



the

hothouse

A NOVEL

WOLFGANG KOEPPEN

translated and with an introduction by

MICHAEL HOFMANN

A progenitor of Günter Grass and a generation of postwar German writers, Wolfgang Koeppen emerges after decades of literary neglect with an existential masterpiece.

Harrowing, moody, and supremely powerful, *The Hothouse*, first published in 1953, stands among the finest novels written in postwar Germany. Bitterly controversial at home, largely unknown abroad, Koeppen (1906-1996) brought a volcanic, high-modernist style to German literature, a style that remains unparalleled to this day. It is only since his death that his works have begun to experience a literary renaissance. Here, with the first English publication of *The Hothouse*, award-winning translator Michael Hofmann has produced a work that not only conveys Koeppen's uniquely radical voice but also is a breathtaking piece of prose in its own right.

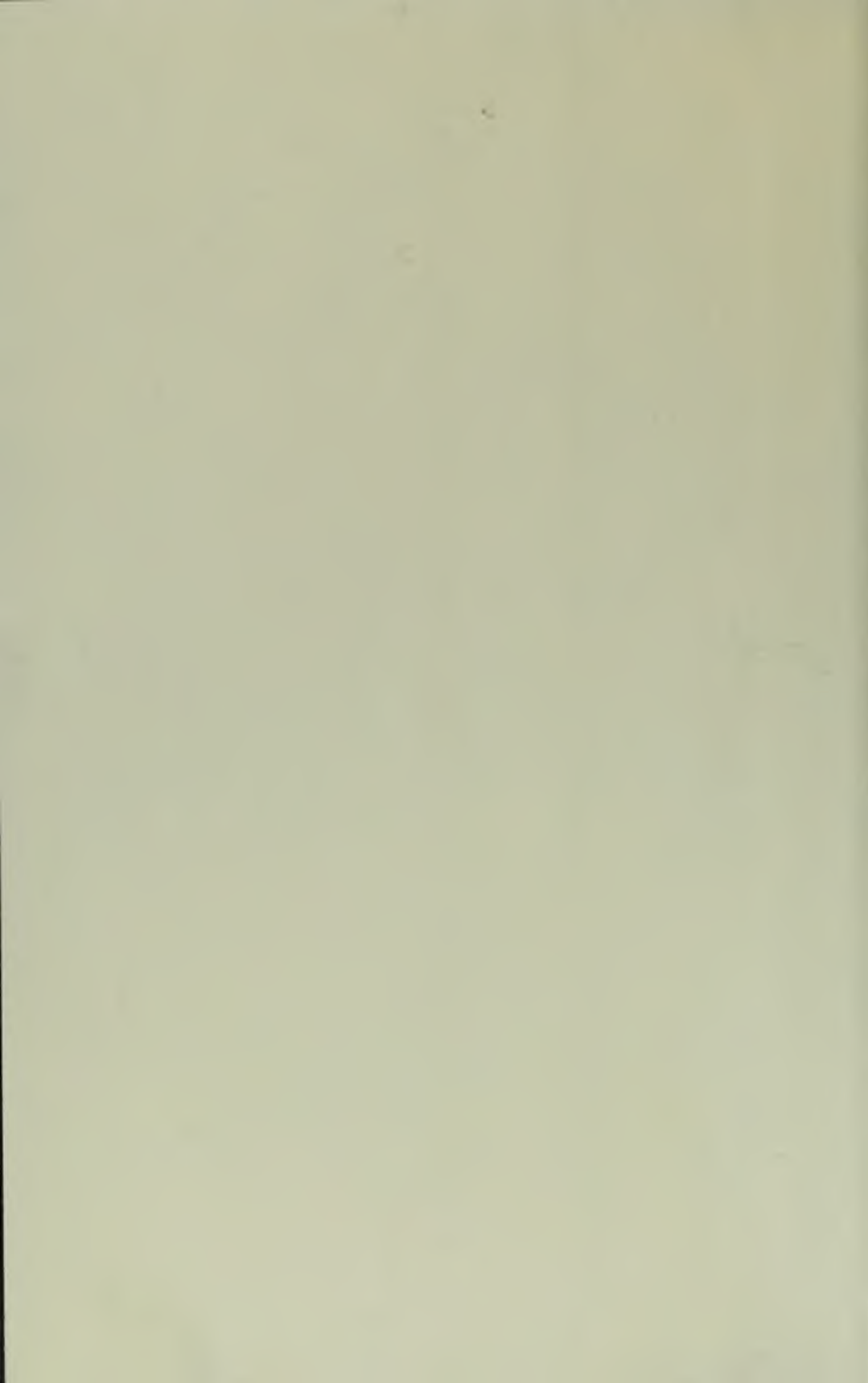
The Hothouse refers to the city of Bonn with its warm, damp climate, but it also refers to the political environment of the temporary capital of divided postwar Germany, where politics became more about compromise and half measures than principled change.

