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BY WAY OF *DETOUR*: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE INTERVAL IN PETER HANDKE'S *SLOW HOMECOMING*¹

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Detour, *dé - tourner, détournement*. “To take a detour” evokes the pleasure of traveling into the unknown but also the fear of running astray, of losing yourself in an uncharted territory. Detours come in many shapes. They are the ever-winding paths, the roads “less traveled by,” the serpentine *lines*² that turn around and out of themselves, means of deferring indeterminately the arrival at a destination. While for a painter like Paul Klee the curved line was a “walk for the walk’s sake,” an innocent, embryonic arabesque, the determinations and strategies of the detour do not always bring to mind gratuitous or purely hedonistic associations. We have learnt from Odysseus’s story that the experience of the detour came as a result of transgression. But Odysseus’ is an imposed and not a *chosen* detour.

The experiences of Sorger, the hero of Peter Handke’s *The Long Way Around* (1979) are detours made by the character’s, so to speak, choice.³ Taking a detour is a strategy of survival. The detour enables Sorger to restore a harmonious relationship with the landscape and to discover a middle ground between him and objects, which is the first step towards the geographical and historical inscription of his

¹ I will discuss two texts from this tetralogy: *The Long Way Around* and *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire*.

² I am referring here to Paul Klee’s lines in his *Pedagogic Sketchbook* (1925): the first line in the book is already winding, it is the sign of a walk.

³ For this typology, we have another archetype, which precedes the *Odyssey*: it is Hercules’ task as he first sets away from home: he is presented with two possible roads, one winding, perilous and full of hardships, the other smooth, straight and filled with pleasures. Hercules chooses the first one. He has thus passed the test, made the good choice—on the second road, Athena tells him, he would have been lost...by choosing the first one, he has made the first step towards accomplishing his heroic destiny.

identity, *after* the linguistic and subjective experience of separation and distance.

This last aspect relates to another one of the definitions of detours, or of the act of *détourner*: to deter, or to present with an obstacle. Taking a detour on your way back home is a *de-re-turn*, a way of remembering by slowing down the pace and by re-visiting the sites of your previous tours. It is an act of revision, a corrective task that Sorger sets for himself on his way back to Germany from the far American North. The revisionist agenda brings us to another significance of detours as *détournement*—stealing, embezzling, or appropriating someone else's possessions. Whether performed in quotation or not, these *détournements* are ways of revisiting the past and bringing it into the present. In Handke's case, visiting the site of Paul Cézanne's first landscape paintings bespeaks an ethos of recuperation and nostalgia but it also represents a way of forging a new aesthetic in the encounter with the impressionist painter. The 1979 *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* is an autobiographical essay in which the author lays the foundations of his new poetic art which he extracts from Cézanne's teachings.

In the two texts that I discuss, taking a detour is, in many respects, also an experience of the interval. Of the many definitions of this concept, I will briefly review a few that are relevant for my discussion of Handke's texts.

Both in *The Long Way Around* and in *The Lesson of Mount St. Victoire*, intervals appear as the middle ground of meaningfulness which links the perceiving subject to the perceived object in an act of reciprocal re-signification. With Cézanne's art and its constant search for and reworking of motifs, intervals stand for the encroachment of disparate objects, prompting a new mode of perception on the part of the beholder and also the restoration of a previously unnoticed feature of the object. This is what Paul Virilio called an interval, a negative or transparent form in his 1984 *L'horizon négatif*. In his own search for interval figures, Virilio also actualizes Cézanne as a point of reference—“I preferred Cézanne whose pictorial approach abandons nothing of the formal problematic” (*Negative Horizon* 36). As with Cézanne, for Virilio the exercise of creating transparent forms is mainly a question of training vision:

While we perceive circles, spheres, cubes, or corners perfectly, our perception of intervals, of the interstices between things, between people, is far less acute. These configurations, cut out by bodies, stamped out by forms, escape us [...] in every case, these passing figures barely leave any traces in our vision of the world, their fleeting character, tied to the instantaneity of a relation, never seems particularly important. These figures have a far too immediate obsolescence

for our analytical consciousness, for our scrutinizing minds, we have more or less despised this movement that displaces the lines (29-30).

