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"The Material Idea of Volk": Peter Handke's Dialectical Search for a National Identity

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"The Material Idea of *Volk*"

Peter Handke's *The Long Way Around, The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire, Child Story,* and *The Long Way Around: A Dramatic Poem*

In the market of Knin there is an old Buregdzinica, a store where they sell hot baked goods. In the tiny room paneled with dark brown boards sit a young man and an old woman at low tables. In the middle of the wall, right behind the counter, a window opens into the kitchen. Steam clouds pass through it into the room as if from the depths of the earth. The boy behind the counter smiles. I order a pita with cheese. It is lively here. As if the room were full of people. The old woman reads the young man's fortune from his coffee grounds. He looks absently out the door. Steps sound on the stairs to the marketplace. The old woman speaks with a soft, even voice: "You will have a strange meeting on a trip. An old man thinks of you, he is lonely. You will receive money -- a surprise. I see a snake, it has wrapped itself around a tree. Next to it stands a reaper, bends his head and mows. Watch out for people who gather in groups. In three days you will leave on a long journey. I see a rabbit. A stork. An old woman worries about you. Watch out for a woman in a red jacket. In five days you will get a bad message. You will be uneasy. You will have trouble." Suddenly two soldiers are standing in the store. "You will waste much money in bars," the old woman continues, "you will have a car accident." The soldiers order pita with cheese and yoghurt. "You will leave," the old woman continues, "and you will never return."

Zarko Radakovic

"But would you also defend this country of yours?" "Perhaps not the parliament building" would be my answer to such a question, "but this barn and that vintner's hut, definitely." For I can say of myself: "I am sick of my country."

Peter Handke, *Across*

I

In *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* Handke describes his mother's childhood in terms of

servitude, poverty, exile, uniformity, and oppression. Then came the Nazis and the war, providing for her the first heady experiences of self and community: "For the first time, people did things together. . . . For once, everything that was strange and incomprehensible in the world took on meaning and became part of a larger context. . . . Life took on a form in which you felt protected, yet free" (206). In rapid succession the Nazis and the war helped Handke's mother find a sense of community and home, new pride, a feeling of self, the first experiences of an exotic world beyond Austria, a sense for distance and history, family feelings, love, marriage, and a child. At war's end she returned to an undifferentiated life of poverty, pain, and domination. Village religion, customs, and good manners once again surrounded and determined her (218).

Handke has often emphasized the destructive and/or productive nature of language and the society it enables, so it is no surprise to find the language-related forms of culture described here as both enabling and inhibiting. It *is* surprising, however, to see the connection between Nazi radio-broadcast rhetoric and self-discovery. It would seem that it is exactly Hitler's pleasant voice emanating from the "people's radio" that enables community *and* individuality, that creates the paradoxical combination of meaningful coherence and liberating chance so dear to Handke.

Given the larger, historical context, this seems outrageous. But Handke's story is a biography and thus strongly determined by the facts of his mother's life. His text describes a real Austrian woman whom Nazi myths and models transform into more than she was without them. Handke (along with others since Nietzsche) has asserted that if truth is made rather than found, if truth is a construct of language, if a story is to be judged by how it enables community and freedom, then for this one woman the Nazi story was more true than the religious and cultural stories she once knew and later rediscovered in her village, stories that robbed her of individuality while creating uniformity instead of community of individuals.

I hesitate as I write this. Don't the mass murders and absolute war and unspeakable atrocities demand precedence here over descriptions of people like Handke's mother who were given hope and purpose by the National Socialist program? I would flee from this topic if it did not promise, in the details, to address the larger problems as well. Handke's career as a writer has been spent depicting the debilitating effect of totalitarian language and the violence imposed by social structures, political systems, and religious forms held to be metaphysically valid. Powerful National-Socialist slogans like "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer" would have had less impact if Handke's language-critical works had been written three decades earlier. Perhaps.

