenly drops and the lavish picture of a moment ago vanishes. Heaven is not an easy place. At one point, it seems, unbearable. The man in shorts is, perhaps, a news vendor who was sacked yesterday. And, we think, he will now be metamorphosed, and multiplied, and he will spread out, as a long procession of demonstrators (brandishing hoes, scythes, pitchforks).

In the evening we sat, five of us, and quietly ate. For a while we talked. Jürg Beeler, the Swiss poet, repeated once again these significant words: “Lemons are a silent kind of citrus fruit. I have slept with bananas. My cat meowed jealously all the time.”

It is Tuesday, 11 o’clock. Jürg Beeler sits at my table, to my right. Scott sits at a table behind my back. I sit in front of Scott, to the left of Jürg. I am propped on my elbows; Scott, too, is propped on his elbows; Jürg is propped on his elbows as well.

We write.

Scott’s pen is white. Jürg’s pen is green. My pen is black.

The notebook that Scott is writing in right now is small, grey. The notebook that Jürg is writing in right now is white, large. My notebook is medium-sized and brown.

Last night’s conversation at Pfeffingen pointed to the possibility of a “society of readers.” There we were: Scott Abbott, Jürg Beeler, Zorka Papadopolos, Tilo Klaiber, Žarko Radaković. Under discussion were Handke, Wenders, and Storytelling. Abbott agreed with Beeler. Radakovic agreed with Papadopolos. Klaiber agreed with Abbott, but not with Beeler. Beeler agreed with Papadopolos, but not with Radaković. Scott was in his element. It was a beautiful warm evening beneath a vine in the garden. Not a particle stirred in all nature. Everything merged so gently into One. Only a few details of objects, of the protagonists’ faces, and of technical objects were enlarged and clear.

Early afternoon. Scott left a few minutes ago. On the desk in my room there are books, crammed folders, a pencil sharpener, an ashtray,
a calendar, and two letters from Scott.

Dear Jürg,

I sought your gaze at Pfeffingen last night. I found it resting on the tip of the collar of Tilo Klaiber’s shirt.

Pure drops of select thoughts trickled down your cheeks.

At one point I thought you were one of those who might once have gone for a walk with Robert Walser. I was afraid that you might “end up” in a madhouse yourself. You were somehow tired. “Melancholy,” I whispered, realizing that you yearned for “something else.” I knew that you were devoted. Yet possessive too. And that you were capable of hatred. As if you were at your most alive when alone. (I was certain: You missed your wife!)

Dearest Zorica,

the moment you got up from the chair and stepped towards the rose bush in bloom I saw your body outlined beneath the sumptuous skirt in bright African colors. Your skin seemed to be part of me. Smooth, shiny, ever-firm. It smelled of your breath and I loved and cherished your objections to the great author Peter Handke, whom I loved in an entirely different way. Your thoughts were clear and exact. And your smile more limpid than the wine from the south to which you belonged more than the south itself. You sang like Senegalese shepherds. I covered you as you slept like a lion cub. I looked at you, I cried, I laughed, and told you the latest jokes. And in Scott’s face, which looked at you with the look of a child, I saw a limpid and serene sky.

My dear Tilo,

your affection for Ulrich, Klaus, and Miroslav Mandić is proof of your love for me, who has felt your love for them for years. I stretched and spread like the linden tree in front of the Central Library. You didn’t like Handke. Then you suddenly came to like him. And as we were shopping for stereos together, I saw you grow excited over a NAD amplifier, just as I once did, reading Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied. I never ceased to believe in your epistolary thirst for fresh writing. You were discreet even when you shouted. You were noisy even when you slept. I loved the way you sat in a chair, your arms folded on your knees. I loved the way you ate bread. I liked the apples on your table. Didn’t we use to meet unexpectedly in the unlikeliest parts of town. Sometimes we would walk into old buildings and admire
the waxed wooden staircases. You were everybody’s loyal friend. You could read aloud.

