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Postmetaphysical Metaphysics: Peter Handke's "Repetition"

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Postmetaphysical Metaphysics?

Peter Handke's *Repetition*

Zarko stands in front of me watering his and Zorica's garden. One of the pianists who joined us in the garden the other night is practicing in their apartment up the hill from us. Her (or his) complicated rhythms play against the steady rush of the water. A woodpecker's trilling knock breaks in twice as percussion. And from recent memory I add the soft double bass of the cuckoo.

The orthopedist whose garden borders on and calls this one into question (a strictly ordered French garden as opposed to the natural (dis)order of this English garden) has entered the scene. Zarko turns off the water at a spigot the two gardens share. The orthopedist begins to tell him about how the water was left dripping the day before. "You must turn it firmly, turn it firmly so it won't drip." It still drips a little, even after Zarko has turned it as firmly as he can. He looks around for a tool and finds a ten-foot-long spiral of metal that, later in the summer, will support beans. He sticks the end through the spigot handle and, as the neighbor demanded, leans heavily on the end of his lever and turns it firmly. The spigot handle breaks. "Jetzt habe ich Scheiße gebaut," Zarko says. (Oh, shit!)

On the way home I read Zarko a passage from Repetition *in which Filip Kobal describes his inability to work with others. He inevitably breaks or rips*

things. He works too fast and gets too little done. His disgusted father invariably sends him away after a single, hesitant, false blow with a hammer.

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Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left?

Repeat.

Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left?

Repeat.

Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left?

Repeat.

Pete and Repeat were sittin' on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left?

. . .

Bruce Nauman, from "Clown Torture" (1987, Amsterdam)

From desolate repetition to sanctifying repetition: that is, the joy of repetition is only possible when I, having departed into the unknown, am at a loss

Handke, *Phantasien der Wiederholung*

*

Describing Handke and Heidegger in his fine *Der Freudenstoff: Zu Handke eine Philosophie*, Peter Strasser recognizes that the assertions of salvific harmony through art

he thinks he reads in both men's work may raise some eyebrows, and he escapes the problem simply by asserting that "I don't want to comment on the sense or nonsense of this perspective."[1] Others, however, have been more forthcoming with their evaluations of Handke as metaphysician. Jürgen Egyptien, for example, says in a discussion of *Repetition* that "Handke's texts pretend to be the words of Moses, the secret decalogue of our time, the continuation of the holy scripture"; and he disparagingly quotes parts of a sentence from Handke's conversation with Gamper as evidence of Handke's mystical, aesthetic religion: "the final and only rational kingdom . . . will surely be the kingdom of writing, the kingdom of storytelling."[2] There is, perhaps, a mystical feel to this; but it is hardly fair that Egyptien leaves out the word "nonmetaphysical" in his quotation (part of the ellipsis).

It is not difficult to make Handke sound silly -- the "Heino [a cherubic pop singer] of metaphysics," as Walter Jens evidently called him. To do so one simply discounts Handke's suggestion that he is a dialectical writer and focuses on scenes (without reading them closely) that feel metaphysical. Failing to see the material nature of Handke's work, the continued (over several decades), insistent, anti-metaphysical stance, and the self-consciously constructed, contingent nature of every positive assertion, such "readers" can lament with Manfred Durzak that Handke "has catapulted himself with a *Salto mortale* into salvation and has thereby lost his artistry."[3] Andreas Huyssen, castigating the new romanticism he sees in postmodernism, joins this chorus

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[1] Salzburg: Residenz, 1990, 18.

[2] "Die Heilkraft der Sprache: Peter Handkes *Die Wiederholung* im Kontext seiner Erzähltheorie," in *text + kritik*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold (München: text + kritik, 1989), 54.

[3] *Peter Handke und die deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur: Narziß auf Abwegen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1982), 159.

when he suggests that that "fits in all too well with, say, the celebrations of the prophetic word in the more recent writings of Peter Handke."[4] Peter Sloterdijk, however, himself energetically anti-metaphysical, is more positive about Handke's recent work: "In Peter Handke's development, we can observe the stages subjective positivism can run through: language critique, language-game actions, logical treatment of nausea; then from senselessness to faint-hearted sensuousness, to new narration; circling around the first 'true feeling'; labor of recollection. Nausea and meaning cannot coexist in the long run. In understanding this, Handke is on the way to becoming a significant writer."[5] And although he writes of the pretentiousness of "Peter Handke, who, in the meantime, has set out to give poetry once again the quality of prophetic song," Jürgen Habermas also suggests the need for such a project, as long, he says, as it arises in the context "of a demystified and demythologized world." Habermas then suggests, in words that Handke might have used, that we should "stand firm against the danger of losing the light of the semantic potential once preserved in myth."[6]

I can think of no better words to summarize my discussion of metaphysics in a postmetaphysical age: Peter Handke writes to regain the "light of semantic potential" in the context of a world he has helped demystify and demythologize.