In her book on the vocabulary of National Socialism, Cornelia Berning describes how the Nazis used these three words to deify a people, a state, and a leader: "*Volk* -- a historical, fateful idea determined by 'blood and soil' to which individuals are subordinated as bearers and which reveals itself in the 'Führer'" (191). "*Reich* -- mythically, historically, and affectively denotes the "jurisdictional territory" and "living space" ["Herrschaftsraum" and "Lebensraum"] racially determined through the German people and the fateful mission of the Germans in Europe" (161-162). "*Führer* presumably borrowed by National Socialism from the fascist 'Duce'. . . . 'At the Hofbräuhaus Hitler reviewed the parade . . . but the young men and also the mature men marched past with the joyful certainty that they had found something that millions long for, a -- Führer'" (81-82). Because of the use to which these and other words had been put, because they now also meant what the Nazis had said and done with them, because the language itself now seemed culpable, some writers of the immediate postwar time wanted renewal, and they advocated clear cutting, amputation, "Kahlschlag." Although the gesture was indispensable, the supposed clear cutting was impossible -- even those who advocated it most strongly continued to use words and phrases tainted by two decades of Nazi use (see Urs Widmer, *1945 oder die "Neue Sprache"*).

Handke has been accused of inattention to politics, but his early work is itself a kind of "Kahlschlag" in which *all* language is stripped of supposed metaphysical character as its totalizing, terrorizing character is emphasized. Kaspar, for example, in Handke's early drama of that name, finds that while language is a useful way of ordering the world, it is also intimately connected with the violence used to force others into that same order. It is a relief, Handke writes in *Phantasien der Wiederholung*, to be released from such domination: "We, after the world wars: the wonderful knowledge that we are not masters ('You are the caretaker of a meager garden,' Vergil)" (26). Handke finds it morally liberating, he says here, to be rid of words like "Herren" or "Führer." Nonetheless, beyond that deconstruction, he wants to construct new metaphors, fruitful ways of thinking -- and thus, I suppose, the Vergil quotation that defines us as humble gardeners.

In his 1985 interview with Zarko Radakovic Handke speaks at length about his desire, after Nazi ravages of the language, to reconstitute certain words and the perspectives they allow, words like "nature," "God," "history," "beauty," "grace," "holiness," and "Volk" (page # from appendix). A word like "Volk" tends, Handke argues, also to a constructive unity, and he wants to reconstruct the "material idea" of a *Volk* (by material I suppose he means nonmetaphysical). Nazi rhetoric and state religion provide the negative backdrop for this attempt, a backdrop Handke himself paints a warning red; but he is determined to work beyond that into a dialectic, or a "weaving," as he puts it, to reintroduce lost words onto the literary stage. Martin Heidegger (with qualification) and Paul Celan (poet and Jew, without qualification) are claimed as ancestors in this venture.

The narrator of *Child Story* emphasizes a general distrust of nationalist traditions as he says that "no tradition, however longed for, could ever be meaningful to someone like him, and that he could certainly transmit no trace of any tradition to his child . . . as the scion of an unpeople, an unworthy man-of-no-people" (251). Because Nazis had made their "Volk" an "UnVolk," the

narrator is "without-Volk" and thus, in his mind, able powerfully to negate metaphysical claims. As a consequence, however, he is unable to give positive direction to his child. Traditions can oppress, but living without tradition is oppressive as well, and so Handke writes wistfully that "One would like, once again, to hear of a noble Volk" (PW 49). It is the task of the *Slow Homecoming* tetralogy (and much of the work that follows) slowly, carefully, hesitantly, self-critically to reclaim words like "Volk": "I want to say that it is a success when the writer is able to give a word that has been devalued its value again; if only one word again becomes originary in its context, that is an achievement" (Z 205).

This reclaiming, although it may seem archeological, etymological, aimed at a metaphysically grounded beginning, always takes place in the context of Handke's extraordinary sense for the arbitrariness of language and for the constant threat posed by metaphysical certainty. For example, the reclaiming will take place in stories and not in religious or political tracts: "Odd, that the word "God" does not disturb me (in fact, it moves me) in, for example, *Parzival*, the epic; with Meister Eckhart, in a treatise, however, it does: it even inhibits me" (PW 13). The word to be rehabilitated will be contested even in the assertion: "How can the word 'angel' still be used? -- Together with 'battle' (in every written text there ought to be felt the 'battle with the angel')" (PW 22-23). It will have paradox as constant companion: "Once again I succeeded in denying myself: and the rooster inside me crowed happily. When I am especially strongly he who I am, I succeed in saying that I am not he who I am" (GB 115). And success will always find failure close behind: "After my quiet, long, nighttime lecture to the *Volk* I will wake up tomorrow in emptiness -- and why not?" (GB 227).

