

In June 2012, Rachel McNicholl moderated a panel at the Dublin Writers Festival that included Swiss novelist Arno Camenisch. She asked the participants what expectations they have of their reader. Camenisch redirected the conversation by saying that, rather than placing an emphasis on either writer or reader, the text itself has expectations. The editors of CONTEXT asked him to expand on his remark.

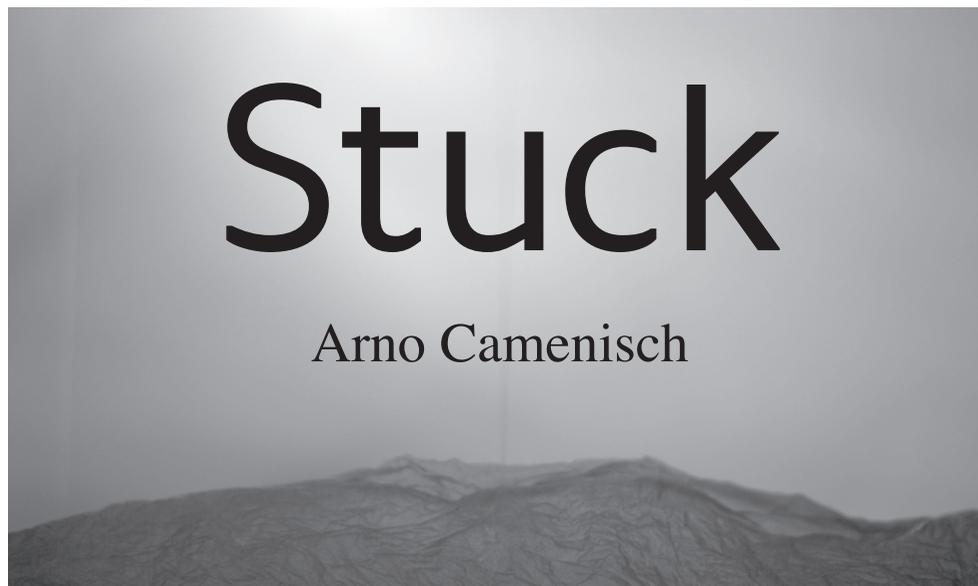
How long have we been stuck here on this chairlift already, asks the author. Just over two hours, says the reader, and is it still too high to jump off, asks the author, yes, says the reader, but you can try if you want. Jump into the snow, and you'll break your legs.

The author lights a cigarette, do you want one too? No, thank you, says the reader, I no longer smoke, actually. Have I told you I've no head for heights, asks the author, three times already, says the reader. Is it the custom in this region that the chairlift is switched off in the evening, with people still in it, asks the author, you should know, you're from here. In this fog, says the reader, that can easily happen, getting distracted briefly, it's only human, don't go thinking it was deliberate.

The author pulls his cap down over his ears. Are you not cold, asks the author. No, says the reader. Do you smoke when you write, asks the reader. Yes, says the author, I should be at my desk right now, you should write in winter, with warm feet and a cool head, and not in spring. And you, do you smoke when you read, asks the author. Are these cigarettes strong, asks the reader. I don't know, says the author, they're bad for you anyhow, a bit short, but good.

Do you like the snow then, asks the reader. My daughter, says the author, said to me, I like you as much as the snow, and for Easter she wants crutches and a pair of glasses—but with windowpanes, she said. I love skiing, says the reader, my ex-wife too. I'm gradually beginning to doubt they'll get us down from here, says the author. To doubt is merely human, says the reader. Even when you ski you fail, says the author, failing is what distinguishes art, isn't it, says the reader, there's no art without failing.

