Notes on Peter Handke, *Slow Homecoming*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

On Late Romanticism

Here are some thoughts on "The Long Way Around," the first and longest of a trilogy of short novels titled Slow Homecoming. Although the novels are short, their language—especially in "The Long Way Around" is dense, and they read slowly in English or German. In this respect "The Long Way Around" feels more like a 350-page novel than a 150-page novel.

The narrator of "The Long Way Around," who is called Sorger (an allegorical name, meaning something like "Person Who Cares"), defines himself largely through his interactions with the Arctic landscape. Handke’s prose here is full of tropes of subjectivity, woven into tropes of landscape: it owes the most, I think, to Rilke, but also to Trakl and other modernist nature poets. Sorger, however, claims he isn’t working in the Romantic tradition:

"He did not believe in his science as a kind of nature religion; on the contrary, his always 'measured' practice of his profession... was at the same time an exercise in trusting the world, for the measured quality of his technical manipulations but also his personal, everyday movements resided in his constant attempt at meditation..." (p. 8 in the Collier edition of Manheim’s translation)

A reader might wonder at this point what "measuring" is, and what "technical manipulations" might be, but at least it’s clear that Sorger mixes nonscientific ideas like "trusting" (and "caring," as in his name) with possibly scientific ones. A page later Handke tells us "Sorger never ceased to regard the linguistic formulas of his science as a hoax": science, Sorger thinks, is only about "description and nomenclature," and he is after something less "dubious."

The "measured" practice turns out to be drawing, and the process of drawing turns out to be empathetic consonance with the landscape. According to Benjamin Kunkel, Sorger’s "patient and reverent bestowal of attention... resembles geology" (from his introduction to the NYRB edition, quoted from the n+1 site). But this resemblance is so distant that it doesn’t really help: Leonardo’s landscape drawings, which have also been analyzed as proto-geology, are closer to geology than Sorger’s nearly abstract "search for forms."

Sometimes Sorger doesn’t even need to draw to achieve his identification with landscape:

"For a moment he had felt the strength to propel his whole self into the bright horizon and there dissolve forever into the undifferentiated unity of sky and earth" (p. 16)

Still, "he preferred drawing to photography, because it was only through drawing that he came to understand the landscape in all its forms" (p. 29). This study of forms, which emerge slowly for him, through the act of meditative drawing, is more from Humboldt than Hermann Weyl: it’s a 19th century species of imagination, not a 20th century one. In every landscape, Sorger says, "consciousness gradually creates its own configurations"; the mind needs time "to form ties with
"it," so that "characteristic forms reveal themselves" (pp. 71, 72)--all straight out of Humboldt, 150 years before Handke wrote "The Long Way Around."

Superimposed on this first-generation Romanticism is late Romanticism, as in Rilke and Trakl, which is especially evident in the coils of self-awareness, in which all natural processes are also processes of self-understanding, and in which interpretation--as in conventional natural science--is to be avoided in favor of "the pure, unexplained description" of "forms" (p. 72). (The second novella in the book, "Mont Sainte-Victoire," has elements of phenomenology, because the Cezanne literature is so infused by Merleau-Ponty's essay, but those elements are overlaid on a foundation of Romanticism--as they are, often, in art historical scholarship which presents itself as phenomenological but is perhaps more deeply Romantic in its first instincts. But that's a subject for another essay.)

In what sense, then, is "The Long Way Around" a postwar (read: modernist or postmodernist) fiction? It seems better understood as one of the last gasps of late Romanticism, in which poetry can only be recovered by the most convoluted writing, the densest and most introspective images, the strongest vigilance against cliches. It has just the slightest touches of postwar sensibility, for example when Sorger concludes that the best he's doing is "not betraying" the world, and creating a "science of peace": an ironic ambition given Handke's later career.

Appendix: a note on Handke's politics

Since politics is what as stifled Handke's career, it's interesting that "The Long Way Around" is weirdly coy about its location. For the first fifty pages it's impossible to tell if Sorger is in the Siberian or North American arctic. He calls the natives "Indians," which is not correct for either continent. He sleeps with an "Indian" woman and gives her a "pet name" (p. 17). She laughs at the "inconceivable notion that there might be another continent" (p. 19): an outrageous European fantasy of isolation. Together they speak a language foreign to both of them: it could be Russian or English. Manheim says Sorger sees "elk " (p. 16) but that's either Handke's or Manheim's error, because it eventually turns out he's been in Alaska. When we're finally given enough information to conclude Sorger's been in Alaska, it's done in a crazily coy way. The narrator flies down to a place on the Pacific coast, "in a different time zone (two hour later)." This is inaccurate -- it would be one hour later -- but it makes the location unambiguous. He makes brief references to "a nation," and finally to the United States (p. 62). All this is in service of Sorger's (and Handke's )attempt to lose himself in a place without history, culture, or a name. It's intensive myth-making, and really unnecessary when it comes to what Sorger actually does in the Arctic community (drawing, sleeping with the "Indian" woman).