The Ninth Country: Peter Handke's *Heimat* and the Politics of Place

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Abstract

Peter Handke's 'Yugoslavia work' embraces novels and plays written over the last two decades as well as his 5 controversial travelogues and provocative media interventions since the early 1990s. It comprises two principal themes: criticism of media reporting on the conflicts which accompanied the break-up of the Yugoslavian federal state, and his imagining of a mythical, utopian Slovenia, Yugoslavia and Serbia. An understanding of both is necessary in order to appreciate the reasons for his at times seemingly bizarre and perverse, and in truth sometimes misguided statements on Yugoslav politics. Handke considers it the task of the writer to distrust accepted ways of seeing the world, challenge public consensus and provide alternative images and perspectives. His biographically rooted emotional identification with Yugoslavia as a land of freedom, democratic equality and good living, contrasting with German and Austrian historical guilt, consumption and exploitation, led him to deny the right of the Slovenians to national self-determination in 1991, blame the Croatians and their international backers for the conflict in Bosnia which followed, insist that the Bosnian Serbs were not the only ones responsible for crimes against humanity, and defend Serbia and its President Slobodan Milošević during the Kosovo war at the end of the decade. My paper asks *what* Handke said about Yugoslavia, before going on to suggest *why* he said it, and consider *what conclusions* can be drawn about the part played by writers and intellectuals in shaping the collective memory of past events and directing collective understandings of the present.

Peter Handke's 'Yugoslavia work', to use a term introduced by Scott Abbott, translator of and commentator on several works relevant here, embraces not only his controversial travelogues and a series of provocative media interventions since the early 1990s, but also novels and plays written over the last two decades. In it he addresses two principal themes: criticism of media reporting on the conflicts which accompanied the break-up of the Yugoslavian federal state, and his imagining of a mythical, utopian Slovenia, Yugoslavia and Serbia. An understanding of both of these is necessary in order to appreciate the reasons for his at times seemingly bizarre and perverse, and in truth sometimes mis-guided statements on Yugoslav politics. Handke's long-term conviction that it is the task of the writer to distrust accepted ways of seeing the world, challenge public consensus and provide alternative images and perspectives, and his emotional identification with Yugoslavia as a land of freedom, democratic equality

and good living, contrasting with German and Austrian historical guilt, consumption and exploitation, set him on a collision course with public opinion regarding the Balkan conflict. His denial of the right of the Slovenians to national self-determination in 1991, his blaming of the Croatians and their international backers for the conflict in Bosnia which followed, his insistence that the Bosnian Serbs were not the only ones responsible for crimes against humanity, and his problematic defence of Serbia and its President Slobodan Milošević during the Kosovo war at the end of the decade derived from a refusal to accept received narratives of the past in collective and national memory, and a determination to leave open alternative scenarios for the future.

The insults Handke dished out to the media commentators with whom he disagreed and his involved literary diction, which gave rise to repeated misunderstandings would have been enough on their own to make him enemies. But the acrimony of the response to his views was due above all to one thing: his refusal to accept that the ethnic cleansing and genocide practised by the Serbs, first in Bosnia, and later in Kosovo, was qualitatively or quantitatively worse than that practised by the Croats and Bosnian Muslims. This touched on an issue of particular sensitivity at a time when, after the end of the Cold War, the Holocaust had come centre stage in European political memory. In the following, I shall try to explain how Handke's position was determined by his biography, his espousal of Slovenia as Heimat, and his conception of the role of the writer. However, I will start by asking *what* Handke said about Yugoslavia, before going on to explain *why* he said it. In conclusion, I argue that he has played a generally beneficial role in discourse on the former Yugoslavia by reminding the public of two things: the dangers of accepting uncritically the interpretation of the Balkan conflict conveyed in the media, and the importance for an understanding of the conflict of of aspects of the past which have been forgotten and values which have been sacrificed in the *Realpolitik* of the present.

Handke is a prolific author, and he has written no less than six books with a direct bearing on Yugoslavian politics. All but one of these, however, are quite short: they originated as essay-articles in German newspapers, and were subse-

quently expanded for publication in book form. In *The Dreamer's Farewell to the Ninth Country: A Reality Which Has Disappeared: Remembering Slovenia*, first published in *Die Zeit* in 1991, Handke laments Slovenia's declaration of independence, the first step in the break-up of the multi-cultural state of Yugoslavia. He repeats and reformulates the mythical idealisation of the country in which had already engaged in a number of works, particularly the autobiographical novel *Repetition* (1986). In becoming a modern state with political boundaries, Slovenia will in his view lose its unique quality as a site of unalienated and authentic being. Though Handke is an Austrian, he has never felt so much at home there as in Slovenia. He vehemently rejects the idea that Slovenia and Croatia should separate themselves from the South Slavs, and revive the old vision of Central Europe based on recollections of the Habsburg empire before the First World War, by joining the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria. His idealisation of Yugoslavia as a federal state in which different peoples live in harmony with each other can be seen as a reconfiguration rather than a rejection of the idea of Central Europe. Commentators have pointed out that it echoes passages in the works of the Austrian writer Joseph Roth after the First World War, and the idealisation of Slovenia in Ingeborg Bachmann's writing in the 1960s (see her story 'Three Paths to the Lake', and Wallas 1991). However, Handke replaces the Austrian hegemony of which these dream with an independent Yugoslavian federation. He depicts this as legitimated by its anti-fascist resistance to the Nazis and pursuing a third way between the superpowers and their ideologies in the Cold War.[1]

