

## Yugoslavia, a Winter's Tale: Imagination of the Balkans in the Travel Literature of Austrian Writer Peter Handke

### Introduction

Upon winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2004, Elfriede Jelinek, an Austrian author not widely read outside of her home country, suggested modestly that her fellow Austrian novelist and playwright Peter Handke was a better candidate for the prize. Handke is certainly the more internationally-known writer, having who created a splash in the world of elite literature with his avant-garde plays and groundbreaking novels in the 1970's. However, Handke made himself a less than ideal candidate for high-profile literary prizes when he wrote a brief travelogue (*Eine Winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa, und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, 1996, [*A Journey to the Rivers: Justice For Serbia*]) concerning a trip he made to Serbia. This was the beginning of his Pro-Serbian stance, continued in three further travelogues, from which he has since refused to waver.

Handke's sudden pro-Serbian politics may have surprised those casually acquainted with his work. As J.S. Marcus wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, "He had come to be known as an apolitical writer, as an aesthete of sorts, an admirer of the refined prose of Austria's great Biedermeier novelist Adalbert Stifter" (81). Yet to say that Handke's main body of work is apolitical would be false. He has written political essays expressing anti-fascist concerns throughout his career, and he has subtly carried these politics into his fiction, focusing on people marginalized by politics and history. In his early works his characters seem irrevocably stuck and unable to engage with their surroundings, but in his later novels disaffected characters pull themselves out of their ruts by traveling in search of sublime landscapes that bring about "landscape epiphanies"

as Mirelle Tabah calls them. “This,” she writes “is the only ‘true sensation’ in a universe in which the omnipresence of violence and war, the objectification of the individual through technocratic and through the oppressive force of reigning ideologies have alienated the majority of beings from their very yearning for happiness” (Cory 336-337). These types of epiphanies tend to happen in landscapes outside of Germany and Austria (339), and of these landscapes, none seems to be a more powerful antidote to Germany and Austria than Yugoslavia as it was before its break-up, particularly the region of Slovenia. In *Die Wiederholung* (1986, [*Repetition*]), one of Handke’s most acclaimed novels, a young Austrian of Slovenian descent like Handke takes a journey through Slovenia, and he experiences a particularly profound “landscape epiphany” in this fairy-tale-like land. But for Handke, Slovenia ceased to be ideal and fairy-tale-like when it declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. Handke explains his disillusionment with Slovenia in his essay “Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land” (1991, “A Dreamer’s Farewell to the Ninth Country”):

Ja, die neuen Grenzen in Jugoslawien: Ich sehe sie, statt nach außen, viel mehr, bei jedem der jetzigen Einzelstaaten, nach innen wachsen, hinein ins jeweilige Landesinnere; wachsen als Unwirklichkeitsstreifen oder –gürtel; hineinwachsen zur Mitte, bis es bald kein Land, weder slowenisch, noch kroatisch, mehr gibt, ähnlich wie im Fall Monte Carlo oder Andorra. Ja, ich fürchte eines Tages in der “Republik Slowenien” kein Land mehr schmecken zu können, wie...und schon seit langem jeden Geschmack von Land, Gegend, Raum, Ort und Wirklichkeit erstickt haben; statt des Anhauchs der Kultur der Schwefel und Schwafel einer längst entseelten Folklore.<sup>1</sup> (195)

---

<sup>1</sup> The new borders in Yugoslavia: I see them, instead of from the outside, much more, as with each of the current independent states, growing into the inside, into each respective country’s interior.; growing as strips of unreality or—a belt; growing into the center, until almost no country, neither Slovenian, nor Croatian, is left, similar to the case of Monte Carlo or Andorra. Yes, I fear one day in the “Republic of Slovenia” there will be no Country left to be able to taste...and already for a long time every flavor of Land, Country, Space, Place and Reality has been suffocated. Instead of the inspiring breath of

Were he a character in one of his novels, Handke's future would be a search for a new space and a new landscape where he is not so alienated, but instead in harmony with his surroundings. Or at least he would construct such a landscape.