“Displacing the lines” is one of Cézanne’s signature devices—he takes away the geometrical configuration of objects and landscape by doing away with contour—the object “appears” only through the painter’s treatment of color. Lisa Robertson has also defined color as a site of passage, a liminal space: “an indiscrete threshold where our bodies exchange information with the environment” (143). While intervals are localizable but for a brief instant, their proper place is the non-place, the *a-topos*, the *terra incognita*. The desire to uncover these intervals both in Handke and Cézanne’s search for form enacts what Giuliana Bruno called “the topophilia of the lacunae”: “those seductive voids that, if one knows the topophilia of the lacunae, are not there to be conquered but are textures exposed, where the markings of time take place” (5).

From an auctorial perspective, intervals are also those empty or transitional periods of the search for a new poetic art which is usually achieved through the retrieval of past models and their transformation into a personal aesthetic. As McLuhan sees it, intervals are periods of intense creative effervescence which bring together the figure and the ground: “All cultural situations are composed of an area of attention (figure) and a very much larger area of inattention (ground). The two are in a continual state of abrasive interplay, with an outline or boundary or interval between them that serves to define both simultaneously” (5). The encounter between two different artists belonging to two diverse artistic periods gives way to a creative ferment which leads to the re-definition of both. Handke’s recuperation of Cézanne’s dominant aesthetic categories is a necessary stage in the reconstruction of his own language. For Handke, the achievement of a private artistic language can take place, it seems, only *by way of detour*, through the laborious, roundabout walk in the interval. This aspect of the artist’s experience of the interval was noted in 1923 by Gertrude Stein:

Geographically, geographical. Geographically to place, geographically in case in case of it.

Looking up under fairly see fairly looking up under as to movement. The movement described...

An interval.

If it needs if it needs if it needs do not move, do not move, do not touch, do not touch... That is what she is looking for. Less. Less threads fairly nearly and geography and water. Descriptive emotion... [...]

I touched it.

As through...

Geography includes inhabitants and vessels (quoted in Bruno 208).

The Long Way Around: Recovering Language and the Self in the Interval

We start the meandering journey home with Handke's *The Long Way Around*. The point of departure is Alaska; the point of destination is Germany. In-between, a vast expanse of whiteness and still life, inertia, delayed departures, the Arizona desert and the suburbia desert, the pantomimic space of the "great city" (New York), encounters with alter-egos, visiting the corpse of the recently deceased ski instructor friend in an ambiguous location (still in America but in a very German-style sky resort), flights in-between these places, and the final flight... Going quickly through Sorger's slow homecoming,⁴ one loses from sight important details, significant stages in his slow metamorphosis—his relation with people, the cultural critique implied in the juxtaposition of different nations in different sites, the whole *topos* of exile, characters, stories, embedded narratives: Sorger's Eskimo lover, Sorger's "happy family" neighbors in the North-American suburbia and his feeling of domestic peacefulness as he dines in their home, etc.

The Long Way Around is a psychogeographic text "by the book," in the sense that the focal point is at all times the character's relation with the landscape, his rejections and embraces of it, the fleshing of the scenery and the emplacement of the flesh. It can also be considered an "atlas of emotions" insofar as Sorger's evolution in the landscape is "to visit the ebb and flow of a personal and yet social psychogeography" (Bruno 2). Significantly (but perhaps too obviously), Sorger is a geologist. At the moment the narration begins he is in Alaska, allegedly to conduct research, but mainly taking long walks in the wintry and still incomprehensible landscape, in search of images. He is away from home, in a state of impermanence and separation from the world and history. His first descriptions of the landscape betray the analytical attempt to classify the real world and to separate the subject from the object:

Capable of tranquil harmony, a serene strength that could transfer itself to others, yet too easily wounded by the power of facts, he knew desolation, wanted responsibility, and was imbued with the search for new forms, the desire to differentiate and describe them, and not only out of doors ("in the field"), where this often tormenting but sometimes gratifying and at its best triumphant activity was his profession (3).