Whereas Handke's censure of the Slovenians met with puzzlement and derision from readers in that country, his next book, *Journey to the Rivers*, first published in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in January, 1996 under the title 'Justice for Serbia', made international headlines and was a topic of debate in the press for

[1] Handke speaks of "spooky talk of Central Europe" (p. 19): "Again and again I saw these small groups of old men as witnesses to a completely different history from our own German and Austrian history. Theirs was the great history of Yugoslav resistance, and I can't put it any other way than to say, I envied them for it. […] In the past few years, however, whenever I came to Slovenia, a new history was being spread about. New? It was the age-old legend of Central Europe but in a new distorted form." (p. 22)

months. Here Handke extends to the Serbs, as the backbone of what remained of Yugoslavia, his idealisation of the federal state, and his utopian conception of Slovenia. The independence achieved by Slovenia and Croatia in the first Balkan War had encouraged the less ethnically homogeneous state of Bosnia-Herzegovina to follow suit in seceding from the Yugoslav federation in 1992. This had then triggered a civil war between Bosnian Muslims and Croats on the one hand and Bosnian Serbs and federal Yugoslav forces on the other. Both sides caused great hardship by expelling minority populations in the areas under their control, but the siege and shelling of civilians in Sarajevo, the establishment of concentration camps by the Serbs and above all the massacre in Srebrenica were among the most violent and cruel acts seen in Europe since the Second World War.

Handke was filled with indignation at the one-sidedness of what he saw as "coordinated perspectives" and "distorted reflections" in the international press, amounting to a stereotyping of the Serbs as villainous monsters in the run-up to the Dayton Peace negotiations in November, 1995. He decided to visit Serbia, in order to see with his own eyes what the allegedly so bloodthirsty Serbian people were really like. On 27 November he travelled to Belgrade and made a series of excursions around the country over the next three weeks. In his account in *Journey to the Rivers*, he makes no secret of his bias towards the Serbian position in the conflict. "Who was the first aggressor?", he asks (pp. 15-16), and insists that Croatia's declaration of independence rendered the 600 000 Serbs living in Croatia, "heretofore Yugoslavian citizens on an equal footing with their Croatian fellow-citizens", a "second-class ethnic group in the constitution of the new state of Croatia, adopted over their heads". This they could only experience as a repeat of the injustice they suffered in the Second World War, as "an atrocity comparable to the unforgettable persecutions at the hands of the Hitlerian-Croatian Ustasha regime".[2] In a number of rhetorically formulated passages,

[2] The haste with which Germany and Austria pressed for recognition of the secessionist republics of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991 reminded not only Handke of the wedge driven into the Balkans during the Second World War, when the German Reich supported a nationalist Croatian state in the fight against Tito's partisans. (See Parry p. 199.) Foreign diplomatic meddling appeared to

Handke appears to go beyond calling readers to practise a healthy scepticism towards international press reporting, and to imply that some of the Serbian attacks and atrocities were fabricated.[3]

His most problematic words are those on the massacre of Srebrenica, where the Muslim population was driven out by Bosnian Serb militia between 12 and 18 July, 1995, and some eight thousand Muslim men were brutally murdered, despite the presence of a Dutch UN peace-keeping force. Handke may share the public horror at what had gone on, but he does not say so, glossing rather over the event, and asking instead what factors led to it, and why they have been overlooked. “You aren’t going to question the massacre of Srebrenica too, are you?”, his wife inquires. “No”, he replies:

> “But I want to ask how such a massacre is to be explained, carried out, it seems, under the eyes of the world, after more than three years of war during which, people say, all parties, even the dogs of this war, had become tired of killing, and further, it is supposed to have been organised, systematic, long-planned execution.” *Why* such a slaughtering of thousands? What was the *motivation*? *For what purpose*? And why, instead of investigation into the causes (“psychopaths” does not suffice), again nothing but the sale of the naked, lascivious, market-driven facts and supposed facts? (pp. 73f.)