Keetenheuve is a sophisticated and idealistic intellectual, a German politician who returned from self-imposed exile during the war. Until this point, he led a life guided by principle and political optimism. Ultimately, his idealism proves to be his downfall. As he attempts to break with the past and introduce pacifist politics into the newly founded German republic, Keetenheuve encounters only the antagonism of his self-interested political colleagues. *The Hothouse* traces the tragic final two days in the life of this decidedly moral man, disillusioned by political corruption and depressed by the sudden loss of his wife.

By turns ironic, erotic, and deeply mournful, Koeppen's novel opposes the vitality of thought and language with the ultimate darkness and

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WOLFGANG KOEPPEN

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Author's Note (1953)

The novel *The Hothouse* draws on current events, in particular recent political events, but only as a catalyst for the imagination of the author. Personalities, places, and events that occur in the story are nowhere identical with their equivalents in reality. References to living persons are neither made nor intended in what is a purely fictional narrative. The scope of the book lies beyond any connections with individuals, organizations, and events of the present time; which is to say, the novel has its own poetic truthfulness.



*God knows politics is a complicated business,
and the hearts and minds of men often
flutter helplessly around in it, like birds
in a net. But if we
are unable to feel indignant at a great injustice,
we will never be able to act righteously.*

—HAROLD NICOLSON

The process of history is combustion.

—NOVALIS



Introduction

WOLFGANG KOEPPEN (1906–1996) HAD A VERY LONG life and a very strange career. Following an obscure, provincial, peripatetic youth on the Baltic coast of Germany—nothing to record, no apprenticeships, no achievements, no landmarks, the only thing that characterized him a besetting love of books (asked what the crucial event in his life was, he replied: learning to read; asked another time how he would like to die, he said: in bed, with a book)—he had, by the late 1920s, made his way to Berlin (all roads then led, as they do again, to Berlin). There, Koeppen had his only period of regular employment, when he worked on the cultural pages of the *Berliner Börsen-Courier* for a couple of years, leaving in 1933, much as Keetenheuve does in *The Hothouse*, from dislike and apprehension of the Nazis. He left Germany, not for Canada and England, like Keetenheuve, but for Holland. He had, by this time, published a novel, *Eine unglückliche Liebe* (*An Unhappy Love Affair*, 1934) with the publisher Cassirer.

It was well reviewed, sold little, and the following year, there was another, *Die Mauer schwankt* (*The Tottering Wall*), again with Cassirer. Soon thereafter, the newspaper closed down: Cassirer, a Jew, fled, and Koeppen, in Holland with Jewish friends, who were themselves debating where to go and what to do with themselves, decided to return, in late 1938, to Germany, rather than wait to be apprehended. Koeppen lacked the fame, the contacts, on a banal level, the aptitude for languages, and perhaps ultimately, the brute necessity required to make a go of things in exile.