It wouldn't have taken much more for us to reach the top, says the author. There's always a difference between



SELECTED WORKS BY ARNO CAMENISCH

The Alp. Dalkey Archive Press, April 2014.

what you want to attain and what you do attain, says the reader, oh really, says the author, and this difference is failing, says the reader, failing produces art—the art of failing. Thank you for your remarks, says the author. And this old chairlift—will it be able to hold us, asks the author, this seat—I have to say—is a bit shaky. You often find chairs fall with people in them, says the reader. And at that point we break our necks, says the author. Very possibly, says the reader. At least you won't outlive your texts, says the reader. Yes, you're right there, says the author, nothing worse than that, it's best when all that remains of the author is the text. Exactly, says the reader.

What do you want to do now, asks the author. You're asking the wrong questions, says the reader. Oh really, asks the author, should I ask how your mother is? No, no, says the reader, think more practically, it's just like with a text: what's it about? With a text, asks the author, with respect, do you really want to talk about texts? Naturally, says the reader, we're stuck here anyhow. Well, if you like, says the author, what the text is about is what the text wants, there's nothing else to it, says the author, happy now? It's you that's saying it, so don't be asking me what I want, says the reader, it's not about what the reader wants. And it's not about what the author wants either, says the author, the only question is: what the text wants. It opens up your brain, as only via this question can you get to the text behind the text. It's really nice we ran into each other like this, do have a swig, we need to drink to that,

says the reader, holding the little bottle out, do me the favour, it will warm you up nicely. The author drinks and gives the bottle back to the reader. To us, says the reader, raising the bottle.

And didn't you also say, says the reader, that—for you—the art of writing was to say something without naming it. You wrote that in an article in that literary magazine, didn't you? Thanks for the quotations, says the author, that's very observant of you. And then the author can feel free to go skiing and get stuck in the chairlift on the last journey up in the fog. It's then up to him whether he wants to go skiing, self-determination is supreme, says the reader, but the texts need to manage without the author, they need to stand on their own. Yes, where would we be, says the author, if the author were to start explaining his texts,

“where would we be, says the author, if the author were to start explaining his texts”

let's talk about the weather instead. The weather stands by you, says the reader. The author lights another cigarette and holds out the packet to the reader, no, thank you, says the reader, I no longer smoke actually, my ex-wife no longer smokes either.

Do you play an instrument at least, asks the author. I used to play the trombone, says the reader, and you? As a child I played the drum, says the author. Oh, says the reader, looking straight

ahead. A good text is unpredictable, you said that too, or didn't you, says the reader. Did you hear something, asks the author, there's something there. There's nothing there, says the reader, it's the ghosts you're hearing. Beside my washing machine at home is a ghost, says the reader. Have you a washing machine, asks the author. Yes, says the reader, taking a new little bottle from his inside pocket. Here, do have a drink, says the reader, it will help you. The author puts on his ski goggles. My ex-wife always said: if you drink, you're also allowed to be drunk. Is that you praying, asks the reader. No, I'm just cold. Why have you stopped talking, asks the reader. Aha, I understand, says the reader, what also distinguishes a good author is knowing exactly when not to say anything. Don't look at me like that, says the reader, you said so yourself.

So you don't want to say anymore, the reader asks. The author shakes his head. Which would mean: those were your last words, asks the reader. This morning, when I drove up the road to the skiing area, I lost my tailpipe, says the author. That's interesting, says the reader, I understand, it's all a question of attitude, you are your text, you wrote that once too. Now stop, says the author. No, no, says the reader, say nothing for once, after all you yourself said that there's also nothingness. You can't see the ground even, haven't you noticed, says the author, looking up again. And nothingness begins where you make the cut, says the reader, it's not so important where the notes begin, more crucial is where the notes end. Have you quite finished, asks the author. No, not quite, says the reader, you did after all also write that what it's all about is not what is, but what isn't, the groove is in the void, now I understand, says the reader. It's not about understanding everything, mumbles the author. What did you say, asks the reader. Nothing, says the author. ■

*Arno Camenisch writes in both Rhaeto-Romanic and German. He is best known for his award-winning trilogy of novels, beginning with *The Alp*, already excerpted in Harper's, and continuing with *Behind the Station* and *Last Last Orders*, all of which Dalkey Archive Press will publish over the next two years.*

Translated by Donal McLaughlin

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND BACKS OFF SUPPORTING TRANSLATIONS

**FULL STORY TO FOLLOW
IN NEXT ISSUE OF CONTEXT**

CONTEXT

A FORUM FOR LITERARY ARTS AND CULTURE

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What Did We Have to Talk About, Now That He Was Dead?