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have left the Serbs as victims again, by destroying the federal Yugoslav state, and turning whole communities into foreign minorities in the newly created nations of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (*Journey to the Rivers*, p. 35). Handke’s association of Yugoslavia with peaceful and equitable self-government and political resistance to foreign rule draws on memories of peasant risings against the Austro-Hungarian governors in the eighteenth century, the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes formed after the collapse of the Hapsburg empire in 1918, and the partisans whose efforts to defeat the Nazis during the Second World War laid the foundations of post-war Yugoslavia. Handke’s Yugoslavia is the anti-fascist other of Germany. His remembering of Yugoslavian history is, however, a selective one. It excludes not only the pro-fascist Croatian Ustasha governmernt, but also ignores the political ambivalence of the conservative-Royalist Serbian Chetniks, who also collaborated with the Germans at points during the war.

[3] Was the Croatian world heritage city of Dubrovnik really deliberately shelled, he asks for instance, or did it just suffer collateral damage? (p. 48) He stresses that it has never been proven that the shelling of the Markale market in Sarajevo, which galvanised the international community

A second journey in the following summer, which took Handke into the Serbian republic in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is described in *A Summer Supplement to a Winter Journey*. On his first trip to Serbia, he had been unable to visit those parts of the former Yugoslavia directly affected by the war – having merely been permitted to take a few "memorial steps" across the border from Bajina Bašta into Bosnia, the land of atrocities. He now visits Srebrenica, but again fails to express the consternation and condemnation demanded of him by critics of *Journey to the Rivers*.

Asking Through Tears: An Additional Record of Two Journeys Across Yugoslavia in Wartime, March and April 1999 is the account of two further short visits Handke made to Serbia nearly five years later. At this point, the country's military installations were being bombed by NATO in order to put pressure on the government to end the acts of violence by the military towards the civilian population in the southern province of Kosovo. The Serbs had rescinded the autonomous status of the region, although ninety percent of the Kosovan population was of Albanian origin. When the Kosovo Liberation Army stepped up its independence struggle, Serbian forces again resorted to ethnic cleansing. Handke's condemnation of the bombing and his continued support for the intransigent Serbian President flew in the face of international opinion.

At the same time as he wrote *Asking Through Tears*, his play *The Ride in the Dugout Canoe: The Play about the Film about the War* (2000), was produced in Vienna's Burgtheater. This is a more complex and profound response to the conflict than the travel reports written by Handke as a gesture of solidarity with Serbia. He explores the difficulties encountered by two film directors seeking to make a documentary on the Balkan wars. Their final decision not to make the film suggests it is ultimately impossible to present a balanced account. This is then a play not about the war, but about the media representation of war.

Finally, Handke published a series of articles on Milosevic's trial at the International Court of Justice in the Hague in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2002.

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into bringing to an end the siege of the city, and into finding a political solution to the Bosnian problem, were actually the work of Bosnian Serbs (pp. 47-8).

These were republished in the following year under the title *Round About the Grand Tribunal*. In addition to these books, on the one hand Handke expressed his views spontaneously in a series of shorter newspaper articles, and gave carefully staged and provocative TV interviews. On the other, it is worth noting that Yugoslavian politics also form the backdrop of his major novel *My Year in the No Man's Bay* (1994). Here he imagines the country reconciled within its old borders, while Germany is rent apart by civil war.

Journey to the Rivers

It is worth looking at the themes, structure and reception of *Journey to the Rivers* in a little more detail, since this book has been the focus of most attention. The most important theme is the international press coverage of the war, of which Handke is extremely critical. He shares the general suspicion of the mediation of reality in the postmodern world familiar from the work of Jean Baudrillard. "For what does one know when participation is almost always only a (tele)visual participation?", he writes:

> What does one know when overwhelming on-line networking produces only information and not the knowledge that can come into being solely through learning, observing and learning? What does some one know who, in place of the thing, sees only its picture, or, as in TV news, an abbreviation of a picture, or, as in the on-line world, an abbreviation of an abbreviation? (p. 13)

Handke goes beyond this quite justified point about our problematic dependence on media representations of political reality to accuse leading international quality newspapers of deliberate political bias. He writes of the "suspicious, predetermined, inquisitorial agenda" of the international press, calls *Le Monde* a "demagogic snoop sheet" (p. 12?), and refers to a "hatemongering hack" (p. 15) at that "Serb-

swallowing rag", the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (p. 76). The packs of journalistic meddlers on the sidelines are "in their way just as terrible dogs of war as those on the battleground" (p. 75).

Handke's other main concern in *Journey to the Rivers* is to present a different image of Serbia and the Serbs from that in the press. The "country of the so-called aggressors" (p. 2) is presented as peace-loving and rural. When he describes the people of Belgrade, it is with the adjectives "courteous" and "civilised". They are "thoughtful, from an almost dignified collective isolation" (p. 31). Rough-looking men he comes across in the mountains near the Bosnian border and initially suspects of being paramilitary killers turn out to be timber workers and forest rangers (p. 58).