In 1939, extraordinarily, he was on a plane to Berlin. He said: "It is perhaps my only boast not to have served in Hitler's armies for a single hour." What Koeppen did was—Penelope-like—to work on unrealized film projects in the Berlin film industry. In 1944, fearing exposure from Nazi colleagues, he made use of the circumstance that his apartment building was destroyed in an Allied air raid, to go underground. He made his way to Munich, where he stuck for fifty years. Munich was the subject and the setting for the first of his second clutch of novels, the so-called "Trilogy" or "Postwar Trilogy." *Pigeons on the Grass*—which I describe elsewhere as "set in Munich in a single day, a modernist jigsaw in 110 pieces and showing 30 figures"—was published in 1951, closely followed by *The Hothouse* (1953) and *Death in Rome* (1954). Then and later (and, for that matter, earlier: Hermann Hesse had praised his second book for a Swedish newspaper), Koeppen was not short of influential supporters among fellow writers, critics, and publishers. Günter Grass referred to him in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech; Max Frisch and Hans Magnus Enzensberger have praised him in superlatives; Germany's most powerful literary critic, Marcel Reich-

Ranicki, has filled a short book with his encomia on Koeppen; Siegfried Unseld, the head of Suhrkamp, first acquired, then promoted and kept faith with and bankrolled his author for over thirty years. And yet, in spite of that, both within Germany and internationally, Koeppen has remained a marginal figure, one for the few, a writers' writer. Why is this?

In the first place, the idea of a literary career assumes a more or less even and continuous output, under more or less stable external conditions. And Koeppen's novels—he wrote no others in his remaining forty years, but more of that later—were written and published quickly, spasmodically, over very few years, but in two widely spaced periods. What good to him were his early books, published by a Jewish publisher in the Third Reich—both things that (it was part of his point) the good folks of the fifties were at pains to forget? Karl Korn, the outstanding critic who reviewed both *Pigeons on the Grass* and *The Hothouse* in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, began by remarking unhappily that Koeppen's name was unknown to all but a couple of dozen people. Looked at in one way, he was a debutant; and in another, he was an experienced writer in mid-career, albeit ending a sixteen-year silence! No wonder people didn't know what to make of him!

And then there was the nature of the books themselves. Reich-Ranicki dubbed *The Hothouse* “a provocative elegy” and *Death in Rome* “an alarming provocation”—but that was years later. At the time, critics and readers merely felt themselves goaded beyond endurance. The reaction to Koeppen's poetically charged, scathing, rhythmic prose on the part of the morbidly sensitive, anxious, and protective media of the new Federal Republic can only be compared to that of some Soviet bloc country to certain works of samizdat literature—

with the difference that the work of the censor's blue pencil and the secret police was carried out by scribblers in the newspapers and an indifferent public. One review, in a leading German Sunday paper, was headed: "Not to be touched with a barge-pole," another ended: "The public will say 'Crucify him!' He won't care." Another, more "thinky" piece in a monthly magazine was actually followed, many years later, by a "recantation"—and how often does that happen in the literary world!? A bookshop in Bonn scheduled a reading from *The Hothouse* followed by a public discussion with politicians; this was canceled at short notice when the police said they would be unable to guarantee his safety! (They are very different writers, but in his ability to take on his own country, Koeppen reminds me of Tadeusz Konwicki, the great author of *The Polish Complex* and *A Minor Apocalypse*.)

The upshot of so much vilification and repression was to repress Koeppen as a novelist. He wrote no more novels. In another one of his characteristic little bursts of activity, he published a series of three travel books on Russia, America, and France, in 1958, 1959, and 1961. The tone taken toward him was transformed: there was, one observer reports, not a single adverse review to any of these! In 1962—as a reward for good behavior, the cynic might say—he was tossed the Büchner Prize. Thereafter, there were many sightings and promisings of further novels—not least after Koeppen moved to Suhrkamp—some of them even fully equipped with titles and settings and plots, but nothing ever appeared. The commodity that Koeppen traded in became silence. Journalists lined up to question Koeppen about his silence—as they did in the United States with the octogenarian Henry Roth, who had been silent for sixty years—and courteously, helplessly,

evasively, he received them. A distressing book of these encounters was published (*Einer der schreibt* [Someone Who Writes], Suhrkamp, 1995), a cross between a bullfight and a game of grandmother's footsteps, painful to read:

INTERVIEWER: To put it another way, what do you do all day? Do you go for walks, do you watch TV?

