FOREWORD

The taxi that had brought me from the Graz railway station drove off into the autumn afternoon. I found myself in the city's university quarter standing on the footpath outside the functional four-storied block that housed Gerhard Roth's apartment on the Geidorfgürtel. Later, I would learn that this building, which had been erected in the late 1930s, also contained the apartment in which his mother was now living and had first occupied on her marriage to his father in 1940. In the early 1950s, during the period of Allied occupation after the Second World War, she had struggled with the British housing authority in Graz to regain her entitlement to the apartment for her husband and young family. I located the stairwell and climbed the steps to the door of the author with whom I had corresponded and had now travelled from Tübingen to visit, in the hope that he would answer at least some of the many questions about his work that I had prepared. He had invited me to spend the weekend with him in Graz and at his house in Obergreith near St Ulrich in rural Southern Styria. I rang the bell. After a brief moment, the door opened and as I was peering at eye-level at the broad expanse of red pullover that appeared in front of me, a voice from somewhere above in the semi-darkness of the hallway said: "You were looking straight at my chest; you weren't expecting me to be so tall." Gerhard Roth laughed, embraced me and welcomed me into the small apartment in which he both lived and worked.

Over the next two and a half days in October 1980 and on several subsequent visits in 1982, 1983 and 1996, Gerhard Roth not only answered in great depth and with remarkable

attention to matters of literary and historical detail all the questions that I had brought with me, but also discussed with disarming frankness and openness many other aspects of his creative process and his existence as a writer. His hospitality, warmth and friendliness contrasted markedly with the somewhat frosty demeanour of a number of the academics whom I had recently encountered in Germany. I recall especially the kindness of his mother, Frau Erna Roth, who brought me breakfast from her apartment above and of his then companion and later wife, Senta Thonhauser, who took great care to make me feel welcome and to provide for my dietary peculiarities during this first visit and on several later occasions.

The interviews presented here were recorded between the 17th and 19th of October 1980 and on the 11th of November 1982 during the period when Roth was working on *Landläufiger Tod,* the vast narrative assemblage that would become the central text in his seven-volume cycle *Die Archive des Schweigens* (1980-1991). The original aim of the interviews was to gather material for my doctoral thesis about Roth's literary development within the context of the avant-garde cultural activities in Graz, which from the early 1960s had resulted in the formation of the artists' association *Forum Stadtpark* and the emergence via its literary magazine *manuskripte* of the Graz authors who were in the early 1980s still somewhat misleadingly identified in popular literary-critical discourse as the *Grazer Gruppe.* On this first visit, Gerhard Roth introduced me to his close friends the dramatist, Wolfgang Bauer, and the writer and editor of *manuskripte*, Alfred Kolleritsch.

On the evening of the first day, a Friday, Senta Thonhauser drove us in her VW Beetle to the house in Obergreith — the *Koppitschhaus* — into which Roth had moved while working on *The Calm Ocean* (*Der stille Ozean*) in 1978 and continued to occupy, when not living in Graz, until 1987. The house, which only recently he had arranged to be renovated to a level of modest comfort, was a typical and strikingly situated example of a two-roomed southern Styrian rural smallholder's dwelling into which large families had once been packed. The house and the immediate surroundings were already in part familiar to me from their fictional realisation in *The Calm Ocean* as settings for the meditations of the doctor, Ascher, who had been found guilty of professional misconduct. After an interview session the following morning, he took me on a tour of Obergreith to meet a number of the local inhabitants, some of whom appeared as figures in *The Calm Ocean* and had narrated their life-stories in the three-part documentary Roth had made the previous year for the ORF, *Menschen in Österreich.* Among them were the local publican, the 'Kirchenwirt', Fritz Schmidt (vulgo Finsterl) and Juliane Rannegger (vulgo Vogelton) with whom Roth had often taken his meals and who had found him his present house. He introduced me everywhere as the 'young researcher from New Zealand.' Fritz Schmidt recalled meeting as a young man New Zealand prisoners-of-war, captured in 1941 after the failure of the Allied campaign to liberate Greece from the Germans and sent to work as farm labourers into the surrounding countryside from Stalag VIIIA, the POW camp at Wolfsberg some 80 kilometres