Before even leaving his home in the suburbs of Paris, he begins to shape our impression of it through enthusiastic endorsement of the Serb Emir Kusturica's film *Underground*, which had been awarded the Palme d'Or in Cannes that summer. Kusturica's imaginative presentation of Yugoslavia's history is certainly pro-Serb and anti-Croat, but it is also highly irreverent and engagingly satirical. Handke is therefore justified in defending it against the narrowly politically motivated criticisms of Alain Finkielkraut and André Glucksman. Serbia's cultural richness and its many cultural ties with Western Europe are a theme running through the book. He approaches Serbia, as the full German title *A Winter Journey to the Rivers Danube, Save, Morava and Drina* indicates, as a geographical rather than a political entity. Much of his text is concerned with the country's wide open landscapes, which suggest permanence, peace and hope. This image of an alternative, natural Serbia, free of negative political connotations, is underlined by his particular focus on the country's main rivers. At one point, Handke actually links them with his argument that Serbia has always been part of Western European cultural tradition:

> This river world was perhaps a sunken one, decaying, old, but it represented also an archetypal landscape the likes of which have never emerged for me from the Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century: a

> primeval world that appeared as an undiscovered civilisation, a very appealing one. (p. 36)

The Danube and its tributaries unite the different parts of the now sadly disintergrating Yugoslav federation, they naturalise its one-time political boundaries. Handke's search for images for Yugoslavia and Serbia does not lead him to the house or home, which frequently stand for the Heimat as homeland. Nor does he make as much as others have done of the bridge as a symbol for intercultural and interethnic communication and unity. It is rather the rivers of the country on which he dwells, with their associations of fluidity and openness to change, purity, innocence and power to rejuvenate.

In places, Handke's depiction of Serbian society as unspoiled by modern capitalism is so unrealistically idealised as to be hard to take seriously. He sees an unaccustomed liveliness in the markets, "something happy, light, vivacious about the process of buying and selling (that elsewhere has become pompous and grave, mistrustful and half scornful)", "something like an original and yes, traditional pleasure in commerce" (p. 40). Even the black market sale of petrol in canisters at the roadside becomes a desirable form of pre-capitalist economy:

> And I caught myself then even wishing that the country's isolation – no, not the war – might continue; that the Western (or whatever other) world of goods and monopoly might continue to be inaccessible. (p. 41)

This suggestion that the Serbs should be content to live in isolation and poverty indicates that Handke's writing on Yugoslavia belongs to the realm of poetic rather than political discourse. The very title of his first Yugoslavia book, *Dreamer's Farewell to the Ninth Country*, reflects its poetic quality. A melancholy, suggestive lament of the passing of an imaginary Slovenia on whose reality he quixotically insists, it is illustrated with attractive drawings of flowers, birds and landscapes taken from his manuscript. Handke's romantic vision of Slovenia as a grass-roots democracy practising regional autonomy, impervious to ideologies,

its people living in harmony with the natural environment, had already been identified with the 'Ninth Country' of Slovenian folk tales, in Handke's diaries, and formed the climax of his novel *Repetition*. He appropriates the legend of a glorious future when the ninth king of Slovenia will come into his own, and identifies it with the way of life which he believes is practised by rural communities in Slovenia today. His private myth of the Ninth Country is grounded in his dislike of the long history of Austrian hegemony, his resentment of the primacy of economics and rationalism over feelings and egalitarian values, and his fear of a McDonaldisation or creeping commodification and levelling of society. His real target in the *Dreamer's Farewell* is the economic, political and social modernisation of Yugoslavia. An awareness that this is doomed to failure – and perhaps also of the dubiousness of such Othering by an outsider who experienced the modernisation of his own country as a loss of essence and authentic being – is, however, already present in the title, and implicit in various passages in the book.

Writers are expected to be provocative, and to present personal visions and alternative realities in their work. It is not so much Handke's similar mythical treatment of Serbia in *Journey to the Rivers* as his blurring of the boundaries between private fantasy and reasoned political debate which courted controversy. As Christoph Parry writes, Handke repeatedly and confusingly crosses the border between aesthetic discourse and the sphere of political fact and rational argument (Parry p. 207). *Journey to the Rivers* is characterised by deliberate genre ambivalence and structural complexity, which are linked with Handke's desire to bring out the complexities of what the media were presenting as a simple one-dimensional issue. "The problem – only mine? – is more complicated, complicated by several layers or stages of reality", he writes: "and I am aiming, in my desire to clarify it, at something thoroughly real through which something like a meaningful whole can be surmised in all the mixed-up kinds of reality." (p. 12) This distinction between layers of reality is accompanied by a fragmentation of the subject. "There was a part of myself", he writes, "(repeatedly standing for 'my whole'), which felt that the Bosnian Serbs … were 'enemies of humanity'". But in spite of that, he notes on the next page, "another part of me (which in fact never

stood for my whole) did not want to trust this war and this war reporting. Didn't want to? No, couldn't." "A part of me could not take sides", he later adds, "much less judge" (p. 21). The narrating subject is also self-aware to an extent not commonly found in political journalism. On p. 24 he pauses in his presentation of mechanisms, defences and countermotions to press reporting of the war, and observes there is a danger that he might be acting comparably to those left-wing thinkers who visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s and glorified it in their work. Handke also integrates recognition of his bias as a narrator (p. 215) through a series of interjections: "What, are you trying to help minimise the Serbian crimes in Bosnia … by means of a media critique that sidesteps the basic facts?! – Steady. Patience. Justice." (p. 12)