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[4] *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 180. He might well take another look at the "prophetic word" of *Die Wiederholung:* ". . . laboraverimus," the simple proclamation that we will have worked, that although we will have not approached some metaphysical telos, will have created meaning of some sort and will not be suffering the consequences of nihilism.

[5] *Critique of Cynical Reason*, tr. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 409.

[6] *Nachmetaphysisches Denken: Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 275.

In this book Habermas provides a remarkably clear account of the general philosophical debate in which Handke's book and this essay take part. See especially "Metaphysik nach Kant" (chapter 2) and "Motive nachmetaphysischen Denkens" (chapter 3).

Peter Handke's novel *Repetition* (1986) begins with an epigraph from the mystical, Jewish *Zohar*: "'The kings of old died; they could not find their food.'" As the metaphor of a lost and sought-for king unfolds in the novel, it raises the question of metaphysics in the work of an author known for his opposition to metaphysics.[7] Early in the novel the

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[7] For example, in Handke's early play *Weissagung*, an attempt to demonstrate the empty circularity of metaphor, four actors recite lines like "Die Fliegen werden sterben wie die Fliegen" and "Das Schwein am Spieß wird schreien wie am Spieß."
The following lines from the long poem "Die Sinnlosigkeit und das Glück" similarly reflect Handke's postmetaphysical thinking:

> Der Gegensatz zur Sinnlosigkeit ist nicht der
> Sinn --
> man braucht nur keinen Sinn mehr,
> sucht auch keinen philosophischen Sinn für den
> Unsinn:
> ausgezählte Wörter; die verboten gehörten,
> denkt man.
> . . .
> Und womit kehrst du am Abend nach Haus
> zurück? --
> Mit solchen Anblicken zum Beispiel, antwortet
> der Anblicksammler stolz.
> Und wie ordnest du sie? --
> Weil die Angst vor dem Unsinn vorbei ist,
> brauchen sie keine Ordnung mehr.

> The opposite of meaninglessness is not
> meaning --
> one no longer needs meaning,
> nor does one seek a philosophical meaning for
> meaninglessness:
> used up words; that ought to be forbidden,
> one thinks.
> . . .
> And with what do you return home
> in the evening? --
> With such sights, for example, answers

reader learns that the Kobal family's most important (but perhaps adopted)[8] ancestor, Gregor Kobal, lead a peasant revolt against the Hapsburg Kaiser in 1713. For his efforts he was beheaded and his family exiled. "It was he who had said . . . that the Emperor was a mere servant and that the people had better take matters into their own hands!" (4). In the context of the epigraph from the *Zohar* about defunct, mystical, mythical kings, I interpret this eighteenth-century turn from the Kaiser and his authority as the modern age's turn from metaphysics (beginning in the eighteenth century with Kant). That leaves the Kobal family (and Handke's readers) without a comforting philosophical home. Whether the new condition is to be lamented or praised depends on perspective and personal taste.

The Kobals themselves respond diversely to their liminal existence. The novel's narrator, Filip Kobal, reports that for his father the part of this story that counted

> . . . was not that his ancestor had been a rebel and guerrilla leader, but that he had been executed and that his family had been banished. . . . He behaved as if a supreme will, more powerful than that of the emperor who many years ago had ordered the execution of our ancestor Gregor Kobal, decreed that after the

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the collector of sights proudly.
And how do you order them? --
Because the fear of meaninglessness is past,
they no longer need an order.

In *Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat*, 103-119.

[8] Handke's texts incessantly criticize closed systems of thought and attempt to avoid their own tendency, as texts, toward closure. As a result, even the most innocent assertion, like that made here about Gregor Kobal as an ancestor, must be qualified. The narrator in one place simply states that Kobal is an ancestor, and later repeats and revises that to suggest that perhaps he was adopted. Cf. the following from *Phantasien der Wiederholung*: "To hold open emptiness: that would be the highest art" (41); "The constant, necessary, almost-speechlessness of art, of writing, of the art of writing: only this, saying-what-is-the-case-with-halting-voice, the liminal word, will be heard in eternity" (33).