Handke never fails to undermine his own creations, but neither does he cease creating. The four volumes of *Slow Homecoming* attempt a slow return home "Into Deepest Austria" (Handke's

original title, Z 153), less a geographical homecoming than a linguistic return. The hope is to recover productive meanings of "Heimat" and "Reich" (after and in spite of the Nazi "Heim ins Reich"), an idea of depth (beyond and yet not beyond the postmetaphysical play of surfaces), and an idea of "Volk" opposed to the "incessant, lasting, stupid Austrian nationalism" Handke is fond of cursing.

The first book of the tetralogy, from which the whole gets its name, begins in Alaska, continues on the continental west coast, and ends as Sorger, the narrator, flies from New York toward Europe. The second and third books (*The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* and *Child Story*) are set closer to home, in France, a country from which he can view and assess Austria and Germany as "home": "He felt that the image spoke for itself: a man taking his own and setting out for an unfamiliar world. Shouldn't everyone attempt something of the kind, time and time again? Wasn't it in foreign surroundings that a man's own becomes his determining certainty?" (247). The final book, *The Long Way Around: A dramatic poem*, is a play about the return of a writer to the village of his birth where he and his brother and sister discuss their inheritance.

II

Handke has often attempted to dislocate, disorient, deconstruct, unmask, to create the consciousness of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors," to bring about a crisis; for awareness of truth as arbitrary construction undermines the despots and rulers whose truth claims are enforced by violence: "The night of this century, during which I searched my face obsessively for the features of a despot or a conqueror, has ended for me" (LWA 115). When a *Volk* is established with reference to "Blut und Boden" one must leave *Volk* and homeland and become homeless. But

with the writing of *The Long Way Around* Handke begins to feel his way beyond that alienation and necessary deconstruction.

Early in *The Long Way Around* the narrator describes a triadic process informing the life of the German-speaking geologist Sorger. His first experience in a new environment is that the place opens itself to his grasp, to his understanding, and he settles there, naively and easily. Then, however, a powerful sense of dislocation, disorientation, or a loss of balance sets in. Sorger, suffering as a foreigner, cut off from home, must rediscover that what he thought true is nothing but a stage set. He works through the emptiness, observing and drawing,[i] seeking and creating new forms. The drawing of pictures as opposed to creating abstractions[ii] and images of the here and now as opposed to images of home metaphysically grounded in the past or future demonstrate the concreteness of Sorger's attempted construction ("a fleshy, bodily idea of *Volk*," Radaković interview). The work is difficult, but in the end it may produce a holy, inclusive unity of space. Although the mystical "dome encompassing heaven and earth, a sanctuary, which was not only private but also open to others" (7) would suggest transcendence, Handke qualifies that with the luck and tiredness needed to bring it about. In a similar passage in his *Essay on Tiredness*, after the narrator states that "A cloud of tiredness, an ethereal tiredness, held us together " (15), a skeptical voice questions the transcendent unity: "Doesn't the past transfigure there?" The narrator answers both yes and no: "If the past was of the kind that transfigures – it's all right with me. I believe in that sort of transfiguration." No denial, then, that this was an artificial glorification or transfiguration, but rather the suggestion that the moment was worthy of glorification, of created meaning. Finally, what Sorger creates is not only personal, but also open to others. This action that moves him beyond his solipsism is an important step toward a *Volk*.