In his book on literary controversies in Germany since the Second World War, Robert Weninger has provided a helpful account of the chorus of protest which greeted *Journey to the Rivers*. Peter Schneider, whose articles on Yugoslavia in the *New York Times* Handke had attacked explicitly in *Journey to the Rivers*, wrote in *Der Spiegel* (15 January, 1996), expressing disbelief that his colleague should seek to transform aggressors into victims. Handke had failed signally to provide the evidence needed for such a significant reallocation of responsibility for the war. And the mockery he made of the suffering of genuine victims, by insinuating that the press photos of Muslims taken in Serbian prisoner of war camps were posed, was in the worst of taste.[4] His anger, Schneider suggests, has been deflected from those who carried out acts of torture and murder to those who reported them, and ultimately to the victims themselves.

[4] "While continuously and really suffering, and no doubt more and more", Handke had written, the victims of the war "compliantly and visibly adopted the requested martyr faces and postures for the lenses and microphones of the international photographers and reporters, as instructed, directed, signalled" (p.20). Of course Handke was right that the seeming authenticity of photographs belied the fact that a motif has been selected and subjected to compositional treatment. He was justified in his observation that the Muslim victims were "acting" their own suffering for the press, and it was fair to say that suffering Serbs were hardly ever shown in such close-ups, and "hardly ever with their gaze directly and passionately into the camera, but rather in profile or gazing at the ground as if conscious of their guilt" (p. 21). The suffering of Bosnian prisoners had become commodified, inasmuch as it was placed at the disposal of an anonymous audience whose consumer habits are guided by motives ranging from the genuine desire to be informed as a foundation for action, through indifferent curiosity to plain voyeurism. Nonetheless, Handke's

Summing up, Schneider regrets that Handke's praiseworthy attempt to achieve peace and reconciliation through a common remembering of the past, and to undermine prejudice by arousing interest in the Serbian landscape and people is sadly compromised by unfounded blanket suspicion of anyone calling the Serbs to account for their acts of aggression and destruction.

The Bosnian writer Karahasan put his finger on two weak points in Handke's position: he was wrong to say that the Bosnian 'people' provoked the war by declaring their independence and secession from the Yugoslav federation, and to imply that the rights of one people must be weighed up against those of others (see Weninger, p. 18). For the Bosnian state's action was a result of a referendum in which a substantial majority of the citizens voted for independence. And Handke can also legitimately be taken to task for depicting the Serbs as a unitary bloc, sharing political views and responsibility for war crimes in equal measure: the massacres and rapes in Bosnia and Kosovo were the work of individuals with first and second names, Karahasan points out, and it is monstrous to suggest all Serbs share equally in collective guilt for their actions.[5]

While Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann and Milo Dor reacted angrily to Handke's book, he also had vociferous defenders, including Sigrid Löffler, Adolf Muschg, Alfred Hrdlicka, Peter Turrini and Elfriede Jelinek. Many of these stressed the justification of his attack on the reporting of the war. Handke responded to his critics by giving interviews, taking part in public debates, and touring not only Austria and Germany, but also Spain and Serbia, where he read parts of the text in public. Weninger regrets, however, that Handke did not take the opportunity to engage with the weightier arguments levelled against him in the *Summer Supplement to a Winter Journey* he wrote after his second visit to Serbia six months later. Rather than clarifying misunderstandings, his comments here on the cleansing of Muslims from the town of Višegrad seem emotionally

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passage reads in context as an insult to the war victims and to photographers who were trying conscientiously to inform the public.

[5] Tabah has similarly spelled out the dangers of Handke's mythisisation of reality (which is reminiscent of Inner Emigration during the Third Reich). Is he a revisionist? She gives examples of his over-stepping the mark.

remote – Handke expresses disbelief that so few, poorly armed men could have expelled the majority of the population. He is perfectly justified in saying that we should not forget the suppression of the Serbs by the Turks in the Ottoman Empire, and their murderous persecution by Muslims supported by the Nazis during the Second Word War. But he is treading on very thin ice when he describes the “supposed vengeance massacres” as “quite understandable” (p. 82).