Dear Scott,
my mother too—like Gregor Kobal’s—is descended from rebels. A remote ancestor of mine, Mladen Pantić, had amassed a fortune by looting before he crossed the Sava, fleeing from Macva to the Pannonian plain. He settled on the slopes of Mt. Sainte-Victoire. His son, Miloš, my grandfather and great-great-grandfather, later a prosperous farmer, spent his life talking about buried treasure, yet never looked for it. They said that Mladen had kept the secret till his very last breath, and took it with him to the grave. “In the stubble field, beneath the old pear,” were his last words, which remain an enigma. The plain still extends as far as the eye can see. Only the odd line of poplars in front of a farm obstructs the gaze that ranges over infinity.

Dear Jürg,
at the baker’s today, before my very eyes, they unloaded rolls that, in my nose, smelled of gunpowder.

Dear Scott,
in the field today, I gathered the hay that you cut on 19 May 1989 and piled it into small stacks. It has been dry for days.

Dear Miroslav,
I’ve had no news of your movements. Do get in touch.

Dear Dragan,
I read your piece in NIN. It’s fine.

Dear Peter,
according to information that I’ve only had from Maruša, you ought to be in Greece. I have read Bruce Chatwin. I never stopped thinking of you.

The woman who is now hanging out the wash is my neighbor.

Eight years ago, we lived in another high-rise, but on the fourth floor.
Dear Peter,
   I’ve been reading Ponge, Bove, and Char, in your translation.

   A sentence from one of Nietzsche’s books returns me to Repetitions.

   ☾ 26 May 1989
   Tübingen

It said somewhere in a book that the collapse of Austria was no other than the expected consequence of the workings of the Austro-Hungarian spirit of “irresponsibility and slackness”; the product of numerous “shallow” and “inconsistently carried out” jobs; “insufficient severity”; “lack of motivation in defending one’s own integrity”; “Athenian cunning,” true, “plenty of temperament,” and “a wealth of hedonistic experience”; nevertheless, “unpreparedness” in “times of crisis.”

As I sat in a café in Klagenfurt (it was 14 May 1989), I felt on my face the man who served me. His “slackness” could easily turn into “patient waiting.” I imagined myself as a boorish, drunken man, an ill-mannered man. The man sent a few reproachful looks in my direction. I spat on the floor. The man spoke a warning word aloud. I threw my plate at the window. I swore. Only then did the man call the bouncers . . .

In another country, in a situation in which I had behaved exactly the same way, I was taken straight to the police station, without a single word. The man there never budged, never batted an eyelid. He was even polite all the time.

There was once a man whom public opinion, and even his friends, always declared to be stupid. He always reacted “without thinking”; while others kept silent, watched, waited, assessed the situation and, above all, thought. The man’s reactions were usually wrong. The reactions of others, the product, no doubt, of lengthy preparation by means of thinking, were always “right.”
There were glasses on a wall, ranged on shelves resembling towers and pillars. Above the brandy glasses there was an oblong vessel filled with a turbulent viscous liquid, in which the color blue spread and rolled like a wave. From below, a thick shaft of light, like inverted rain, undermined the liquid with a clarity that burst above the source of the light, reminiscent of agitatedly outflowing blood.

On the table are a beer glass, a salt cellar, a container with napkins and drinking straws, an ashtray, and a can of condensed milk, as well as the notebook in which I now write these letters with this pen.

The thought of Scott Abbott pains me. There is always the image of a man in an impeccably ironed shirt and precisely creased pants, with a clear expression on his face. White teeth. Ears neither small nor large. Every hair in its proper place. The idea that he is now sitting in his little room in Frankfurt, engrossed in the anthroposophic writings that he uses merely as material for his novel, draws me further away, towards the exhibition pavilion where Prospect is staged, and where a Triptych post historicus by Braca Dimitrijević quietly resides.

So, we arrived in Griffen around noon (that was on 15 May 1989, this is a Repetition). First we roamed, driving slowly along the narrow streets. The place lies on low ground, bordered, on one side, by a huge, steep cliff. The houses start on the very foothills of the mountain. The hilly part of town is called Altenmarkt. It lies south of the road, which is the main street as well. Both sides of the road spill out and merge with other streets. The ground has been evened out. And while the main street is noisy, smaller side streets and those that run parallel with it are quiet. “This place could be like something in the States,”’ I told Scott. “This place could be somewhere in the American Midwest,” Scott confirmed.
6 JUNE 1989
TÜBINGEN

The thought of Handke does not feel strange and remote. But the thought of Griffen is beginning to feel “strange and remote.”