away. Roth took me to visit an old couple who lived with their poultry in a one-roomed 'Winzerhaus' that was partially covered by a bountiful grape vine. I had read about the poverty that even in the early 1980s still existed in some parts of rural Austria but I was nonetheless astonished to see their few sparse belongings and that the battered wooden floor of the room lay directly on the rammed earth below. The woman was toothless and he told me that she was younger than she appeared to be. As I walked about Obergreith with Roth, he pointed out many of the features of the landscape and local agriculture that he had photographed and included in the narrative of *The Calm Ocean.* He talked about his use of photos and the notes he made on them, and the first exhibition of his photographs that had been presented in Villach, Graz, Vienna and Hamburg earlier in the year. His first photographic study *On the Borderline / Grenzland* was due to appear the following spring with Vienna's Hannibal Verlag. We visited the cemetery in St Ulrich where he pointed out the grave of the local folk-healer, Mautner, and related stories about some of the other dead who were buried there.

Later that afternoon, we drove back to Graz. I stayed behind in the apartment while Roth attended a theatre premiere. Before he left, he showed me the seaman's chest in which he stored his already burgeoning collection of some 2,000 photographs, 5,000 slides and his numerous densely written notebooks. His study and living room housed a large collection of books and records. Several arresting phantasmagorical paintings by Peter Pongratz and works by other Graz artists

lined the walls along with a number of framed historical photographs from Styria. The bookshelves were immaculately ordered. I found there, mostly in good, hardbound editions, the collected works of major German and Austrian writers, a wide selection of German translations from American, Russian, Latin American and other European authors, many works on the natural world, philosophy, religion, sorcery and mysticism, studies of psychology, of the art and language of schizophrenia, of visual art and photography. On his writing desk were his manual Olympia typewriter, a framed photograph of his maternal grandfather, the glassblower Richard Druschnitz, a large quartz crystal, a fossil and some brass cartridge cases. Glass paperweights and other glass objects of striking colour and intricate patterning that his grandfather had made sat atop the bookshelves. On the living room table where I sat down to write up my notes lay a telegram addressed to Roth from W. Petritsch, the Press Secretary of the Austrian Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, inviting him to join the Chancellor that evening at the premiere at the Graz Schauspielhaus.

Some time after midnight, Gerhard Roth returned from the theatre with Wolfgang Bauer. I was introduced to Bauer and we sat around the table talking and smoking until the small hours during which time Roth and Bauer consumed the best part of a bottle of whisky, produced a number of amusing coloured pencil sketches, discussed the state of Graz literature and Austrian politics and expressed concern over the state of the Chancellor's health. At one point, Bauer seemed convinced that Kreisky's death was imminent: "The Chan-

cellor is dying!" he lamented. In a tone of comic sincerity that made it seem for a moment entirely probable, he then told me that Bruno Kreisky would like to adopt Gerhard Roth as his son. Roth had developed a close relationship with Kreisky when he had accompanied him on tour in Mallorca and Yugoslavia in May 1980 with his fellow writer, Peter Turrini, and the German photographer Konrad Müller, to work on a book for the Chancellor's seventieth birthday. Roth then persuaded Bauer to record for me a reading of his poem 'Schmutziges Wasser'. He agreed and intoned the chthonian depths of this splendid surrealistic elegy with heartfelt gusto. Later, when Bauer had left and I was sleeping on the sofa in the study, I was awakened by the sound of Roth, whose own health was somewhat precarious at the time, groaning loudly in his sleep. I felt suddenly alarmed that the writer might die before the Chancellor.
On the Sunday, however, all was well. I accompanied Gerhard Roth on a visit to Alfred Kolleritsch who cooked us lunch and set me straight on a number of points concerning the so-called *Grazer Gruppe* and Austrian cultural politics. Kolleritsch produced a number of unpublished photographs taken in New York and elsewhere relating to Roth's association with himself, Wolfgang Bauer and other Graz authors through *manuskripte*, including Peter Handke. The German author, Gert Hofmann, arrived with other friends of Kollertisch and the discussion of cultural politics intensified.