A knowledge of the essentials of Handke’s biography and background (see Hafner articles and biography) helps to explain his idealisation of Slovenia. Handke was born in 1942 and grew up in Griffen, a small town in the south-east Austrian province of Carinthia, not far from the Yugoslav border. At the end of the 19th century, a quarter to a third of the population of Carinthia spoke Slovenian, but this Slavic-speaking minority has declined to an official figure of 60 000 today. Griffen, once a purely Slovenian-language town, is now entirely German-speaking. A decisive turning point was the referendum held to determine whether the Slovenian-speaking part of the province would remain Austrian or become part of the newly formed Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes at the end of the First World War. A sizeable majority elected to remain in Austria, but Handke’s grandfather was among the Carinthian Slovenes who voted against this. Tensions between Carinthian Slovenes and German speakers have never entirely disappeared, and although the rights of the Slovene and Croat minorities were guaranteed in the Austrian State Treaty of 1955, the Carinthian Prime Minister Jörg Haider only recently sought to make an issue again out of the so-called ‘signpost dispute’ which was a matter of considerable contention in the 1970s.

Handke’s mother’s family were Slovenian speakers, but his father was a German. As a small child, he is said to have been fluent in Slovenian, but the family lived in Berlin from 1945 to 1948, and Handke showed little interest in the language after they returned. It was only when he began to spend a part of the year in Austria again in the 1970s, after living in various cities in Germany and France, that he became fascinated with Slovenian. Rediscovery of Slovenian

language and culture was a way of regaining his childhood, and linked with a quest for a lost immediacy and sensual relationship with ordinary things. Slovenia offered the foundation of an alternative identity, as the location of what he perceived as a less degenerated way of life than that in German-speaking Austria. Handke learned the language well enough to translate novels by the Carinthian Slovenes Florjan Lipuš and Gustav Januš into German. The autobiographical novel *Repetition* reflects the author's growing interest in his Slovenian roots, and in particular his admiration of his maternal grandfather and an uncle who had studied horticulture across the border in Maribor. His fictional protagonist, the eighteen-year-old Philip Kobal, is a transparently autobiographical figure despite certain adjustments of fact. He embarks on a journey of discovery in Slovenia which leads him to the village where his family originated, a utopian rural community in the Slovenian karst associated with the Ninth Country of Slovenian folk tales. At the same time, Philip Kobal undergoes a process of self-discovery, which confirms his vocation as a writer, and equips him to make his way through life in Austria. Handke thus redefines his personal and family identity by cultivating his Slovenian heritage.

His Yugoslavian texts must also be seen in the context of a long-term literary strategy. It has often been argued that there was a break in Handke's literary production the 1970s, when he abandoned ideological deconstruction in favour of a modern 'Romanticism'. However, there is an underlying continuity between the delight in provocation, rejection of existing explanations and myths, and quest for new images of his own found in early work such as his play 'Insulting the Audience' (1966) and his anti-establishment tirade at the Group 47 meeting in Princeton in the same year, and his attacks on media images and 'myths' in *Journey to the Rivers*. In the essay 'I am an Inhabitant of the Ivory Tower' (1967), he describes as his task the articulation of alternative versions of reality: "I expect of a literary work something which makes me conscious of a hitherto unthought of possibility of reality " – a possibility of perceiving and speaking. „I expect of literature a breaking up of all apparently definitive world views." (pp. 19, 20) A different strategy was needed from his contemporaries'

„trivial realism“. Indeed, a constantly evolving innovation of strategies calling into question everything which had been comfortably resolved was required. Among the possible methods of demonstrating that there were other ways of representing reality, Handke specifies refusing to provide coherent *images* of the world, which give the impression of being real (p. 27), and refusing to structure his writing with conventional narratives (p. 25). A subjective element was inherent in this literary project: “What interests me as an author … is not showing reality, or coming to terms with it, my aim is rather to show *my* reality” (p. 25), and Handke made it clear that he had no ready-made solutions to offer: “A committed writer I cannot be, because I know no political alternative to what exists, here and elsewhere (unless it’s an anarchist one)” (p. 26).

Handke again formulated his strategy of raising questions and offering counter-arguments in his speech in acceptance of the Büchner Prize in 1973: “I am convinced of the forward-looking power of poetic thought to dissolve concepts. […] As soon as a concept turns up while I am writing, I try to evade it – if I still can – by changing direction towards a new landscape in which the simplifications and totalising demands of concepts do not yet exist.” (‘Die Geborgenheit unter der Schädeldecke’, in *Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat*, 76f.) In *Journey to the Rivers* he similarly calls for the history of the wars of Yugoslavian disintegration to be written „differently than in the contemporary assignments of guilt in advance“, even if only the nuances are different: for this „could do much to liberate the peoples from their mutual inflexible images“ (p. 26).