15 JUNE 1989
TÜBINGEN

I dreamt last night of Tomaž Šalamun. He was a huge, burly man, with cropped hair, dependable. His children were there too, Maruša, Zorica, and my father. We were all casually dressed. Tomaž and my father wore grey suits. Yet the color of the fabric was closer to a brownish-petrol-blue. Both were suntanned.

When I woke up my first thought was “Andraž Šalamun.” Tonight I am to talk with Toza Vlajković. On the subject of Handke. For Radio Belgrade’s “202” channel.

10 MAY 1991
COLOGNE

On 28 June 1989, the sixth centenary of the battle of Kosovo was observed at Kosovo polje, in the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija, in the republic of Serbia, in Yugoslavia. The masses gathered on the broad expanse of the plain of Kosovo to hear a commemorative address by their President, Slobodan Milošević.

Anselm Weidner, journalist of the German radio station Süd-deutsche Rundfunk, and I, his interpreter, arrived in Priština on 28 June 1989. (The text that I reproduce here was written on 29 June 1989, and I copy it here today, by pen; in other words, I repeat it.) After a crazy journey at breakneck speed from Tübingen to Ljubljana, from Ljubljana to Zagreb, from Zagreb to Belgrade, we completed the lap from Belgrade to Priština too.

At Ljubljana, having arrived in a Toyota car, we missed the plane to Belgrade and boarded the plane to Zagreb where, after a bit of wrangling, we “missed the opportunity” to talk to the People in Charge in the building of Radio Zagreb (for the People in Charge “weren’t there at all”; for “every time I am in Zagreb I lose my temper over the
lack of information”), so that, after a conversation with the obliging lady who worked in the office of the “Aviogenex” company, we walked listlessly down Amruš street, whose meandering course took us unfailingly to the house number thirteen.

At Julije Knifer’s, the atmosphere was “cozy.” The dog gnawed at one of my shoes. Nada was coating eggplants with bread crumbs. Ana was unaffected and sweet. Knifer, as always in similar situations, held his joined hands at the nape of his neck. Those were moments of pure feeling, of clear looks and inner peace. Even the voice of Slobodan Milošević on television was slightly more restrained.

Belgrade. It’s as if, amidst powerful emotions and evident family ties, we have been reduced to operatives and operations. Those were hours of increasingly frequent conversations with Anselm Weidner, the hours of a “businesslike” Anselm, the hours we spent in an office in the airport building, and the hours that we worked in the office of the “Adria” company, where we made several expensive phone calls to Hamburg, Stuttgart, Munich, Bremen, Saarbrücken, and Cologne.

Priština. A fog-wrapped evening. Utter darkness and silence. The smell of earth and stale fruit. In one place I saw a man walking along the road who tottered, ran into a group of men who grabbed him by his upper clothes and dragged him into the dark. The bus that runs from the airport to the city is driven by an elderly man. At one point a young man gets up from the seat next to mine and informs the driver that he had forgotten his luggage at the airport. The driver’s reply is lost in the noise of tanks that roll down the road at that very moment.

Before the Grand hotel, downtown. A group of young men, Serbs, is protesting against an illegally parked bus (the driver is Albanian). At one point a scuffle breaks out, which ends with the enraged young men breaking into the bus and dragging out the driver. Shouting. Oaths.

In front of the hotel several Albanians offer us a taxi. We leave. In the direction of a cheaper hotel, the “Peony of Kosovo.” (It is now 29 June 1989, and the text was written at breakfast that same day; this is a repetition.) Anselm has a double serving of breakfast. (It’s cheap.) In the hall of the hotel we run into people from Belgrade Radio and TV. (They address us in voices that sound like a news bulletin.) One of them suggests we meet up again in Belgrade.

The newsstand across the street from the hotel garden. Sitting
under a chestnut tree. A quick perusal of the papers.