Sorger learns early that the way to the living diversity of a *Volk* begins with a vague

decision, a decision he is not sure he is ready for. The narrator asks for clarification of just what the decision is, but the only answer given is the image of a round-shouldered "Volksbeamter" (people's official). The process, the effort he puts forth, seems more important than the actual decision, and he is overcome by the desire "to exert himself to the point of exhaustion" (24-25). These decisions he is just beginning to recognize, these deeds that will link Sorger with others as a *Volk*, will so tire him that the community of tiredness referred to earlier may arise. Through concerted effort (like his drawing and his essay on space) Sorger will begin to bring a *Volk* into being. Handke says elsewhere: "Writing I purify myself, my ancestors, my *Volk*, through form; and my ancestors are few, but my progeny are all!" (GB 224). A *Volk* does not naturally exist but must be created, Handke says, quoting Rahel Varnhagen: "One *sees* history, constructs it oneself: the spiritual or mental development of peoples is their history: and mortals like Goethe create them by seeing, announcing, prophesying -- backwards too, as Friedrich Schlegel knew in that good time, and they are the ones who reform the *Volk*." That is an almost word-for-word quotation of the passage in *The Long Way Around: A Dramatic Poem*: 'Artists form the *Volk*.' For me that has two meanings: They educate . . . they are not only the educators of the *Volk*, but they form and thus produce the *Volk*" (Z 200).

There are moments of creation uninvolved with other people, but however wonderful they may be, *The Long Way Around* finds them problematic. Several times Sorger's ability solipsistically to create meaning, coherence, or presence results in ecstatic experience: "'There is a possible connection,' he wrote under his sketch. 'Every moment of my life is connected with every other -- without intermediate links. The connection is there; I need only imagine in full freedom'" (75). But as Sorger approaches perfection and beauty in moments like this one, he finds unreality there: "Unreality meant that anything could happen, but he was no longer able to do

anything about it. . . . Sorger had lost his image of himself (which ordinarily enabled him to take action)" (83-84). Compare a similar problem expressed in *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*: "And then the things formed a grove around the writer, from which, of course, he had difficulty finding his way back to life. True, he repeatedly found an essence of things, but this essence could not be communicated; and in stubbornly trying to hold it fast, he became unsure of himself. No, magical images -- and that went for the cypresses -- were not the right thing for me. Within them lies a not at all peaceable nothingness, to which I never want to return. Only outside, in daylight colors, *am* I" (150). The ecstatic moment, the inner sense for the ineffable and ephemeral "thing-in-itself," is finally empty, and he turns to the exteriority of color to ground his "self."

To act, Sorger needs an image of himself. (This is a concession from the Peter Handke who has described as well as anyone the violence of such images.) Where will the image come from? Who will make decision possible? People, other people, a *Volk*, the *Volk* the entire tetralogy traces into "deepest Austria," the *Volk* so allied with Nazi "Blut und Boden" that it must be deconstructed in every moment, and yet without which there is only irreality.

The images that finally become Sorger's own, that give him the power to act, are gathered from faces: "The house of strength is the face of the other" (112). (I suppose Handke draws here on the work of the contemporary French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who describes the face of the Other as the beginning of ethics.[iii]) At one point in the story, after Sorger has been saved from the terrors of chaos by a neighbor family, the narrator writes that "At length Sorger became something more than a self-forgetful beholder of happenings in someone else's face; an overpoweringly gentle manipulation had incorporated his limited personal life into the face of mankind, in whose openness it would go on forever" (94). Later, after Sorger has performed a similar service for a fellow Austrian in New York, Sorger watches another man "eat and, learning

from him, felt warmth on his forehead. His face was covered over by the stranger's face, and in the end there was no other" (120). The physicality of the faces and the actual circumstances of people aiding one another again reinforce Handke's commitment to a material rather than a metaphysical *Volk*. "I stress," Handke said in his interview with Lothar Schmidt-Mühlisch, "that that is in no way platonic idealism, but matter."