Evidently, this is what he has done in his Serbia travelogues. Before he undertook the trip he recounts in *Eine winterliche Reise* he had not yet extensively traveled in Serbia, but he became very curious about it, perhaps because it was a space that was still willing to be called by the name "Yugoslavia." When he went there in 1996, he developed a deep admiration for the country, and he simultaneously developed an even deeper disgust for the western media. His vehement criticisms of western journalists and intellectuals were met with equally vehement criticisms of Handke in newspapers across Western Europe and in the U.S. But despite this criticism, Handke has stood by his doubts, even if they have evolved into a stubborn and unconditional defense of Serbia.

### Research Question

In my thesis, I will examine how Handke dismantles one Yugoslavia and builds another in his narrative, and I will explore Handke's success or failure in finding an alternative, peaceful Europe that compliments his aesthetics in the war-ravaged areas about which he writes.

### Methodology

I will analyze Handke's four major travel texts as one large travel narrative of the former-Yugoslav realm: *Eine winterliche Reise...*, *Ein sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise*, *Unter Tränen Fragend*, and *Die Kuckucke von Velika Hoča*. This

---

culture, the sulfur and gas of a long since lifeless folklore. (Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.)

analysis will have three major sections: deconstruction of old landscape, construction of new landscape, and transformation as traveler. In analyzing these texts, I will pay particular attention to Handke's description of landscapes, his observations of war, his characterizations of the people he encounters, his portrayal of the media, his comments on Yugoslavia and the former Yugoslav republics, his comments on Western Europe, specific mentions of travel as a concept, as well as the glimpses into his personal life that he chooses to reveal. The pertinent passages will be collected and indexed, and then organized and analyzed according to the criteria below.

### I. Deconstruction of Old Landscape

This section of the thesis will be an analysis of Handke's critical portrayal of western media and Western Europe and his deconstruction of the accepted views of the former-Yugoslav realm that had been perpetuated by the media. I will examine his core objections to the western media's idea of the Balkans as well as the evidence and arguments he provides to attack the western media's idea. The criteria with which he rejects the portrayal of the former Yugoslavia will be important to remember later in the thesis when considering whether or not he himself is successful in presenting a faithful portrait of Serbia.

### II. Construction of New Landscape

While the first section of the analysis will examine what offends Handke's aesthetic standards, this section will examine what pleases them. His descriptions of landscapes, his observations of war (or lack thereof), and his specific mentions of travel as a concept will reveal what sensations and experiences are important for him to record and use in creating a narrative space, namely a new Yugoslavia. In order to understand

his construction of his own Yugoslavia, the theoretical framework from *Imagining the Balkans* by Maria Todorova will be essential.

### III. Transformation

In this section I will analyze the passages concerning Handke's personal life and his views on travel to reveal his own transformation as a traveler. Analyses of his fiction will be helpful, as his fictional characters are often similarly transformed by landscape and travel. Academic literature on travel writing will provide a theoretical framework. One important theory in travel literature, articulated in Syed Manzurul Islam's *The Ethics of Travel* is the difference between the sedentary traveler and the nomadic traveler, the nomadic traveler being the traveler who travels without cultural baggage and who observes the given landscape without imposing such baggage, while the sedentary traveler travels with such baggage from home, and pollutes his observations of the given landscape and culture with it. Handke often criticizes other travelers in the former Yugoslavia of being sedentary travelers. However, the key will be whether he himself succeeds in becoming a nomadic traveler or falls into the rut of a sedentary travel.

#### Expected Results

My analysis will reveal that Handke will meticulously tear the media's authority apart, but he will have difficulty creating his own kind of textual authority after casting doubt on the ability of text to transmit any kind of reality. This will highlight the fictional element of writing a so-called non-fiction essay. The Serbia he constructs will be a Romantic one, the last holdout of the former Yugoslavia. At first he will resist the images of destruction, but he will learn to incorporate them without any loss of perceived sublimeness in the landscape. As a traveler he will become more and more drawn to the

image of Serbia he has created, and more and more disillusioned with the world outside its borders.