The shoeshine boy asked me for double the money, because he had “used different colors of shoeshine.”

Taxi driver. A fleshy, heavy man, but not fat. He offers to drive us to Kosovo polje. We reject the offer. We make for the building of the provincial government. Security checks at the entrance. First a face scrutinizes us through the glass of the doorman’s cubicle. Our passports are taken away. Two men go up the stairs. They return after a few minutes. Then another two arrive. Everybody looks at us, moving hurriedly. The faces are not smiling. Nor are they stern. All the time I look Anselm in the eye. He looks around, bewildered. When I thought they would throw us out, they lead us away.

Stairs. Corridors. Rooms. Doors. In a medium-sized room we sit down in armchairs. There is a bronze relief of Josip Broz on the wall. A door opens. Marija Gašt is steps into the room, placing a soft, plump leg on the carpet. “A fine-looking woman,” I think. Expensively dressed, I notice. She orders fruit juice for us, fruit juice and coffee for herself. The room is padded. A picture of Josip Broz hangs on the wall. The voice of Marija Gašt is unusually coquettish. Charming movements, elegant gestures, a dignified look on her face. The woman feels important. She communicates the feeling to us. And I turn to Anselm, I notice that he feels important too, and he gives me a meaningful look, as if he could see that I too feel important. Marija Gašt said that “Kosovo hasn’t lost its autonomy.” Dryly, in an utterly controlled manner, yet in a ringing voice, she spoke of clashes in which “twenty-four people died.” She rose from her chair several times. She returned to her place, lowering her soft and succulent body. She seemed to want to step towards Anselm. I almost felt like going out of the room and leaving them alone. What kept me nailed to my chair was the sight of a heavy cut-glass ashtray on the table and the weight of Tito’s figure in bronze relief, which pressed so hard on the wall that I thought it would burst through it and that through the crack we would be able to see Đilas, Kardelj, Ranković, and Kidrić. Anselm crossed his legs, pouted his lips, and twitched his mustache. Marija said, in a charming voice, that she “loved Slobodan Milošević.” I imagined myself writing this down “word for word” in my notebook. I kept my hands crossed on my knees. I watched Marija’s heaving breasts. With measured words, and in a warm voice, she spoke. She didn’t know “exactly how many people attended yesterday’s rally at Kosovo polje,” for “the celebration did not take place at the stadium,” where “you always know how many people
are gathered “or you can at least “have a more definite impression” of their numbers. “How many Albanians are there in Kosovo”? She again couldn’t exactly tell us, but it was almost certain that “the figure was close to 90 per cent.” She said that demonstrators had “thrown stones at the police.” Some were “even armed.” (That had been, she said, in March 1989.) “The police never immediately reacted by shooting,” she said. Anselm twitched his mustache, frowned, laid his hand on his knee, scratched his chin with the other hand, and plucked a horsehair from the seat, whose springs tinkled softly. “But the police had to return the demonstrators’ fire,” she said. She also said that we were “too interested” in matters of security and “too little” in economic ones. “That’s right,” I thought. So, rather than banging the table with my fist and spitting out harsh words across the back of the office chair: “How many enterprises were solvent in the first quarter?” “How much has been produced for export this year?” “To what extent do other republics participate in production?” “Are there privately-owned enterprises here?” “What about standards?” “What about wages?” “Are idle enterprises being closed down!” “Screw all this expense-account spending!” “Fuck the factories that are opened only to increase employment figures on paper!” “Fuck all this hysteria!” “Screw reason!” “Screw work!” “Screw plain facts!” “Screw awareness of one’s own potential!” “Get your ass off to the fields, where peppers grow like grass and pile up before the houses like stones after a major earthquake!” “Tiny shops, sprouting up like mushrooms,” “packed pastry shops,” “ice cream,” “the noise of merriment,” “frescoes glittering in monasteries,” “tobacco leaves fanned out like lungs,” “tractors,” “tourist coaches,” “huge bunches of grapes fall out of overloaded trucks, on which groups of hens immediately converge, pecking and performing ballet steps,” “flocks of sparrows descend on the potato fields, to devour pests collectively,” “thousands of workers, with hoes and spades across their shoulders, march as one and sing marching songs that resound like the sirens of hundreds of buses carrying hundreds of thousands of soccer fans,” “millions of ants in orderly lines are conquering new fields of endeavor, new markets, new areas of manufacturing and intellectual activity,” “swarms of bees are reforming the economic system and boosting the workers’ zeal with their buzzing,” “while the army and police, composed of wolves, snakes, mosquitoes, and spiders, suddenly turn into dogs, cats, ducklings, and ladybirds and they all doze placidly together on the grass before a well of clear water.” Marija Gašić crossed her legs discreetly. Her short skirt rode up a bit towards the hips, revealing a
sumptuous thigh, clearly delineating the knee of a plump leg that, together with the large and shapely breasts, made for a figure of exotic harmony and flavor. She spoke flawless French, and English. I wrote down her sentences, perfect, in my notebook, enchanted, feeling Anselm’s breathing as the gentle breeze and springtime twittering of birds at Kosovo polje, six hundred years ago.