The second interview was recorded in the *Koppitschhaus* in Obergreith in the winter of 1982. I was then living in Graz

while on a research scholarship from the Austrian Government and drove down on a Friday evening to St Ulrich where I had arranged to meet Gerhard Roth at the Gasthaus 'Finsterl' run by Fritz Schmidt. On the unlit street the night was so dark that it took me some time to find the door handle. I found Roth and Senta Thonhauser sitting at a table against the far wall under an illustrated poem about 'The Voluntary Fire Brigade'. Soon Roth was deep in conversation with a young man from the district in his early thirties whom he never met in the five years that he had spent there. He had a cleft palette. He had been studying psychology for seven years in Salzburg and was suspicious of Roth's motives for coming to Obergreith. Soon he began to deride him as the "learned sociologist from the big city" who had come to spy on the inhabitants of St Ulrich for not entirely scientific reasons. Quantities of the Kirchenwirt's own *Schilcher* were ordered and consumed. The exchange grew more heated. Roth explained painstakingly how he had first come to Obergreith to recover his health but it was becoming clear that the young man had an axe to grind and was in no mood to accept the author's good-natured efforts to calm his suspicions and ask him about his own views. After two hours, Roth finally grew weary of the young man's aggression and we left him trying unsuccessfully to persuade the now reluctant landlord to produce another bottle of *Schilcher* from the cellar.

In talking with Gerhard Roth the next day, it became clear how much he had already distanced himself from much of the contemporary cultural scene in Austria. Apart from his

contact with personal literary friends like Bauer and Kolleritsch, he preferred the company of ordinary people. He had been reading for the third time the German translation of Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit.* The writing of *Landläufiger Tod* was now well advanced. His reading of Melville's *Moby Dick* had been significant for *The Calm Ocean* and was an even more important stylistic model for the new book: the range of textual forms from poetry to scientific prose, the weaving together of many motifs – the whale-hunt, Ahab's obsession, the teeming ocean, the cosmos and the ship itself – and the combination of epic, folkloristic and documentary elements; all suggested possibilities for the structure of the work. He was now less interested in photography than when writing *The Calm Ocean* or the 'American' novels *Der große Horizont* and *Ein neuer Morgen*; to a much greater extent *Landläufiger Tod* was, like his early experimental writing, a product of his own fantasy and imagination. Short sections of the project had appeared earlier in the year in *manuskripte* (Issues 75, 76, and 77, 1982). *Circus Saluti*, published the previous year by S. Fischer, would now probably form the first section of the novel. *Das Töten des Bussards,* the manuscript found by the Mute, Franz Lindner, that was left behind by Dr Ascher, the protagonist of *The Calm Ocean* who had since committed suicide, had now been cut out of the new novel altogether and published separately by Graz's Droschl Verlag just a few weeks previously. Roth had now decided to incorporate the more poetic passages into a long section entitled 'Mikrokosmos'. He pointed out to me with obvious satisfaction a reference to

his work in a recent review by Ulrich Greiner of Handke's *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts* that characterised his writing as having a positive inclination towards depicting the blackest depths of the human soul (*Die Zeit* Nr 41 2.10.1982).
The filming of *The Calm Ocean* was due to begin in just over two weeks under the direction of Fassbinder's former cameraman, Xaver Schwarzenberger. Hanno Pöschl was playing the role of the novel's protagonist, Dr Ascher. The film crew would be coming to Obergreith and Roth would have to vacate the house for two months. He had been working for some months on the film script with Walter Kappacher and had already rejected several versions. He had now decided to withdraw and leave the work to the film professionals. In the intervening time, he would live in Graz where from Mondays to Fridays he was working on *Landläufiger Tod* in two extended writing sessions a day.

There were other visits and other conversations but the two recorded interviews published here had achieved their purpose. They provide an extensive record of Gerhard Roth's emergence as a writer against the background of the Graz literary milieu and the development of literature in Austria and Germany after 1945. The relationship of his work to the literary activities in Graz that centred on *Forum Stadtpark*, *manuskripte* and the Grazer Autorenversammlung was now clear. At the conclusion of the second interview, Roth told me that, although he would give other interviews on matters of fact and historical context, he would never again go into such depth about his creative processes. To the best of my

knowledge this has remained the case. Roth's autobiography *Das Alphabet der Zeit* (S. Fischer, 2007) closes in 1963 with an account of his recognition of the desire to be a writer and his very first contacts with readings by H. C. Artmann, Gerhard Rühm and others of the *Wiener Gruppe* at *Forum Stadtpark*. Much of significance in the first twenty years of the career of this writer — from his first literary experiments to the publication of *Landläufiger Tod* in 1984, when he became one of the leading figures in contemporary Austrian literature — is recounted here.