> disappearance of his eldest son, the last of that name, he must suppress any Slovene sound in his house. (48-49)

One response, then, to the condition in which one is cut off or has cut oneself off from metaphysics is to absolutely refuse to speak that language.

In contrast, the mother's response to the same situation is a kind of ritual to reclaim the lost inheritance: "My mother, ordinarily so godless and blasphemous, would lift up her voice and chant names from the [Slovenian] map, syllable after syllable, on a hovering, tremulous high note" (52). "My mother's litany of place names, however faulty her pronunciation, sounded beautiful to me" (52), Filip writes. "From the start my mother's fantasies, remote as they may have been from experience, made a stronger impression on me, the second, late-born son, than did my father's war stories" (54), even though he knows that she is describing a world that does not exist outside her linguistic creation: "a country that had nothing in common with the reality of Slovenia; it was built up exclusively from the names. . . . This country . . . became in her mouth a land of peace where we, the Kobal family, would at last recapture our true selves. This transfiguration . . ." (54).[9]

Despite his personal preference for his mother's creation over his father's begrudging, resentful acceptance of exile and absence, the narrator recognizes both responses to the loss of the metaphysical as human: "When I think back on the image of the two of them, I see one weeping and one laughing storyteller, one standing aside, the other center stage, asserting our rights" (54). He also realizes that both positions are potentially dangerous. If the laughing narrator, the mother, is in the center, she has a position of power from which she can rule: "Then I realized that my mother was not

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[9] Cf. from *Essay on Tiredness* – "But isn't it the past that transfigures? If the past was of the kind that transfigures, it's all right with me. I believe in that sort of transfiguration" (15).

merely self-assured like the waitress but positively imperious. She had always wanted to run a big hotel, with the staff as her subjects. Our farm was small and her demands were great. In her stories about my brother, he was always represented as a king cheated out of his throne" (11). The father, the crying narrator, can likewise exert power, even from the periphery: "His being a stranger in the village made him a domestic tyrant. Because he was nowhere at home, he bullied the rest of us; he drove us from our places or at least poisoned them for us" (54-55). In both positions (the father's post-Slovene liminality and the mother's post-post-Slovene centrality -- or, allegorically, the father's emphatic postmetaphysical muttering and the mother's post-postmetaphysical construction) are the possibilities for dominance. But both stances also make possible more humane responses, as in Filip's description of his father's stammered German: "I must own that my father's way of speaking German, serious, graphic, laboriously pondering every word as though intimidated by the presence of foreigners, still sounds in my ears as the clearest, purest, least garbled, and most human-sounding voice I have ever heard in Austria" (49), and in Filip's description of his mother's voice when she frees him from the boarding school: "a light, wingèd, dancing, chanting voice" (26).

The novel describes the travels of 20-year-old Filip through the mountains and karst region of Slovenia as he searches for his older brother Gregor (named after the ancestor), who went awol there during the second world war. Like the extinct kings of the *Zohar* or the now defunct Austrian Kaiser, Gregor represents the truth, essence, presence, center, or metaphysical reality the young Filip desires. In the stories of his mother, for example, Gregor is routinely referred to as a king (11). Or, in a dream, Filip sees his family in the living room of the house with Gregor as the center: "my brother was

standing in the middle" (63). Or, in an experience triggered by viewing traces of the old Austrian Empire on a Slovenian building, Filip commands his brother to appear, and when he does: "A shudder ran through me, as though I was seeing my king" (92). Making his own trip to the land of lost inheritance, Filip himself becomes, for his mother, a possible king: "And she saw me as the rightful heir to the throne" (11). With this search for a lost relative who represents truth, Handke again takes up the paradigm of *Short Letter, Long Farewell* in which the narrator, supposing "truth to be a woman," follows his estranged wife across North America.[10]

Surprisingly, Filip's walk through Slovenia achieves its goal (to find Gregor, king, metaphysical presence) fairly early in the novel. The scene is a key one:

> While looking at one of these façades, I suddenly wished with all my might that my missing brother would push open the decrepit terrace door, with its opaque grooved glass, and show himself. I even thought in words: "Forefather, show