But relation with others can have an inhibiting result as well, and when Sorger too strongly senses his Nazi ancestry he falls absolutely silent, feeling himself the descendent of "Täter" -- the doers of deeds (65). This recognition relativizes the *Volk*-creating vision of decision and action he had experienced earlier in the book. But the image of a Nazi *Volk* that renders Sorger impotent has as a counterpart his productive admission of guilt by association. The confession moves him beyond silence. His language becomes "'play' and in it he regained his mobility. . . . Speech, the peacemaker" (66). It is exactly that movement out of speechlessness into language, however contingent, that Sorger must experience if he is to remain alive. Language allows action, connection with others. In this regard Sorger finally experiences a "law-giving moment": "Thus the night of this century, during which I searched my face obsessively for the features of a despot or a conqueror, has ended for me . . . " (115). The relentless consciousness of guilt had kept Sorger and his fellows from taking part in the ongoing, peaceful history of the human race (115). Now that he leaves the forced guilt behind, however, he will be obliged to a constant intervention in history (I declare myself responsible for my future (115)).

The remarkable turn from language criticism (because of the violence of metaphysics) to a positive sharing in human history, from a desperately needed deconstruction to the creation of a *Volk* and a history, is really not as sudden nor as final as it seems (neither in Sorger's story nor in Handke's career). *And* -- it is always accompanied by the potentially crippling knowledge that any

creation will be a fiction. Sorger's worst crisis is triggered by just such a realization: he sees himself now as a bungling cheat: 'Your places and spaces don't exist. It's all up with you'" (90). But later in the novel Sorger discovers that shared fictions themselves are exactly what allow community: "'Falsification!' But this was no longer an accusation; rather, it was a salutary idea: he, Sorger, would write the ‘Gospel of Falsification’; and he triumphed in the thought of being a falsifier among falsifiers. (An isolated individual was capable only of patchwork.)" (130).

It is no accident, then, that Sorger's last images of the continent come in a museum, under the influence of the visual fictions he has seen there: "Still fortified by the works before which he had gradually pulled himself erect as one does in the presence of stern (and brazenly vital) models, he stood at the top of the monumental inner stairway" (134). Watching "the *Volk*" move toward the exit, Sorger had, momentarily, the idea that the history of mankind would soon be ended, harmoniously and without horror. Yes, there was such a thing as grace. (Or was there?)" (136). Once again, in an almost holy moment of achieved union, Handke refuses to rest assured. The question "Or?" is as important as the (short) affirmation that went before.

The Long Way Around ends tenderly as the narrator, moved by the character he has created over two hundred pages, addresses Sorger as "du" and watches him (as a face) disappear:

> "Entschwebendes Gesicht!
>
> Die Steine zu meinen Füßen bringen dich näher:
>
> Mich in sie vertiefend,
>
> beschwere ich uns mit ihnen." (210)
>
> "Vanishing face!
>
> The stones at my feet bring you closer:
>
> Immersing myself in them,

I weigh us down with them." (137)

The experience of *Volk* will be reachieved not by evocations of a metaphysical ideal but by attention to material things: human faces and the stones at the narrator's feet.

III

This turn from the metaphysical to exteriority in order to create an ethical *Volk* becomes a guiding principle of *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*, the second volume of the *Slow Homecoming* tetralogy: "'Why at the sight of beauty must you draw celestial comparisons? Look at the earth, speak of the earth, or just of this spot here. *Name* it with its colors'" (174). Seeing the colors of a crow against a blue sky brings a flag to mind and the narrator, moved by the material nature of the colors that bring the flag to mind, is able to accept, however tentatively, the existence of flags that symbolize nations: "a flag that stood for nothing, a thing of pure color. But through it I have at last become capable of looking at actual flags (which up until then had only cut off my view), because now their peaceful prototype exists in my imagination" (143). Such seeing and naming, occurring in moments of fantasy, creates meaning in an individual life and relationship with a "never-to-be-defined, obscure *Volk*" (175).