Right now we are sitting in the garden of the “Peony of Kosovo” hotel. (This was on 29 June 1989. That was when I wrote these lines in my notebook, bound in dark-brown calf skin. This book is called Repetitions. It is being written by my friend Scott and myself. And today is 11 May 1991. In other words, I am copying the story of Kosovo polje into the book called Repetitions.) The street is unusually busy. Many people, very different. The Albanians always walk towards a definite goal. The Serbs mostly sit. Heavy and immobile, they radiate their massive energies that seem to trace the walkers’ paths in loud conversations, deep voices, resolute thoughts, heavy words, long mouthfuls and great gulps at the dining table. “A complex life,” Anselm says at one point. “It’s a life with no pre-established patterns,” he goes on, rolling a cigarette and looking relaxed in a way that is entirely unfamiliar to me. “The Balkans are a chaos without iteration, entropy, or mirrors,” I said, “simply, a mess.” I went on, “and I find it hard to think in your language here,” I concluded. “The German mentality is a mentality of horror,” Anselm said. “What do you mean,” I asked. “The pressure of a stone on every cell,” I said. “Chaos is always a product of the influence and interference of other systems of thought and models of life,” I said. “I find it hard to think of all this in my language, which is now yours too,” he said and, suddenly, asked with determination, “is Priština Jerusalem?” At that moment I remembered a woman on the plane from Belgrade to Priština, who sat uptight throughout the flight, expecting the explosion of a time bomb and our shared death.

Meanwhile the following took place:

The obese cabby drove us to Kosovo polje. On the way there he talked, and said the following: “You see, there, that rally that was, there, that was, a million people there, a million and a half, so, as they say, for example, there wasn’t a single Albanian, maybe a few, there wasn’t, ten per cent, no Albanian, very much, there was some, and why there was, because, for example, we Albanians, when we like, you know, the picture of Tito, but there was no picture of Tito, you know, only Slobo, Slobodan, and, you know, soon as there’s no picture of Tito, what can
you do, this is Tito’s Yugoslavia, right, it’s Tito’s Yugoslavia, you know, I, why should I go when there’s no picture of Tito, we Albanian, we gonna follow Tito, what Tito said, we’re gonna . . . .” I sat in the back seat of the limousine. Anselm sat in the front seat, next to the driver. I looked between the driver and Anselm, towards the plain where the road vanished in perspective, shifting my gaze from left to right, from Anselm’s face to the driver’s, and back. All the time, the driver drove half-facing me. I asked him: “Right, tell me, what do you think are the real problems, here in Kosovo, I mean, not just yesterday, yesterday there was this celebration . . . .” The driver immediately took up my words: “Yup. Six hundred years . . . .” I immediately took up his words: “How many people were there yesterday?” The driver said: “I guess, ‘bout a million, million, sure.” I asked: “Weren’t there two million?” The driver said: “No, there weren’t.” I asked: “What do you think have been people’s problems here, in recent years.” The driver said: “Well, you know, for me, I had no work six years, and I got friends of mine who had no work ten years, and when you got no work, you know, you bury your family, or what.” Turning to me, who was sitting in the back, Anselm said: “Frag mal ihn, ob diese Feindschaft, von der immer im Ausland geredet wird, zwischen Serben und Albanern, wirklich gibt.” I said to the driver: “So, you think the problems here are mainly economic.” The driver was silent and drove on without looking at either myself or Anselm. I said: “And about the Serbs, you know, Serbs and Albanians, conflicts, that kind of thing, do they exist.” The driver turned round and said: “Well, look, you know, we never touch anyone, we Albanians, you know, we, never touch anyone. They, you know, soon as they’re out of school they get work, you know, and we wait ten years. You tell me, you know, is that fair or not.” The driver fell silent and gazed over the steering wheel. A muted silence seemed to reign for a while. Only the noise of the automobile engine was heard. The sun was so bright that its color turned to Red and Orange. Anselm’s nose was red too. His voice, too, grew darker. He said: “Frag mal ihn weiter . . . Die offizielle Zahl der Toten ist vier und zwanzig . . . .” I said at once: “He wants to know, how many dead, dammit, does anybody know for sure.” The driver said curtly: “Well, about that, I’m sure I don’t know, I don’t know.” I went on immediately: “It’s officially known, they said officially, twenty-four or twenty-five, is that right.” The driver answered curtly: “Well, I don’t know nothing about that.” I went on immediately: “But surely some people were killed.” The driver replied curtly: “I don’t know. I don’t know about that.” I went on: “And about the conflicts that take place
around here, are they between the police and demonstrators, or between the Serbs and Albanians.” The driver said: “Well, they demonstrated, I, they said, they demonstrated, they just had a picture of Tito and wanted their rights, and they really didn’t do nothing, you know, they, nothing, they wouldn’t stop. That kind of thing.”

It was a slow conversation rather than a long one, very similar to the road we drove along. The heat outside was great and the wind wafted it in through all the four open windows. Burnt earth, “mown grass,” “cinders thrown over the wheat,” cornfields in the distance, “trampled” for the most part. At the end of the horizon, mountain tops, which resembled both walls and the clouds that continued them. All the time I felt as if I wasn’t in Yugoslavia at all. All the time I kept thinking of Van Gogh’s paintings.

At Kosovo polje we sat for a long time in a restaurant. We ate. The interior of the restaurant was ornate. The waiter took unusually long to serve us. Tito’s picture hung exactly above the glass rack. A pair of boxing gloves hung on another wall. The head of a dark-skinned man could be seen below them. “A Gypsy,” Anselm said. The room had one glass wall, looking out onto a tiny square. Just beyond the wall, on a little verandah with tables and chairs, two policemen sat at a table, their backs to the glass wall, rifles slung from their shoulders. They sat leaning against the glass wall. In front of them, on the verandah, a group of people were standing. They had come seeking shelter from the pouring rain. The people stood in various attitudes. Some rested on sticks, hoes, spades. Others were propping up full sacks. A third group merely stared into the distance. And a fourth at the sky. All had their backs turned to the policemen, who observed their bodies with calm looks. Anselm and I, sitting at a table in the restaurant right behind the glass wall, watched the back of the policemen’s heads. All the time I had the impression that someone was watching me from behind. I turned round and saw the waiter: He stood leaning against the wall and looked me in the eye.

Through a gap between the bodies of the people on the verandah I suddenly saw a grocery store across the street. In front of the store crates with fruit and vegetables were piled: tomatoes, peaches, pears, apricots, plums, and lettuce. The grocer bustled constantly about the crates, kept a watchful eye on them as if they were children, moved the fruit from one end of the crate to the other. He pottered around, never stopping in his motion. And he didn’t look like someone who would sit, say, in the restaurant across the street and order food and a bottle
of wine and eat at length and drink and talk in a deep voice. He looked like someone who would work ceaselessly and die on his feet.