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[10] "Supposing truth to be a woman -- what? is the suspicion not well founded that all philosophers, when they have been dogmatists, have had little understanding of women? . . . The will to truth . . . is still going to tempt us to many a hazardous enterprise."
Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

At the beginning of *Short Letter, Long Farewell* the narrator receives a letter from his estranged wife that precipitates a sometimes hazardous trip across the United States: "The letter was short: 'I am in New York. Please don't look for me. It would not be nice for you to find me'" (85). Although the object of the resulting search -- undertaken despite the warning -- will be the narrator's wife Judith, I take the warning letter also as a statement of the problematic nature of the narrator's search for truth in America. Although he knows it will not be nice to find her, he nevertheless pursues her from New York to Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Tucson, and finally finds her on the Oregon coast. During this educational trip through America, a *Bildungsreise* like Green Henry's Italian journey in Gottfried Keller's nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* the narrator reads along the way, the narrator faces anxieties, learns to make them productive, and seeks new forms for his life.

> thyself," and saw the head of the old man beside me turn toward the bay window. And for a moment, as though my call were its own fulfillment, I caught sight of my brother, full-grown (as I had never known him), broad-shouldered, brown-skinned, his thick, dark, curly hair combed straight back, his imposing forehead and his eyes so deep in their sockets that his white blindness remained hidden. A shudder ran through me, as though I were seeing my king, a shudder of awe, but even more of terror, which made me leave my place in the hollow without delay and slip into the torrent of passersby on the street above.
>
> It received me at once. My impression from below was false; it was not a torrent at all but an astonishingly leisurely flow in which my excitement over my successful evocation of an ancestor was appeased by an unhurried present. (92)

In this seemingly mystical moment, and there are others in the novel as well, Filip achieves his goal. The absent becomes present. The lost is found. It would seem that Filip is the exception to Handke's general assertion in *Phantasien der Wiederholung*: "Everyone experiences the biblical stories, but without the events; everyone travels at some time to Emmaus, but nothing approaches him except -- powerful emptiness" (87). No longer must Filip see "through a glass darkly" (here the opaque glass of the door), for his brother steps through it, visible both to Filip and to the old man next to him. Upon seeing "his king" (like one of the lost kings of the *Zohar*) he experiences the awe, terror, thrill, and solemn shudder of reverence appropriate to a metaphysical vision. But like Hans Castorp when his sees his cousin's ghost during a séance in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, Filip is more disturbed than edified, and he flees into the company of

non-metaphysical passersby.

Handke undercuts the achieved presence in other ways as well. "The successful evocation of an ancestor," however transcendent the described experience appears on first reading, does not assert and glorify the metaphysical, but rather leads away from the youthful, impetuous desire for the metaphysical and toward the physical.[11] Two subjunctives, for example, relativize the experience. The first, "as though my call were its own fulfillment," might be paraphrased by a semiotician as "as if the signifier and the transcendental signified were the same." But the subjunctive mood signals that this may be contrary to fact. The second subjunctive, "as though I were seeing my king," generally calls the vision into question. Whatever Filip is experiencing as he sees his brother whom he takes to be his king, who is there as if he were his king, who represents his king, is merely a sign. Filip is not in fact experiencing the actual king -- that transcendental signified -- he has attempted to conjure up.

The achieved peace among the passersby ("in which my excitement over my successful evocation of an ancestor was appeased by an unhurried present"), that turn from the sudden disconnected gap in time to a slow, continuous, humanly shared present, leads away from the metaphysical and connects this scene with the crucial "mystical" blind window at the end of the novel's first part. Likewise, and most

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[11] Goethe introduces his journal of art and art history, *Propyläen*, with a metaphoric description of the Greek propylaea: "The youth, when attracted by nature and art, feels capable of entering suddenly, with a lively effort, into the inner sanctum; the man notices, after long travels, that he still finds himself in the outer courtyards. . . . Stair, gate, entrance, vestibule, the space between the inner and outer, between the sacred and profane -- only this can be the place in which we and our friends will usually dwell." Cf. Handke's aphorism from *Phantasien der Wiederholung*: "The determining idea of the child had once been that the visible world was just a dream and would burst, whereupon the real would appear; the determining idea of the adult, however, was: the visible world is it, 'is it already': Being, manifesting itself through the forms" (71).

importantly, the ghost's eyes (if this is a ghost) also relate to the blind window.