After describing his German father and Slovenian mother and their ancestors, the first-person narrator writes about Paris, Germany, and Austria as homelands and about the *Volk* that obsesses him. The dialectical movement in the description from positive assessment to acerbic scepticism and back, and the role of art in making the loving evaluations possible, are both familiar from the last pages of *The Long Way Around*. First a warm feeling for the *Volk* of German readers: "I know that no other country numbers so many 'incorrigibles' who hunger for their daily

reading matter; so many of the dispersed and obscure nation of readers" (184). Then the antithesis ever present in Handke's work, the "but": "But . . . from the remoteness of France I moved to, as I couldn't help seeing, an increasingly evil and sclerotic Federal Republic. . . . Almost everything, in newspapers and books as well, bore a spurious name. . . . Then I understood violence. . . . never an utterance that came from a center" (184-186). And finally this mood of despair changes as the narrator reads Hölderlin's Germanophobic novel *Hyperion*, remembers descriptions by Nicolas Born, and stands before paintings -- artistic experiences that lead him to experience a different Berlin: "I . . . glimpsed the beauty of a 'nation,' and even felt a certain longing for something of the kind. And, in Germany!, the word 'Reich' showed me its new meaning" (186-187). He makes his way to two high points of the city where he can say of himself (quoting a cliché from old novels, and the book is full of such quotations, signaling again the constructed nature of these experiences): "'In that moment no one was happier than he'" (187).

Another moment of insight describes what a *Volk* might be (and the pattern of fictionality and ephemerality are familiar, as is the material foundation): “Once after that, I caught sight of another Germany, not the Federal Republic and its states, nor yet again the ghoulish Reich, nor the half-timbering of the petty principalities. It was earth-brown and wet with rain, and it was on a hilltop; it was windows; it was urban, devoid of people, and festive; I saw it from a train; it was the house on the other side of the river; it was humorously quiet and was called Mittelsinn; it was 'the silent life of regular forms of silence'; it was enigma; it was recurrent and real. The man who saw it had a crafty feeling like Lieutenant Columbo after solving a case; yet knew that there could never be lasting relief” (189). Bracketed out are the political state and the backwoods "Heimat" of "old Germany." Instead, this homeland is sober, normal, silent, natural *and* civilized, far from extremes, and beautiful. But however striking the discovery of this new land, the self-ironizing

narrator (as he compares himself to Columbo) remains on his guard. "Heimat" can become HEIMAT!, "Volk" can become VOLK!.

During this long discussion of *Volk* and nation that makes up nearly one-tenth of the book, the narrator moves from praising Slovenian and German peoples to the contradictory view from Paris of a people like the overbearing, uncultured, and coercive Germans Hölderlin attacks at the end of *Hyperion*. Then the glimpse of forms that remind him of Paris, the descriptions of Hölderlin, Lenz, and Born, and the old paintings in Dahlem make him reevaluate the word "Reich" and see a hoped-for Germany. He ends, of course, with a statement of possible danger and certain ephemerality.

The book itself closes with a description of a Ruisdael painting -- "The Great Forest" -- followed by a slow, detailed depiction of a wood in Salzburg (peopled by children) that provides a transformative experience. Once again a work of art makes *Volk* possible; and the children as *Volk* of this wood prefigure the child so important in the third work of the tetralogy.

IV

Child Story describes a father living in Parisian exile who enrolls his daughter in a Jewish school so that she, the actual and linguistic child of historically damned speakers of German, will experience a meaningful tradition he himself is unable to pass on, so she "by birth and language a descendant of murderers who seemed condemned to flounder for all time, without aim or joy, metaphysically dead, would learn the binding tradition, would go her way with others of her kind, and embody that steadfast, living earnestness which he, who had been rendered incapable of tradition, knew to be necessary but forfeited day after day to frivolous caprice" (249). The Jews

qualify as mentors here because they are “the one *Volk* deserving of its name, the *Volk* of which, long before its dispersion to the four corners of the earth, it was said that, even 'without prophets,' 'without sacrifices,' 'without idols' -- and even 'without names' -- it would still be a *Volk*; and whom, in the words of a later biblical scholar, those wishing to know 'the tradition,' the 'oldest and strictest law in the world' would be obliged to consult. It was the only actual *Volk* to which the adult had ever wished to belong” (249). The attempt to situate his daughter within a tradition that can eschew prophets, sacrifices, idols, and names, a tradition that has continued and even thrived in its liminality, a tradition that Handke views positively as without a center, finally fails (and an attempt at Catholic education follows).