At the moment when he was writing this text, Peter Handke was

⁴ The text is extremely dense and I will not be able to give it justice here—nor am I attempting to. I will focus mainly on the relation between Sorger and landscape, his gradual discovery of the interval, which prompts the detour as a strategy of countering death and recovering language and identity.

undergoing a crisis of meaning similar to the one expressed in the paragraph quoted above. Christoph Parry notes that the first part of Handke's work (until the late seventies) is characterized by a self-reflexive expression of the incapacity of language fully to render reality, history and self; however, the works following this date display a completely different style, devoid of ambiguity and indeterminacy, a style which underscores the author's concern for liberating himself from the discourse of finitude (1-9).⁵

The capacity to harness and control nature, to keep it at a safe distance, pacifies and gratifies Sorger for a while. However, this apparent stability is slowly undermined by the character's passion for landscape and his search for images: "After his initial irritation with a nature too quick to promise itself and even quicker to withdraw, Sorger was obliged, on pain of losing himself, to immerse himself in it" (7). What follows is a gradual discovery of the interval, a journey which begins in Alaska with the finding of what Virilio called the "antiforms" and continues in the character's historical and geographical emplacement on his "de-re-turn" home. Before reaching this stage, Sorger's metamorphosis begins with a radical shift in the perception of his body in the landscape: "What he perceived then was not the unthinkable distance between himself and another point but himself as a distant one (guilty of being away)" (25). Sorger is as strange to the landscape as the landscape is to him. By becoming objectified by the landscape, by learning to see himself in perspective, Sorger takes the first step in that interval "where the markings of time take place" to which Giuliana Bruno was alluding. Sorger's long separation from home, which is suggested by the many places that he revisits on his way back, reveals itself as a long detour whose point of destination will have to coincide with the point of departure: "During the day [...] his work made him one with himself and the landscape, but at night, asleep in his iron cot, Sorger remained alive to his remoteness from Europe and his 'forebears'" (25). This newly found perception of himself in relation with the landscape has a direct impact on Sorger's sense of identity—his self is a-topic, it is indefinite because not *rooted* in the world: "[...] without self-awareness, a space in which he was neither a doer nor an idler, neither an actor nor a witness" (31). The first description of an interval reminds us of the sudden perception

⁵ In *The Lesson of Mount St. Victoire*, a text immediately following *The Long Way Around*, Handke expresses this same idea: "Poets lie, says one of the first philosophers. And indeed, it has long been held that reality means hard times and disastrous happenings; and that the arts are faithful to reality when their central and guiding content is evil or man's more or less ridiculous despair over evil. But how is it that I can no longer bear to hear, see, or read such thoughts? [...] Mortality will always be my guiding principle, but never again, I hope, my central theme" (147).

of the “transparent form,” as Paul Virilio called it:

It was the middle ground of a quite commonplace segment of the landscape, chosen by Sorger because of an earthquake fault in the foreground and a fragmentary shelf of loess far behind it. Through no intention of his, this center, which disclosed no particular surface form, not so much as a small swampy depression, and which only a sense of having to fill up his page led him to sketch, gradually took on a decided individuality. It was a smooth bit of meadow, almost entirely bare of trees or underbrush, with a few huts and a straight path in the foreground demarcated on the far side by the sparse virgin forest [...]. Between these two zones, which were clearly set off from the landscape as a whole, lay the formless middle ground. Though on a plane with them, it gave the impression first of a meadow that had formed in the course of weeks and finally of a human valley in a possible eternal peace (33-34).

It would be difficult to find a more explicit description of the interval than the one in this passage. The interval as the “abrasive interface” between figure and ground, as the transparent form which links and presents in a new light the objects it conjoins, appears in this instance as a way of recapturing the meaningfulness of landscape by becoming aware of the “middle ground,” the thin skin—“intervals are inhabitants and vessels,” as Gertrude Stein saw it—between the disparate objects which the eye “cuts” in the fabric of the external environment. It is in the automatism of this cutting operation that the transparent forms which proliferate in the sphere of images are overlooked. As in Virilio’s case, we already have in this passage from *The Long Way Around* an allusion to Cézanne’s formal problematic. The particularity of Handke’s understanding of the interval consists in his permanent connection of the perception of antiforms with the notion of harmony—“all the images which had played without violence on a middle ground without birth or death;” [...] “consciousness was the feeling of this form and the feeling of this form was gentleness” (42). To Franco Rella, the feeling of the form as gentleness pertains to the area of atopic thinking—Sorger is still de-situated; at this point he is only learning how to emplace himself in the world. The quest for harmony does not translate into a desire for “synthesis” or *coincidentia oppositorum*, but rather a figure of the *complexio oppositorum*: “love is *complexio*—contact with, and union with the different” (Rella 10). This is the lesson that Sorger is given in his contemplation of the interval and he will use this teaching to find his way back home. The detour he takes is a way of reconciling his history of distance (from the world, history, his people) with his retrieval of proximity.