In the scene that gives the first third of the novel its title, "The Blind Window," Filip Kobal waits at the train station for the train that will take him away from home and into Yugoslavia where he will search for his brother:

> I raised my head and saw in the end wall of the station a rectangle -- a blind window the same whitish-gray color as the wall, but set in from it. Though no longer in the sun, this window shimmered with reflected light from somewhere. In Rinkenberg there was only one such window, and it happened to be in the smallest house, the roadmender's, the one that looked like the porter's lodge of a nonexistent manor. . . . Whenever I passed, it caught my eye, but when I stopped to look, it always fooled me. Nevertheless, it never lost a certain undefined significance for me, and I felt that such a window was lacking in my father's house. (68)

He tells of a frantic, night train trip his father and brother took from this station to a doctor in Klagenfurt because of an endangered eye, a trip taken in vain, for from that time on there was nothing in [the eye's] place but a milky whiteness. But this memory explained nothing. The significance of the blind window remained undefined, but suddenly that window became a sign, and in that same moment I decided to turn back. My turning back -- and here again the sign was at work -- was not definitive; it applied only to the hours until the following morning, when I would really start out, really begin my journey, with successive blind windows as my objects of research, my traveling companions, my signposts. And when later, on the evening of the following day, at the station restaurant in Jesenice, I thought about the shimmering of the blind window, it still imparted a clear

message -- to me it meant: 'Friend, you have time.' (68-69)

A window is generally transparent, as would be a signifier that reveals a transcendental signified.[12] This window, however, is blind, even more opaque than the windowed door Filip hopes his brother will step through. The only window in the village similar to this one is on the roadmender's tiny house, a house that makes Filip think of a nonexistent Lord's or manor house. The double motion of this signifier is characteristic of Handke's work in general -- the little house both brings to mind what could be the house of lost kings and reminds one of its nonexistence.[13] This is precisely the novel's stance in relation to metaphysics: it evokes the very thing it simultaneously reveals as absent.

The roadmender was previously described in the novel as a liminal figure in the village. His work as a sign painter (artist, writer) fascinated Filip Kobal and, along with Filip's mentally handicapped sister, he was said to embody in his liminality the (real) center of the village. But just what was the meaning of that decentered centrality? Just what did the so promising blind window express? Whenever Filip stopped to decipher the message it meant, in fact, nothing. But if there was no clear meaning, there was still (undefined) significance. Although Filip wanted a clearer message, the openness of this signifier is as important as the fact of signification. Filip's father's house has no such window of uncertain meaning, because, I suppose, he is a man of defined significance, a tyrant, an oppressive authority figure. Having accepted his exile, even uncertain meaning would be too much for him. Although the narrator suggests that the meaning of

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[12] Cf. Handke's assertion that "The 'mirror of language' should finally be destroyed. One cannot simply look through language to objects. Instead of acting as if one could look through language like a windowpane, one should turn the light on insidious language itself" "Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in den USA," in *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms*, 30.

[13] This may be the point of the novel's second epigraph: "I stayed with this one and that one." *Epicharmos.*

the blind window will remain indefinable, Filip nevertheless takes the window as a sign that he should return to his family. But as an indeterminate sign, the window is also interpreted as signifying the exact opposite -- as a sign of his travels, of his leaving his family. The next day, in recollection, the contradictory messages give way to a third, enigmatic, statement: "'Friend, you have time.'"

As an open signifier, the blind window provides a helpful context for the scene in which Filip perhaps sees and certainly flees the vision of his king/brother. Both scenes involve revelations through blind windows and in both cases the revelation gives way to a final message of slowness and shared humanity: "'Friend, you have time'" and "our slow present." The one scene describes the loss of the brother's eyesight and the resulting milky whiteness of the eyeball, and the other scene has that blind whiteness hidden. Although the empty forms (the blind windows and the empty cow paths) privileged by the narrator over more certain messages are repeated in the brother's blind eye, in the metaphysical vision the blindness is concealed, the ambiguity masked. That direct transcendent gaze may be what frightens Filip, or more likely, he is unsettled by the gaze that purports transcendent sight but behind the shadow remains the same blind eye.