KOEPPEN: I'm terribly busy.

INTERVIEWER: What are you busy with?

KOEPPEN: I don't know.

Sometimes Koeppen tried to deny that he was silent, claimed that he was writing all the time. But that was only half true, as he was writing only the kind of occasional things that writers don't see as writing—and that only with the greatest difficulty. The huge 700-page collection of his prose scraps that Suhrkamp published in 2000, *Auf dem Phantasieross* (*On the Wings of Imagination*), actually lays to rest the myth that he was all the time working on some secret project. Even so, to describe him as a victim of German circumstances is too easy.

Certainly, his decorated silence must have been easier to live with for the nation and its opinion of itself than any further novels of the ilk of *The Hothouse* or *Death in Rome*, but writing and not-writing are both mysteries. Just because there are three novels doesn't actually say anything about the feasibility of a fourth. Our technical, assembly-line model for the production of novels is entirely inappropriate to a writer of Koeppen's distinction. Besides, if one looks at his career, it is clear that not-writing—or not-publishing—preponderates.

Writing was the exception, not the rule. Reckon it up, and you find maybe one productive decade in six or seven as a writer. There were spates or spasms of it, that is clear from the dates, but there was also an admirable, even a lovely quality of truancy about it. *Death in Rome* he wrote while he had another project—an Eulenspiegel novel—on the go; he got a ticket to Rome to attend a meeting of the Gruppe 47, cut the meeting, discovered Rome, went home, and wrote a different novel. For *The Hothouse*, he spent a week in Bonn, then holed up in a bunker hotel in Stuttgart, his typewriter clattering up and down the concrete passages, and wrote his book in a few weeks. This quality of truancy, combined with violent necessity, has to be respected, and so, while—God knows!—I can understand the wish that there had been more books, I also understand that such a wish is unreasonable, and that it teeters along the boundary between gratitude and ingratitude.

The other writer about whom I have much the same feelings is Koeppen's coeval Malcolm Lowry (1909–1957), the author of *Under the Volcano*. There are some striking similarities between the two: earlier books in the thirties (*Ultramarine*, in 1937); one extraordinary, unrepeatable, Joycean masterpiece (taking, for the sake of argument, Koeppen's trilogy as a single work) that casts its shadow over the rest of their lives; difficulties with manuscripts (Lowry lost one in a taxi, and another when his house burnt down; Koeppen claimed to have left one behind in Holland); a deep interest in films (Lowry and his wife spent years over their script of Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*) and music; the temptation to rewrite or double or shadow their masterpiece (Koeppen brought Keetenheuve back to life in some later fragments; Lowry wanted to write an *Under Under the*

Volcano); the way that both of them, in a phrase of Lowry's biographer Gordon Bowker, were "Coleridgean projector[s] of schemes." In 1955, Koeppen reviewed the German translation of *Under the Volcano* in terms that might have fitted, say, *The Hothouse*: "It is an intellectual book, you might almost say a book written for writers, full of civilization, quotations, allusions, doubt and asperity, the song of a cerebral despair, a protocol of failure, a plumbing of the depths of the soul, a laying bare of the emotions and the heart. . . . The novel is told at a breathless pace. But its panting breath has the moving, burning sniff of great poetry. It is an intoxicating book. The words flow over the reader like a cataract and make him delirious. But they are also elevating." *Unter dem Vulkan* was published in 1951. I wonder whether Koeppen might not have read it at about that time—and before he wrote *The Hothouse*. But even if he didn't, the Consul and the MP are surely kin; and the cantinas and barranca of Quauhnahuac are surely adjacent to "the Spanish colonial death veranda" in Guatemala.

