



Absence

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In recent works such as *ACROSS*, *REPETITION*, and *THE AFTERNOON OF A WRITER*, the Austrian writer Peter Handke has devoted much of his effort to evoking the spirit of particular places and the movement of the writer's consciousness. *ABSENCE*, while clearly related to these works, marks something of a departure. Set in a European landscape with only imprecise and even contradictory indications of time and place, *ABSENCE* recounts the journey of four figures known simply as the old man, the woman, the soldier, and the gambler. The old man, the leader of the group, carries a mysterious book with columns of writing resembling hieroglyphics; frequently he makes notations as he attempts to decipher the meaning of individual signs in the text. After some time he disappears, leaving the remaining three travelers to ponder his absence and the meaning of their journey.

In some ways *ABSENCE* falls in the tradition of Goethe and the *marchen*, though here the logic of events is much less clear. Elements of the fantastic appear by the way, in the margin. Adding to the sense of dreamlike dislocation are the shifts in narrative point of view; for the most part, the tale is narrated in the third person, but occasionally the narrative shifts to identify with the woman, the soldier, and the gambler, speaking collectively as "we." Certain passages in the novel recall the Wim Wenders film *WINGS OF DESIRE*, on which Handke collaborated; while the screenplay was generally quite good, there were lapses into vague sentimentousness, a fault that is more prominent in *ABSENCE*. Not in the class of such extraordinary books as *ACROSS* and *REPETITION*, *ABSENCE* is for the Handke completists only.

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