Another description in the novel further privileges the empty sign:

> But the kingdom of the world that I perceived in this way exceeded the limits of present-day Yugoslavia and all the kingdoms and empires of olden times, and gradually its signs lost their definition. The Cyrillic letters on the newspapers of certain passersby were still clear, the vestiges of an old Austrian inscription on a public building were legible, as was the ancient Greek *Chaire* -- Greetings -- on the tympanum of a villa; but, on the other

> hand, the word PETROL on a gas station, which, seen through the branches of a tree, reminded me of a China known to me only from dreams, was ambiguous, and an equally exotic Sinai Desert opened up to me behind the high-rise buildings at the sight of a dusty long-distance bus, on the front of which the roller indicating its destination had stopped exactly in the middle between two illegible place names. As it passed, a fragment of a Hebrew scroll struck my eyes -- yes, *struck* my eyes, for the landscape that opened up around the script was fraught with terror. (97-98)

"Clear," "legible," "ambiguous," "illegible" -- only after this regression does a fragment of a contrived and holy (at least that's how I read "Hebrew" here) text leap into Filip's eyes, open the landscape, and shock him. The sequence culminates in a now familiar empty or open sign: "The vagueness was underlined by a blind window, to which my gaze was now drawn as to the center of the world" (98). Clear, supposedly translucent signification in support of a "kingdom" (cf. the centered Yugoslavian government referred to in the novel: "Marshal Tito was unmistakably there. . . . I could almost hear him say: 'I know you,' and I wanted to answer: 'But I don't know myself'" (10)) would require debunking. But the blind window, asserting while questioning itself, can be looked to as the center of a world "kingdom."

The blind window in this passage is part of a large building that Filip takes to be the manor house belonging to the tiny (gate)house of the roadmender back in his village, and is thus, in my interpretation, the place of metaphysical presence promised by the gatehouse. Notice, in this context, the description of the entrance: "A child was on the stairway with his back to me; one foot a step lower than the other, he seemed hesitant;

the steps were too big for a child. . . . [The house] seemed uninhabited. The child on the steps was in the entrance not to a house but to a playground" (98-99). If this is the "lord's" house, then to enter it would be to achieve closure, to find truth. But the child stands on steps too large for it, uncertain. And in fact, the child is not intent on entrance, but stands in a playground. The antithesis of a ruling king, the child is at play.

Later in the novel playing is defined as the kind of activity that creates its own rights rather than accepting them from an authority:

> But from whom could we demand our right? And why did we always demand it of a third, some of an emperor, others of a God? Why didn't we take it for ourselves, essential as it was for our self-preservation, letting no one else intervene? There at last was a game in which we wouldn't have had to measure ourselves against anyone, a lonely game, a wild game -- Father, the great game! (157)

If the world is indeed contingent, if truth is best described as a "mobile army of metaphors," if language games are all we have, then those games are our own and the responsibility is in fact ours.

But watching the child at play in front of the lord's house and moved by the blind window's indeterminacy, by its opacity and the absence it represents, Filip Kobal falls out of the determinate world of language: "Thanks to its extreme vagueness, it reflected my gaze; and the muddle of languages, the confusion of voices within me fell silent: my whole being fell silent, and read" (99). What is the message? Perhaps the now familiar "Friend, you have time," although here even that ambiguous phrase suggesting that there is time left, or that Filip cannot transcend time, is missing. And the message is not only

indefinite, it is also ephermeral: "I had never thought it possible that I would lose this blind window; I had felt it to be an unalterable sign. Yet one side glance sufficed: the light emanating from it was gone" (99). The dialectical epiphany returns, however, notably as Filip finds solace in memory of the healthy *and* blind eyes of his brother: "his good eye studies me with friendly attentiveness and enjoys the sunshine with me, while his blind eye -- because it's blind -- is none the wiser" (138).

The novel's enigmatic third epigraph, ". . . laboraverimus," (we shall have worked) relates to the brother's penchant for speaking and prophecying in the future perfect. And what will have been accomplished? the novel asks. We shall have seen the king? We shall have achieved presence? No -- simply, "we shall have worked." In this context Filip appoints his brother his protective forebear, knowing all the while that: "Of course I could not when threatened summon him to give me peace; it was the other way around: I found peace by myself, and he was present to bolster me; accordingly it was impossible to lean on my forebears (the only effective forebear, this much I know, is the sentence preceding the one I am writing now)" (138). But with a forebear within him, even if only the appearance of a forebear, he writes, "I am no longer alone; I sit more erect, walk in a different way. . . . What are facts compared to such appearances? . . . Long live appearances! Let them be my subject!" (138).