I said Koeppen wrote no more novels in his remaining forty years. But in 1976, he published a short memoir, *Jugend* (*Youth*), and in 1992 a "novel" by the name of *Jakob Littners Aufzeichnungen aus einem Erdloch*, or *Jakob Littner's Notes from a Hole in the Ground*, which has become the subject of one more controversy at the end of this quiet controversialist's life. That book was one he ghostwrote, in 1948, in return for two CARE packets a month, at a publisher's suggestion drawing on the manuscript of the real Jakob Littner, a Jewish stamp dealer from Munich, who was shipped off by the Nazis to Poland, and then to Ukraine, where he survived the war under unspeakable circumstances. Littner emigrated to the

United States, and died in 1950. Recently, his original manuscript surfaced, and was published by Continuum in Kurt Grübler's translation as *Journey through the Night*. This has been used as a stick with which to beat Koeppen for his own reissued work. This is, I think, unfair. Koeppen's version of the story may not be—could not be—authentic, but sentence for sentence and page for page, it is incontestably the better book: it begins with the titles. Where I would take issue with him is in allowing it to appear—however sheepishly and halfheartedly and not altogether seriously—under his own name, and as a novel. "I ate American rations and wrote the story about the suffering of a German Jew. In doing so, it became my story," he wrote. What speaks here is not arrogance, much less theft, but a kind of wishfulness. My abiding memory of the one occasion I met Koeppen was the fervor and regret with which he spoke of the symbiosis of German and Jew. Certainly, I don't question the blend of altruism and self-seeking, of duty and imagination, of discipline and freedom that Koeppen brought to the original enterprise, in 1948. To claim that the story of a person or a group can only—or even best—be told by that person or group strikes me as a misunderstanding of what literature is. Whether there can be literature about the Holocaust is a difficult problem, but Koeppen's champion, the—Jewish—critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, citing Paul Celan, thinks there can, and I am inclined to agree.

THERE ARE not many novels—except for those by ex-politicians, I suppose—that are situated in and around the corridors of power as *The Hothouse* is: Bulwer-Lytton and Anthony Powell come to mind (neither of whom I've read), and so do

some of the South Americans such as Miguel Angel Asturias and Gabriel García Márquez (whom I have). In a longer time frame, one might think of Shakespeare's history plays—though, with the exception of *Henry VIII* (if that is Shakespeare), they tend not to be about recent history—or Aeschylus's play *The Persians*, which, with a brilliant switch of perspective, treats events (the Battle of Salamis) barely a decade old, and in which the author himself had been a participant. This will already show what a rarity *The Hothouse* is. It is further blessed—whether by luck or judgment—by having been written from a time that seems to lie at the source of many of the developments and institutions that have shaped the world we live in still, and by having as its theme an issue—the Western alliance or, more broadly, the matter of armaments or “deterrent terror”—that will continue to exercise us and our leaders for generations to come. And then, as if it were not enough to take us back to the early days of the Cold War, of NATO and the Montan-Union (or European Coal and Steel Union—the forerunner of the EC), both dating back to 1949; and to the founding of the Federal Republic of a divided Germany, ratified in the same year; it opens the brief chapter—now handily closed again, with the transfer of the seat of government back to Berlin—in which Bonn, a small, old university town on the Rhine was for half a century “the most arbitrarily designated capital city in Europe,” in the words of one reviewer of *The Hothouse*. All these contribute massively to the unrepeatabe and inescapable interest of the book: that it deals with artistry and detachment with things that, fifty years later, are still warm.

One of the many hostile critics of *The Hothouse* claimed that it was only the specific character of Bonn that made the

book what it was, while complaining that it was somehow unfair or antidemocratic to write such a book. This is nonsense, as much as it would be if someone said *Under the Volcano* owed everything to Cuernavaca, or *Ulysses* to Dublin. The books are wonderful, even to people who have never been to the places. Koeppen—like Lowry, like Joyce—makes a Bonn that is part imaginary and wholly evocative, a derisive or cartoonish Monopoly board-like creation of “parliamentary ghetto,” “pedagogic academy,” press ship, station, church, park, wine bar, “American hive,” and a few interiors, Knurrewahn’s “avant-garde” office, Frost-Forestier’s hi-tech multipurpose red grotto, and so on and so forth, with the turgid Rhine ominously at the back of everything. This all adds up to “Bonn”—and the place, and many of the characters thought they recognized themselves in Koeppen’s descriptions. For instance, there was one Carlo Schmid (1896–1979), a leading socialist figure, an expert in international law, and—a translator of Baudelaire! But of course, Carlo Schmid isn’t Keetenheuve, and no one would dream of reading *The Hothouse* as a roman à clef about the estimable Carlo Schmid, or as a naughty attack on Bonn, just as no one would read *Ulysses* because they wanted to find out about Dublin!