We went into the grocery store. It was a dark, narrow room from whose shadows there suddenly emerged the shapes of brightly colored objects. Through the store window you could see the fruit and vegetable crates outside, and before them a huge puddle was spreading in the roadway, fed by water from a burst main. The puddle was observed from across the street by the people on the verandah of the restaurant, and between their bodies you could see the eyes of the policemen, who sat there leaning against the glass wall of the eatery, watching the people’s bodies, while the ends of rifle barrels, spear-like, could be seen above their heads. The grocer is a fair-haired elderly man. His concentration was entirely focused on the work in hand. Every moment was filled with work. He never rested. Yet he moved neither hysterically nor brusquely, but always harmoniously, softly, and gently. He spoke little.

We bought several kilos of fruit. We paid. We made our way down the street. A multitude of people were sitting in restaurants and pubs. They were quite different from the grocer. They ate, they drank, and they talked loudly. They also seemed physically heavier than the grocer. They looked like lumps of rock that couldn’t be moved. All this time—I am quite certain—the grocer was pouring water over his lettuce, dusting each fruit, sprinkling the peaches with dew. He wore a blue coat. He gave me change to the very last cent, and “wouldn’t even hear” of a tip.

We are sitting in a pastry shop. A boy works behind the counter. He distributes ice cream cones and cups to the infrequent customers. Most of them are children. Anselm orders an enormous serving of ice cream. He puts the bags with a kilo of pears, two kilos of apricots, a kilo of tomatoes, two kilos of plums, and a kilo and a half of peppers down at his feet. The vendor deftly throws scoops of ice cream into a silver metal goblet and tells us about the two days when he didn’t sell an ounce of ice cream. “Because of the ban” that was in force, he says calmly. It was a well-lit, airy room. A pinball machine (but I took it for a jukebox) stood next to the wall. Several boys and girls stood round the pinball machine (but I saw them as belles and commandos). At the table, Anselm ate his ice cream greedily (but I saw him as a private eye). At one point a young man in a black T-shirt came into the room. He spoke German, with an Austrian accent. He said he was from Klagenfurt. He hasn’t read any Handke. He plays tennis. He resells refrigerators. His family is from a neighboring village. The guy here,
the vendor, is a school friend of his. He had lively eyes. Yet his facial expression was frozen, as in Egyptian frescoes. (I have long been “very fond of” Coptic painting.) The young man sat down beside Anselm and bought him another ice cream. Anselm moved the bag with the peppers, which tumbled across his shoes. Scattered tomatoes rolled over the floor. We picked them up, the vendor, the boys, the girls, and I. Meanwhile the young man and Anselm discussed Carinthia.

The bus ride into town was quite ordinary. On the seat behind me there was an old woman with three little girls on her lap. They were all incredibly alike. The only difference was in their age, which you could determine by their differing corporeal dimensions. The eldest girl had the longest little legs, the biggest little head, the longest hair. In some things, quite the opposite was the case: The youngest had the biggest little eyes, the deepest voice, and the most restless gaze. We got off at the last stop, in a street which also marked the boundary of the old quarter. The streets meander, to meet (perhaps) somewhere at the center of the quarter. The houses are lined up like dominoes. The facades, jutting, overhang the sidewalk where a field of piled garbage and scattered stones is spreading, visibly. A line of ants was marching across an old box. One of the houses was no more than frontage. Behind it, a small space was concealed, an erstwhile room, its walls half torn down. Grass and weeds rose high from the floor. We stop before a store-window with rings and jewelry. Silver wire, strung out on the white fabric-covered bottom of the window, glints in the evening sunlight. I squatted to peer at a small ring in the left-hand corner of the window. Silence. A sunbeam, which hit the pane at a right angle, penetrated through the window and, spilling into reddish streaks, was refracted over the ring, which suddenly turned into a large circle. At the same time it extinguished itself there at its center, shining back, instead of a glint, a “coarse” light. And it soaked up moisture, which immediately dried and turned into a skein of warmth. I bought it at once, without hesitating.