In the course of the novel Filip learns that "the empty forms both of the cow paths and of the blind windows could be relied on; they were the seal of our right" (159). A seal is the stamp of authority, a sign from above that guarantees or assures. The genius of these particular seals is that they are empty forms, forms that question while asserting, that stimulate a contingent production of meaning. In their blindness, arbitrariness,

emptiness, these signs are in fact no different than any other sign. Their power lies in the way their emptiness asserts contingency while they simultaneously act as productive signs.

The experiences that lead to this insight leave Filip in a curious state. He has given up hope that his king would ever appear. He has abandoned metaphysics for the "things and words of this beloved world -- for being" (160).[14] And years later as he weakly and carefully narrates his story, as he repeats it to make it myth -- "to naturalize myth (repetition)" (*Phantasien der Wiederholung,* 88) -- he wonders if its sounds will be drowned out by the more urgent, less timid sounds of soldiers. The answer, he decides, is no, for although the soldiers represent one sort of kingdom, the kingdom of the text (whose watermarks are the empty forms) is a recurring kingdom, in fact, the kingdom *of* recurrence (221-222).

Two scenes late in the novel in which Filip again glimpses his brother add insight to this story of kings. Having decided, because his fantasy can be more creative in places his brother won't haunt, to avoid places his brother mentioned in letters, Filip sees his

> brother stepping through the door to the yard. He appeared to me in a crowd. . . . Did he really come in? No, he just stood in the doorway, on the threshhold . . . his deep-sunken eyes -- both had their sight -- projected an infinite dream. Though I remained seated with my companions, I also had the impression that I got up to make sure it was he. . . . Neither of us moved; we stood facing each other for an eternity, at a distance, beyond

[14] This is the most basic story of *Der Himmel über Berlin*, in which angels leave the metaphysical realm to experience the pleasures, responsibilities, and sorrows of nonmetaphysical existence.

> reach, unapproachable, united in grief and serenity, merriment and forlornness. I felt the sun and wind on the bones of my forehead, saw the festive bustle on both sides of the dark passage with my brother's image in it, and knew we were in midyear. Holy forebear, youthful martyr, dear child. (231)

This time the brother remains on the threshhold, that interstice that allows both distance and presence in Handke's poetics.[15] Both eyes are seeing, and with them he can dream (not see) into infinity. There is no fear like that of the earlier scene when his blind eye was hidden, for this is clearly a moment of recollection and not a metaphysical vision. When Filip describes getting up to face Gregor he asserts that this too, like the infinity Gregor dreams, is imagined, for he is really still seated. They are separated (at a distance, unreachable, and not able to address one another) and united (by feeling). Filip knows he is seeing an image of his brother, and that image, that creation, helps him situate himself even more securely in the world as he feels the sun and wind, sees the celebrating people around him, and is conscious of being in midyear -- a nonmetaphysical, material center quite different from the temporal discontinuity of the earlier vision. He praises the image of his brother's appearance in religious terms because of the earthly meaning it affords, and he can do so precisely because there is no sense of actual metaphysical presence, no religious or political claim that would have to be refuted. Gregor is no longer Filip's king, but a dear child (the child playing earlier between Filip and the entrance to the manor house).

Immediately after this scene Filip once again "sees" ("zu Gesicht bekommen") his

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[15] In Handke's *Der Chinese des Schmerzes* the main character is an expert on threshholds.

brother, but this time it is actually "an empty bed that spoke to me of Gregor" (232). What began as a supposed and threatening real vision has become, as Filip has gained understanding, a story. And with this Filip declares himself "at a goal. My purpose had been not to find my brother but to tell a story about him" (234). Now the brother's prayer that they might one day travel to the marriage of the fabeled ninth king of the ninth land can be translated from the realm of metaphysical desire to an "earthly fulfillment: writing" (234). Repeating this idea of earthly, material fulfillment, Handke emphasizes the nonmetaphysical character of the kingdom created in a story: "Thus the final kingdom and also the only rational and not metaphysical kingdom will surely be the kingdom of writing, the kingdom of story telling" (Gamper, 158). And who will be the king? A smiling narrator, both king and child, inspired by blind windows and other empty signs, repeating and renewing through stories (245-246).

As the epigraphs to this chapter suggest, there are two kinds of repetition: the one that tortures the clown (or the crying narrator) who recognizes the contingency of everything and simply despairs, and the one joyfully embraced by a story teller equally aware of contingency yet anxious to create meaning through repetition. The first is nihilistic. The second resembles the anti-metaphysical Nietzschean affirmation of eternal return.