### Annotated Bibliography

#### Primary Literature

Handke, Peter. Die Kuckucke von Velika Hoča. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009. Print.

Handke, Peter. Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa, und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996. Print.

Handke, Peter. Sommerlicher Nachtrag zu einer winterlichen Reise. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996. Print.

Handke, Peter. Unter Tränen Fragend. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000. Print.

These are the primary texts of the thesis. They are travelogues that take place primarily in Serbian-populated areas (Serbia, Serbian Republic of Bosnia, and northern Kosovo), and they are considered very controversial due to Handke's excessive criticism of western intellectuals and media, his questioning of the existence of certain war crimes, and his sympathy for Serbian people.

#### Secondary Resources

Coury, David N. and Frank Pilipp, ed. The Works of Peter Handke: International Perspectives. Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2005. Print.

This is a collection of essays which defines different aspects of Handke's career. Mireille Tabah's essay "Land and Landscape in Handke's Texts" is particularly important to this research as it explores Handke's relationship to landscape. Other essays explore the evolution of Handke's writing style and themes in his fiction, which will be important when comparing his travel texts to his fiction.

Deichmann, Thomas, ed. Noch einmal für Jugoslawien: Peter Handke. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999. Print.

This book is a collection of interviews with Handke and reactions of other intellectuals to Handke's controversial travel texts. Deichmann is perhaps too sympathetic to Handke, but the writings collected in the book reflect a diverse mix of opinions.

Hafner, Fabjan. Peter Handke: Unterwegs ins Neunte Land. Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2008. Print.

This is a German-language analysis of Handke's representations of Slovenia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia in his fiction and non-fiction work. Hafner's work will build upon the framework from *Imagining the Balkans* that I use in order to understand how Handke imagines and constructs the Balkans.

Islam, Syed Manzurul. The Ethics of Travel: From Marco Polo to Kafka. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996. Print.

This book provides the theoretical framework mentioned in the methodology concerning the nomadic traveler vs. the sedentary traveler. Islam explains this in great depth and with several archetypes, and he also explores how ethical these modes of travel are.

Konzett, Matthias. The Rhetoric of National Dissent in Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, and Elfriede Jelinek. Rochester, New York: Camden Press, 2000. Print.

In the section of this book concerning Handke, Konzett writes about the political aspects Handke's work. Konzett also places Handke's work in the political context of Austria and Central Europe, which is useful when considering the cultural background Handke brings with him when traveling to the former Yugoslavia.

Kowalewski, Michael, ed. Tempermental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1992. Print.

This volume contains articles mainly about English-language travel literature, but it is useful in the context of Handke because it analyzes trends in contemporary travel writing, and provides theories about the different ways travel writers approach a foreign landscape, and how travel writers approach a politically charged landscape.

Parry, Christoph. Peter Handke's Landscapes of Discourse. Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2003. Print.

This book analyzes Handke's multiple uses of landscape, and how his use of landscape has changed throughout his career. Perry analyzes Handke's major works, and in a chapter called "Landscape in Conflict," he analyzes Handke's use of a conflicted landscape (the former Yugoslavia) in his travel writing.

Todorova, Maria. Imagining the Balkans. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

This book is a major analysis of the idea of the Balkans throughout history, how the imagination of it in the west has evolved over time, and how the west's imagination has distorted its representation. It reveals many typical assumptions that western intellectuals often make, and it also analyzes how false constructs of this area have developed. Both these aspects will be important when understanding Handke's own assumptions and false constructs.

#### Works Cited

Jelinek, Elfriede. "A Gloom of Her Own." Interview. By Deborah Solomon. *The New York Times Magazine*. 21 Nov. 2004: A31. Proquest. Website. 27 Oct. 2009.

Marcus, J.S. "Apocalypse Now." New York Review of Books 21 Sept. 2000: 80-85. Print.