Only a few steps away, we found ourselves in a tailor’s shop. Anselm immediately tried on a jacket and pants. “They look good on you,” I said. He stood in front of a mirror, striking attitudes. “A good fit, the suit,” said the tailor. He was Albanian, a man of our age, in a blue coat. He sat behind the counter, looking towards the window, through the pane and out, at the passers-by who filed past as fashion models on a catwalk. One wore a jacket with overlong sleeves. Another had pants torn at the seat. The third wore a floor-length robe. The fourth had his shirt-tails untucked. The fifth wore a winter coat. The
sixth was a policeman with a rifle. The seventh, an old man with a loaf of bread under his arm. The eighth was a child dragging a branch behind it. The tailor was stitching up the hems of the jacket. A smoking iron stood upright on the counter before him. The tailor, a large man with grey-blond cropped hair and eyes like glowing potatoes, smiled from his pupils. At the same time he flashed his eyes. Then he rose from the chair, sat on the counter, turned to me, and we immediately “became close.”

At the end of this story, however, though I might have died before the day was out, I found myself in middle life; I looked at the spring sun on my blank paper, thought back on the autumn and winter, and wrote: Storytelling, there is nothing more worldly than you, nothing more just, my holy of holies. Storytelling, patron saint of long-range combat, my lady. Storytelling, most spacious of all vehicles, heavenly chariot. Eye of my story, reflect me, for you alone know me and appreciate me. Blue of heaven, descend into the plain, thanks to my storytelling. Storytelling, music of sympathy, forgive us, forgive and dedicate us. Story, give the letters another shake, blow through the word sequences, order yourself into script, and give us, through your particular pattern, our common pattern. Story, repeat, that is, renew, postpone, again and again, a decision that must not be. Blind windows and empty cow paths, be the incentive and hallmark of my story. Long live my storytelling! It must go on. May the sun of my storytelling stand forever over the Ninth Country, which can perish only with the last breath of life. Exiles from the land of storytelling, come back from dismal Pontus. Descendant, when I am here no longer, you will reach me in the land of storytelling, the Ninth Country. Storyteller in your misshapen hut, you with the sense of locality, fall silent if you will, silent down through the centuries, harkening to the outside, delving into your own soul, but then, King, Child, get hold of yourself, prop yourself on your elbows, smile all around you, take a deep breath, and start all over again with your all-appeasing “And then . . . .”

12 These words form the final section of the book Die Wiederholung by Peter Handke. There, in the present tense, in German, and not italicized, they run as follows: “Ich dagegen sehe mich, mag ich auch heute noch sterben, am Ende dieser Erzählung nun in der Mitte meines Lebens, betrachte die Frühlingssonne auf dem leeren Papier, denke zurück an den Herbst und den Winter und schreibe: Erzählung, nichts Weltlichere als du, nichts Gerechteres, mein Allerheiligstes. Erzähl-
lung, Patronin des Fernkämpfers, meine Herrin, Erzählung, geräumig-
stes aller Fahrzeuge, Himmelswagen. Auge der Erzählung, spiegelte
mich, denn allein du erkennst mich und würdigst mich. Blau des
Himmels, komm in die Niederung herab durch die Erzählung.
Erzählung, Musik der Teilnahme, begnadige, begnade und weihe uns.
Erzählung, würfelte die Lettern frisch, durchwehe die Wortfolgen, füg
dich zur Schrift und gib, in deinem besonderen, unser gemeinsames
Muster. Erzählung, wiederhole, das heisst, erneuere; immer neu
hinausschiebend eine Entscheidung, welche nicht sein darf. Blinde
Fenster und leere Viehsteige, seid der Erzählung Ansporn und
Wasserzeichen. Es lebe die Erzählung. Die Erzählung muss weiter-
gehen. Die Sonne der Erzählung, sie stehe für immer über dem erst mit
dem letzten Lebenshauch zerstörbaren neunten Land. Verbannte aus
dem land der Erzählung, zurück mit euch vom tristen Pontus. Nach-
fahr, wenn ich nicht mehr hier bin, du erreicht mich im Land der
Erzählung, im neunten Land. Erzähler in deiner verwachsenen Feld-
hütte, du mit dem Ortssinn, magst ruhig verstummen, schweigen
vielleicht durch die Jahrhunderte, horcnd nach aussen, dich versen-
kend nach innen, doch dann, König, Kind, sammle dich, richte dich
auf, stütze dich auf die Ellenbogen, lächle im Kreis, hole tief Atem und
heb wieder an mit deinem allen Widerstreit schlichtenden: ‘Und . . . .’