In his later poetological writing he develops the idea of describing often seemingly trivial things in detail, and describing landscapes in particular as literary strategies. Landscape description becomes a substitute for conventional narrative, avoiding the straitjacket of narrow concern with events and their inevitable historical implications. In the novel *Repetition*, he reflects on the origin of all literary writing in sketches of the landscape. This idea is linked with his quest for a poetic language in which images unite the abstract with the concrete, and overcome the alienation of modern society by fusing intellectual understanding with intuition and sensual perception. This is for Handke, as for the Roman-

tics, what distinguishes literature from journalism: the former conveys the personal and immediate, the latter merely the abstract and conventional. Handke associates poetic language with Slovenian, in whose words he believes he has found an authentic connection between the signifier and the signified. This is partly due to the persistence of an unalienated way of life and an economic structure in which the 'false' language of marketing is insignificant. (The valorisation of Slovenian as against German is already present in *The Lesson of Sainte-Victoire* , p. 90.) Learning Slovenian is, like his writing, a 'repeating', in the dual sense of restoring and reconstructing, both recovering his childhood and adopting an alternative, Slovenian identity.

In conclusion: The role of the intellectual in shaping collective memory

I suggest that, for all his faults, Handke has made a useful contribution to memory work on the Balkan conflict in the 1990s. Not merely for the personal biographical and poetological reasons I have outlined, but also because it was important to remind the European public of events in the Second World War which predetermined attitudes in the Balkans in the 1990s, he challenged the oversimplified allocation of the roles of victims and perpetrators in the media in *Journey to the Rivers*. He ends *Journey to the Rivers* writing about the importance of the German (and Austrian) people remembering "what it did and caused to be done repeatedly in the Balkans during the Second World War" (p. 78), and wishing that this might be even half so present in the German collective memory as it is among the Yugoslavs. He describes the German-Austrian phenomenon of "knowing what happened but having nothing whatsoever present" as "a spiritual or psychological illness" much more serious than the Yugoslavians' so-called "infantile unwillingness to forget" (p. 79) Squatting down on the bank of the river Drina, and at his desk again at home, he asks himself:

> Didn't my generation fail to grow up during the wars in Yugoslavia? Not grow up like the innumerable self-satisfied, complete, box-like opinion-forging, somehow worldly, yet so small-minded members of the generation of our fathers and uncles, but grow up. In what way? Perhaps thus: firm and yet open, or permeable […] And with this kind of maturity, I thought, – as the son of a German – pull out of this history that repeats every century, out of this disastrous chain, pull out into another story. (p. 80)

In *Asking Through Tears*, Handke also expresses fundamental doubts about the legitimacy of resorting to warfare, and particularly aerial bombardment, in order to impose a political solution – doubts which were to be shared by many after the invasion of Iraq.[6] The title of Handke's book is derived from an encounter with a Serbian woman, a doctor whose cancer patients' suffering was greatly increased by the trade embargo and bombardment of her country. The final image of Serbia he leaves us with is her distraught face, beseeching him to explain what great guilt of the Serbs and Montenegrans has brought this cruel punishment upon them (p. 154). Similarly, his challenging of the assumed imperatives of the EU model of social market capitalism and of national independence for smaller ethnic groups within the European framework, which emerged with the erosion and disappearance of Cold War geopolitics and ideology, is not without supporters.

Handke's writing on Yugoslavia is of course driven by a patently unrealistic dream of the reunification of the old federation, and many of his statements are provocative responses to what he perceived as a seriously biased understanding, seeking to redress the imbalance. He could also be petty. In the Spring of 1999, while negotiations were going on over the future of Kosovo, Handke gave an interview on Serbian TV, which was also broadcast in Germany, condemning the threatened air raids should Serbia not agree to the stationing of UN

[6] At a time when Joschka Fischer had led the Greens into acceptance of war as a legitimate political means, and writers such as Enzensberger, Schneider and Heym endorsed the war as a just one against an evil regime (see their contributors to the volume *Der westliche Kreuzzug: 41 Positionen zum Kosovo-Krieg*, ed. Frank Schirrmacher, 1999), Handke refused to participate in the shift of German intellectual opinion away from the post-1945 consensus that any participation

forces in Kosovo and autonomy for the region. He said his place was at the side of the Serbs, should the bombing begin. On 6 April, he left the Catholic Church in protest against its approval of the bombing. He accepted a knighthood from the Serbian Academy, and announced that he was returning the 10 000 Deutsch-mark awarded him together with the Büchner Prize by the German Academy for Language and Literature in Darmstadt back in 1973. (He made no specific accusations against the Darmstadt Academy explaining the reason for this action.) In the following days and weeks, Handke attacked prominent left-wing thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas, Günter Grass and Hans Magnus Enzensberger for their support for the bombings. In an interview in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, he called these representatives of the 1968 generation "PE teachers of horror", who were condoning a "new Auschwitz". Such dubious comparisons with the Holocaust, and his continuing support for Milošević led even admirers of his work such as Susan Sontag to distance themselves from him. Timothy Garten Ash, who had commented positively on Handke's criticism of the media in the past, was moved to take issue with what he saw as the implication that the Serbs were just as much victims of the war as the Bosnians: this was "neither historically nor numerically true". The speech Handke gave at the former Serbian President's funeral in March 2006 again aroused widespread condemnation, and his drama 'Play About Questioning, or the Trip to the Sonorous Country' was removed from the programme of the *Comedie Francaise*. In June 2006, Handke announced he was not accepting the Düsseldorf Heinrich-Heine-Prize, in protest against the views of the mayor of Düsseldorf. When a group of his supporters in Berlin collected a sum of money in lieu, he donated it to a Serb village in Kosovo.