In the beginning of this article, I stated that for Sorger the detour is a strategy of survival. Sorger is aware that his quest for harmony is historically guilty, having led, in many instances, precisely to violence

and death. But, in order to be able to emplace himself in the world, he will have to accept this (German) ground, to bring it to light. The interval has taught him that figures and grounds have to go together in order to become meaningful: “Today I thought of salvation, but it wasn’t God that came to mind, it was culture. I have no culture; I shall continue to have no culture as long as I am incapable of crying out; as long as I whimper my complaint instead of shouting it out loud” (95). A memory which prompts another memory, the detour is the only way of return. In the last journey which takes him home—the “first real journey” (136)—the narrator makes the statement that only in this way can Sorger find what “his own style is” (136). Intertextually, this refers to the following stage in Handke’s detours, to the *Mount of Sainte-Victoire*, a *détournement* that the author will make in his own voice this time.

Walking in Cézanne’s Footsteps. The *Détournement* of Style

The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire (1980) is an essay in the genre of aesthetic (auto-) biography. In this text, Peter Handke *proposes* an artistic manifesto from which emerge the author’s aesthetic dominants in the dialogue with Paul Cézanne’s art. If, for Gottfried Boehm, Paul Cézanne is an artistic figure around whom a whole “cultural history of the twentieth century can be written” (quoted in Parry 56), for Peter Handke, the painter becomes a teacher and guide toward a new esthetic of the object (and, with it, landscape, color and reality). In order to achieve this, Handke will have to first take a geographical detour, to re-visit the very sites which had inspired the painter:

For a long while I myself had only toyed with the thought of seeing the mountain in the flesh. Wasn’t it an *idée fixe* to suppose that because a painter had once loved it there must be something intrinsically remarkable about it? It was only on the day when a spark leapt from thought to imagination that I made up my mind [...]: yes, I would go see Mont Sainte-Victoire! Thus my journey was not so much a quest for Cézanne’s motifs [...] as a response to my own feeling: that mountain attracted me as nothing in my life had ever attracted me (158).

Handke’s act of appropriating Cézanne’s aesthetic for his own art is directed at incorporating both the reference and the representation. Strategically (and narratively), this takes the form of, on the one hand, actually visiting Mont Sainte-Victoire and discerning in the landscape the “transparent forms” and, on the other hand, visiting a gallery of Cézanne’s paintings. The double detour—geographical and artistic—reproduces the author’s attempt to take possession of that move in perception by which the painter had been able to see “parallel landscapes” within the landscape and then to transform

them into objects of representation. It is the same search for intervals that Sorger was preoccupied by in *The Long Way Around*.

Every time Handke describes a painting by Cézanne, he also alludes to his own art. The first painting which the author references is *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*:

At first Cézanne painted horror pictures, such as his *Temptation of St. Anthony*. But in the course of time his sole problem became the *réalisation* of pure earthly innocence: an apple, a rock, a human face. His reality became the form he achieved, the form that does not lament transience or the vicissitudes of history, but transmits an existence in peace. Art is concerned with nothing else. But what gives life its feeling becomes a problem in the transmission (147).

In the painting, the gloomy colors of the background give way to the apparitional presence of the magical in the foreground. In this conflation of the imaginary, the actual objects of the landscape fade away, in an undifferentiated opacity of greens and blacks. This relates to one of Handke's reflections a few pages later: "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 the daylight colors, am I" (150).

Thus, it will be more in Cézanne's landscape paintings that Handke will find the impetus for his own art. Parry explains the parallel between Cézanne's landscape painting and Handke's writing in the following way:

The paradox of Handke's writing from this period onwards is that he too is trying to achieve something that cannot easily be paraphrased. The things he describes can be described in other ways, but they would no longer be the same because the experience connected with their description would be different one. Painting provides the obvious model for the kind of writing where the story is reduced to the minimum (51).

One landscape in particular arrests Handke's attention and around it he lays the foundations for a number of aesthetic categories which will become relevant for his own writing. It is the 1904 *Rochers près des grottes au-dessus du Château Noir*, which is one of the best expressions of Cézanne's way of envisioning the report between artist, language and reality:

Danger, dance, solidarity, warmth—these were the components of my feeling of "nearness" as I stood looking at the painting. Suddenly magnified, the pines and rocks were deeply within me—just as a flushing bird momentarily flies through one's body with giant wings; but instead of passing as such as phantasms of horror do, they remained.