The choice of the Jews as "the single actual *Volk* to which the adult had ever wanted to belong" recalls Peter Sloterdijk's assessment of the Jews as a people quite different from the totalizing exclusive people of "Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer": “The Fascist . . . must have felt that no one saw through him more than did the Jews, who by virtue of their very tradition of suffering, almost as if by nature stand in ironic juxtaposition to every superior power . . . modern Judaism radiated such an intense negation of the arrogance of power into the center of Fascist consciousness that the German Fascists, bent on their own grandiosity, built extermination camps in order to eliminate what stood in the way of their presumptuousness. Did not these people live with the melancholy knowledge that all messiahs, since time immemorial, had been false? . . . No will to power can endure the irony of the will to survive this power too” (242-243). Emmanuel Levinas, in trying to describe what a Jewish state might be, has posited a state separated from nationalisms and yet strong enough to deal with injustice, persecution, and violence, a state that can both engage and disengage -- taking as its model David who fought by day and studied the law by night, a state that is the servant of the whole universe: “This is an idea of power without the

abuse of power, of a power safeguarding the moral principles and particular identity of Israel, which an institution common to Israel and all the nations might compromise. It is an idea to which the image of Saul would seem to conform when, at the beginning of his reign, hiding himself among the baggage, he continues to work his field. On the other hand, the text from I Samuel is an impassioned indictment. The prophet foresees the ruler's enslavement of his subjects, and the attack on their property, persons and family. This power eventually becomes tyranny: 'And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day' (I Samuel 8: 18). It is impossible to escape the State" ("The State of Caesar and the State of David," *The Levinas Reader* 269). As he works toward an idea of a Jewish state that will negatively embody an absence of coercive power and yet positively embody a national entity that can exert a power ensuring justice, Levinas faces a problem very close to Handke's as he works toward *Volk*. "For two thousand years," Levinas writes, "Israel did not engage with History. Innocent of any political crime, pure with a victim's purity, a purity whose sole merit is perhaps its patient endurance, Israel had become unable to conceive of a politics that would put the finishing touches to its monotheistic message. Now such a commitment does exist. Since 1948" ("The State of Caesar and the State of David" 276-277).

The postwar generation, Handke wrote in *The Long Way Around*, left without a sense of *Volk*, was unable "to vibrate in harmony with the peaceful history of mankind" (115). As did the Jews in 1948, Sorger commits himself to positive action. But just as Levinas describes the "attack on . . . property, persons and family" from the state that inevitably grows tyrannical, so too does Handke envision the violence inherent in a "chosen people." One day the father in *Child Story* receives a letter that, in the name of the chosen people whose school his child is attending, threatens her with death as a descendent of the hated Germans (257).

After accepting and creating a personal law of human decision and interaction in *The Long Way Around* and after refining that aesthetic action in *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*, the father of *Child Story* acts, even in the face of violence, to give his daughter a tradition among the Jews. In return, as a child, she begins to endow him with a tradition of his own: “He was convinced that she embodied an important law, which he himself had either forgotten or never known. . . . In this light, he was able . . . at times to allow himself to utter certain words which he had hitherto rejected as pathos, shut his ears to at the movies, closed his eyes to as obsolete in old books, and which now turned out to be more real than anything else in the world. Who were the fools who had dared to claim that these 'high-sounding' words were of purely 'historical' interest, and that time had divested them of their meaning? Weren't they, in their blindness, or perhaps only lukewarmness and faintheartedness, confusing words with whole sentences?” (242-243). Father and daughter thus make possible and reinforce for one another the experience of *Volk*; and in fact, their own relationship is a vivid experiment in human relationship in which the vicissitudes and pleasures of interaction are portrayed.

Child Story concludes with a joyful, material description of the daughter who goes off to school with other children and yet alone, a passage surrounded by references to "SONG" (278) and to the ancient French popular song ("'Cantilena: perpetuating the plenitude of love and of all passionate happiness'" (278)). Lines from Pindar's sixth Olympic ode form a concluding epigraph: "Arise child, and follow my voice into a land common to all." This will be a land where the question "'Are you still a child or have you become a German?'" (275) will not arise, and yet a land that will provide for its citizens a "binding tradition" and a "steadfast, living earnestness." The land created and sung by the voice of a poet (or the brush of a painter) will have a *Volk* of "readers."