However, in many respects, such behaviour of Handke's corresponds to the traditional understanding of the intellectual as 'conscience of the nation'. Edward Said suggested in the 1993 Reith Lectures that key functions of the intellectual were to raise embarrassing questions, confront orthodoxy and dogma, resist being coopted, and represent people and issues frequently for-

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in war was unacceptable. In opposing the NATO bombing of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis, Handke found himself in the company of thinkers such as Noam Chomsky and Eric Hobsbawm

gotten. Intellectuals spoke and acted on universal principles, and testified against their violation. They exemplified a complicated mix between the private and public worlds, bringing a personal inflection to public issues, which invested their formulations with a unique authenticity. It was in their nature to be embarrassing, contrary and unpleasant (pp. 9-10). Handke can certainly be seen as "break[ing] down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication" (p. x), and "uphold[ing] a single standard for human behaviour in foreign and social policy" (p. xii). However, there is an important respect in which he does not conform to Said's model: he has never engaged in the "relentless erudition" and scouring of alternative sources which Said regards as necessary (p. xv). It would only be fair to say that he is more enigmatic than enlightening, and has all too often slipped into the very process of reducing complex issues to simplistic images, finger-pointing and polemic side-taking which he is rightly critical of in others.

Christoph Parry writes that it was not so much Handke's critique of the media and his call for justice for Serbia as the way he presented his arguments and his readiness to ignore Serbian ethnic policies which made him enemies in the early to mid 1990s. His merciless hounding by the international press and the many insults he received after 1996 gained him a considerable degree of sympathy. However, it became difficult to sustain this support for Handke at the end of the decade: his siding with the Serbs and Milošević during the Kosovo conflict was too problematic. A similar overall picture emerges in Robert Weninger's account of the controversy over Handke's Yugoslavia writing (see p. 166). In *Journey to the Rivers*, Weninger notes, Handke claims that he is not so much attempting to emulate Zola's famous 'J'accuse' intervention in the Dreyfus affair, as to challenge the consensus: "I feel compelled only to justice. Or perhaps even only to questioning?, to raising doubts" (p. 76). The problem is that Handke's doubting and questioning has been blind to political realities. His defence of the Serbian Yugoslav Republic is also a projection of wishful thinking.[7] Handke

[7] Parry (p. 206) notes the distance from reality in Handke's depiction of perfect ethnic harmony through the variety of headgear seen on a single day in Skopje, Macedonia, in the article 'Once

repeatedly asks the people he meets in Serbia whether they believe that Yugoslavia will ever be reunited – indeed he admits that this became a source of irritation for his companions. Towards the end of the book, he recalls meeting a Macedonian truck driver on a recent trip to Slovenia. Such goods transfers between the different parts of Yugoslavia had earlier been a common sight, but they have become rare since Slovenia's independence. From the glance Handke exchanges with the driver, he believes they share a "phantom pain" for the loss of the multi-ethnic federation. He also tells a poignant story of an old man, a former partisan who had fought with Tito, who commits suicide out of "heartache at the end of his Yugoslavia" (p. 62). Defiantly, given the hopelessness of Yugoslavia ever realistically being reunited, Handke finishes his travelogue with the text of the old partisan's suicide note, in which the suffering induced by the betrayal, disintegration and chaos of the country is blamed for having robbed his life of all meaning.

However, this does not mean that Handke's Yugoslavia work has been worthless. At the end of *Journey to the Rivers*, the author himself expresses misgivings about whether it is not irresponsible to present the petty sufferings of the Serbs, "the bit of freezing there, the bit of loneliness, the trivialities like snowflakes, caps, cream cheese – while over the border a great suffering prevails, that of Sarajevo, of Tuzla, of Srebrenica, of Bihac, compared to which the Serbian boo-boos are nothing" (p. 82) He argues that "My work is of a different sort. To record the evil facts, that's good. But something else is needed for a peace, something not less important than the facts." His aim is to divert from the "shared captivity in the rhetoric of history and topicality into a much more productive present". It is time for "the poetic", "that which binds, that encompasses, the impulse to a common remembering, as the possibility for reconciliation of individuals, for the second, the common childhood" (p. 82).

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more for Yugoslavia', first published in *Die Tageszeitung* in 1992. A similar utopian reconstruction of the no longer existing republic is identified by Parry in the novel *My Year in the No-Man's Bay*,

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where the year 1997 in the novel sees the fates of Yugoslavia and Germany reversed.

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