[...]

Once, when Cézanne was asked to explain what he meant by a *motif*, he slowly joined the outspread fingers of his two hands together, folded, and interlocked them. Reading about this, I remembered that in looking at this picture I had seen the pines and rocks as intertwined letters, their meaning as clear as it was indefinable. In one of Cézanne's letters I read that he did not paint "from nature"—that his pictures were "constructions and harmonies parallel in nature" (177-178).

This nearness does not refer so much to the actual arrangement of depicted objects within the frame, but rather to a proximity which is created between the beholder and the object perceived and between the objects themselves. The effect is produced by the disappearance of the contour—the demarcations, which separate the objects only to unite them, are made solely by the brush, through the mediation of color. The interval as limit has to unite by the same move with which it separates. The particularity of Cézanne's motifs consists in the creation of a unitary image of significance in the juxtaposition and, as it were, encroachment of disparate objects. This *bringing together* operates as a writing by which the pictorial is given significance. Handke is able to trace and identify his own aesthetic in the encounter with Cézanne:

"Thing-image-script" in one: that is the miracle—and yet it does not communicate my feeling of nearness. Here I must also mention the house plant which, looking through a window, I saw against the landscape as a Chinese character. Cézanne's rocks and trees were more than such characters; more than pure forms without earthly traces—in addition, they were woven into incantations by the painter's dramatic brushstroke. At first, my only thought was: so near. [...] They were *things*, they were *images*, they were *script*; they were brushstrokes—and all these were in harmony (178).

Handke's "thing-image-script" is a recurrent device in his writings; it defines the nature of the relation between perceiver, the object perceived and the history which contains them. The "thing-image-script" translates the author's attempt to reenact the meaningfulness of the relations between man and the perceived world by re-creating and re-contextualizing the object in such a way—in harmony, in the here and now—that the perceiver will be able to grasp it. It is not a question of defamiliarizing the objects but rather rendering them meaningful in their own context. To state, like Rella, that for Handke landscape is "an event, not a given" (157) would be too little to say. For Handke, the given itself—of landscape, of Cézanne's art—is an event. His artistic, geographic and historic detour to Mont Sainte-Victoire is a celebration of this event and his at times emphatic and declamatory discourse reveals the author's enthusiasm in the détournement of the "given."

But the "given" is there only insofar there is a beholder to grasp it: "In a few hundred years the whole world would be flattened. But

the little that remains is very dear to the heart and eye". And thirty years later, he said: "Things are in a bad way. We shall have to hurry if we want to see anything. Everything is vanishing" (179). A bit later, Handke will give his answer to Cézanne's question, formulating it as a profession of artistic faith, a "proposal" he is passing on to us from the impressionist painter:

Are Cézanne's works, then, messages? As I see it, they are proposals. [...] What do they propose to me? Their secret lies in producing the effect of proposals. [...]

That is how I see Cézanne's *réalisations* (except that I stand before them, instead of kneeling): a transformation and sheltering of things endangered—not in a religious ceremony, but in the form of faith that was the painter's secret (181).

The detour as a propitiatory and restorative act: taking the long road back to prevent the images from vanishing. In a moment in which his own language is drying out, Handke places himself in the interval in order to recapture proximity and the referential substance of writing. His thing-image-script is the outcome of the need to recuperate the parallel transparent forms from landscape as well as preserve the distances of discourse and history from his previous writings. What he is attempting to do is to create an image capable of discourse and history (the script part). This is easily achieved in *The Lesson of Mont Sainte-Victoire* through the dialogue and juxtaposition between two authors and artistic periods which are as strikingly similar as they are dissimilar.

Conclusion

Taken together, the strategies of the detour and the changes of perception effected by the interval articulate a number of possible interpretations. I would say that for one, they allow Handke to distance himself from a whole range of more and more leveling contemporary discourses. This also signifies the fact that the author assumes a liminal position in the contemporary context. By way of detour, Handke comes to surpass the crisis of meaning and style which he was experiencing as a consequence of the discourse of finitude proper for his and our time as well as to avoid the mindless repetition of the labyrinth of significance of his admired precursors. In their basic description, both the detour and the interval are figures of transition; perhaps they signal of period of transition.

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