Thus the first three volumes of the tetralogy end with images of readers, of the *Volk* that

knows paintings. There is the museum-induced vision of *Volk* at the end of *The Long Way Around*, the painting-inspired description of the woods at the end of *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*, and the evocations of song concluding *Child Story*. These images make possible the actual return home to Austria "by way of the villages" which is the play *The Long Way Around: A dramatic poem*.

V

Although the pilgrimage of the tetralogy is from Alaska through France into "deepest Austria," it is anything but a journey toward "Volkstümlichkeit" -- a popular nationalism that finds outward expression through political kitsch. The old woman of the play makes this clear, calling for people to stand up against "the crying injustice of the so-called representatives of the *Volk*, of the regional programs, of the questionnaires, of the false welfare, of the electric fences . . . [made] to blow out the light of our souls, to smother us? . . . Show each of their words to be barking and show the barbed wire within their mouth" (78).

To avoid this tyranny Hans proposes a kind of deconstruction or *Kahlschlag* in which the symbols and names that have formed the barbed wire are done away, allowing a nameless wilderness to arise. In that openness they can once again say "earth" in reference to the place they stand (36-38). The construction following the deconstruction will be done by builders who are themselves without certainty, without homes, without haste: "We are the fatherless, those set free, the ones without homeland, those divested of place, the beautiful foreigners, the great unknown ones, the sensuous slow ones, the people of all times . . . doesn't the *Volk* create itself?" (43-44).

The prophetic and yet carefully relativised admonitions at the end of the play repeat many

of the themes of the tetralogy, including the creative artistry, childlike nature, relation to the face of the other, and human dignity that make a *Volk* possible. The play ends with caravan music as a child is crowned. Led by a child (who has not yet become a German), following a music that will lead them onward, (that will continue the playful process rather than announcing arrival), the actors replace their masks and thus remain players who are told to choose a glad fraud over public truth (115). Children, creators, travelers, those sensitive to the faces of others, pretenders, "mere" actors. A *Volk*.

VI

Formed by the same philosophical and literary traditions that have brought Handke to these formulations, another contemporary European writer has been, recently, similarly engaged in recreating a *Volk* after years as a liminal critic. In a speech delivered at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on April 29, 1990 when he was awarded an honorary degree, Václav Havel describes himself in terms that effectively restate what I have tried to say about Handke and a *Volk* in this chapter:

> I can already hear your objections -- that I style myself in these Kafkaesque outlines only because in reality I'm entirely different: someone who quietly and persistently fights for something, someone whose idealism has carried him to the head of his nation.
>
> Yes, I admit that superficially I may appear to be the precise opposite of all those K.'s -- Josef K., the surveyor K., and Franz K. -- although I stand behind everything I've said about myself. I would only add that, in my opinion, the hidden

motor driving all my dogged efforts is precisely this innermost feeling of mine of being excluded, of belonging nowhere, a state of disinheritance, as it were, of fundamental non-belonging. Moreover, I would say that it's precisely my desperate longing for order that keeps plunging me into the most improbable adventures. I would even say that everything worthwhile I've ever accomplished I have done to conceal my almost metaphysical feeling of guilt. The real reason I am always creating something, organizing something, it would seem, is to vindicate my permanently questionable right to exist."[4]

NOTES

i. Although Manheim translates "Aufzeichnung" as "taking notes," it can also mean drawing, and other parts of the novel show Sorger drawing to find lost form.

ii. Nietzsche writes that "Everything that sets man off from the animal depends upon this capacity to dilute the concrete metaphors into a schema; for in the realm of such schemata, something is possible that might never succeed under the intuited first impressions: to build up a pyramidal order according to castes and classes, a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, boundary determinations, which now stands opposite the other, concrete world of primary impressions, as the more solid, more universal, more familiar, more human, and therefore as the regulatory and imperative world. ("On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense" 250)

iii. *Totality and Infinity* 187 ff. See also Goldschmidt on Levinas and Handke's *The Long Way Around* (123).

4. In this regard see also Julia Kristeva's *Nations Without Nationalism*.