Koeppen said: “I wrote *The Hothouse* as a novel about failure,” and I see no reason to quarrel with that. Many critics, even admirers of Koeppen, have made the mistake of seeing the failure in the novel itself. Reich-Ranicki quotes Thomas Mann’s phrase “Helden der Schwäche,” “heroes of weakness,” but it doesn’t help him to see the point and the necessity of Keetenheuve. To take on a strong, overbearing, even poisonous system, he would argue, requires a strong hero. It is a pity

he has failed to understand that Koeppen's great idea was to inject, as it were, Hamlet into the world of one of Shakespeare's history plays. There is a glorious—and terribly sad—incommensurability in perhaps every one of the contacts in the book: how can Keetenheuve even talk to Korodin, say, or Frost-Forestier, or Mergentheim, or Elke, or Lena? But he, with his griefs and complications, is always more real than they are. The world needs more of him—the amateur in love, and writing, and politics—but it will only get—has only got—more of them: the career politician, the specialist, the Teflon man, before the threatened rise of a new and worse era of career miracle workers and cargo cults and apolitical money-men, Berlusconi, Tyminski, Forbes, Perot. *The Hothouse* is an elegy to the amateur and the dilettante: it already completely anticipates the plastic world of show, the world of newsreels, of sound bites, of calculation, of Piranesian or Pirandellian inconsequence, of near-virtuality, where, Koeppen wrote fifty years ago, “the century was reduced to imitating its own movie actors, even a miner looked like a film star playing a miner.” Keetenheuve has an adolescent purity of heart, and that's what makes him such an inspired pendant to the corrupt drift and setting of this book, where there is Hiroshima and then business as normal, where there is Nuremberg and then business as normal; and such a perfect mouthpiece for a book that, as Koeppen says somewhere, is not a dialogue with the world, but “a monologue against the world.”

None of the books I have translated have given me more pleasure than *The Hothouse* and *Death in Rome*. I find Koeppen's “hämmernder Sprechstil,” as it was described by one critic, his “hammering parlando,” completely congenial. I love the way he hides a phrase on a page, and a scene in a

book; it takes many readings to become aware of the richness and the breadth of his vision, of his prismatic way with details and motifs. His rhetorical approach to a sentence, improvising and appositional, but wound tight in a mighty rhythm, is quite exhilarating. (You need to read them "aloud" to yourself.)

Koeppen describes *The Hothouse* as "a German fairy-tale, but, if anything, too mild." To that end, he has incorporated a lot of talismanic German material (German with a capital "D"). He takes "Wagalaweia" from the Rhine Maidens' song at the beginning of Wagner's *Rheingold*, and makes it into train noise; Alberich the dwarf, and Hagen, and the Norns (a sort of Nordic Fates) also come from Wagner. Novalis and Hölderlin and Heine all supply hugely famous tags. The historical Musaeus (1735–1787) was a collector of fairy tales (like the Grimms), a satirist, and a tutor to the court pages at Weimar. German politics, especially the short and often sadly compromised history of German socialism (the word is never mentioned in the book), is ransacked by Koeppen to similar effect. This system of allusions—to literature, to mythology, to politics—all serve to amplify the story, give it more, ironic, noise. As if it needed it: a man who emigrated in 1933, returned in 1945, was elected to Parliament in 1949, and drowned himself in the Rhine in 1953. As Karl Korn wrote in 1953: "*The Hothouse* is literature of a quality that is not often attained."

MICHAEL HOFMANN
September 2000

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