A Tribute to Stig Sæterbakken

Niclas Lundkvist



drawing by Elizabeth Sunde

Stig Sæterbakken (1966–2012), one of Norway’s most acclaimed and controversial novelists and critics, whose latest novel *Through the Night* Dalkey Archive Press released in 2013, took his own life last year. A translator and a champion of literature, he translated Nikanor Teratologen’s *Assisted Living* from Swedish into Norwegian. Here, Teratologen (aka Niclas Lundkvist) shares his insights into the man and his remarkable oeuvre.

The title of this article is taken from one of the first pages of Stig’s *Through the Night*. The father of the family, the book’s ill-fated protagonist, speaks these words after his son takes his own life. And it is now that I truly appreciate their import. Because I don’t know. What do we have to talk about? What is there to say when sorrow cuts through your entire being and all you want to do is fall silent, lie down, and draw a blanket over your head in the vain hope that the thoughts of what’s been lost won’t grind down your own inborn lust for life? Should one say what the suicide’s teenage sister says in *Through the Night* when she finally breaks her torturous silence? “HELVETES JÄVLA SKIT” (HELL FUCKING SHIT).

The news, which came on the afternoon of January 25, that Stig had taken his own life, was a heavy blow for his friends, and an even heavier one for his

wife and daughters. Stig was a good-hearted, sharp-witted man, a celebrated author, a gifted translator, an excellent literary critic, and a loyal, magnanimous friend, whose sudden disappearance has made me very sad, and reminded me how extremely grateful I am for all that he’s done for my writing; gratitude that, of course, I’ve already expressed to him. His essays and articles about my work are probably the best that have been written on the subject. He’s produced masterful translations of two of my books, *Att hata allt mänskligt liv* (To Hate All Human Life) and *Äldreomsorgen i Övre Kågedalen*. It was largely thanks to him that Dalkey Archive Press has now published the latter in Kerri Pierce’s excellent translation under the title *Assisted Living*.

Today I re-read Stig’s *Umuligheten av å leve* (The Impossibility of Living, 2010), a text of only fifteen pages that was published in a very limited edition, and remembered the strong impression it made on me when I first read it, and how I’d told Stig via mail about that impression. On the title page, there’s a black and white picture of Stig as a little boy, standing outdoors, looking into the camera. Stig writes:

Most unfortunate: that the boy looks so anxious as he’s standing there. As if he’s looking right at something terrifying, so terrifying that it’s impossible to look away. Is it his own future into which he’s staring? Everything that lies before him, literally speaking, continuity’s unbearable repast, existence’s inedible banquet—

Or, in reality, is it an old man standing there? One who’s looking not forward, but backward, one who knows that life’s already over, that what could’ve happened has already happened, and that it wasn’t pleasant, all that happened, and that all that’s left is to relive the whole thing one more time (see Kierkegaard)? And that the one thought that’s buzzing around in his skull is: This won’t work! Fucking hell, this won’t work!

At 22:34 the evening before he died, Stig sent me a few words in answer to my question about whether he was feel-

SELECTED WORKS BY STIG SÆTERBAKKEN

Siamese. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.
Self-Control. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.
Through the Night. Dalkey Archive Press 2013.
Sauermugg. Cappelen Damm, 1999.
Kapital. Cappelen Damm, 2003.

ing better now compared to earlier in the month: “Not much. As you’ll soon understand. Glad our death-condemned paths crossed each other, Niclas, and thankful for the chance to work with your incomparable prose. It’s only too bad we never met and got to live it up together. Heilige/Stig”

I didn’t see his parting salutation until the news of his death reached me twelve hours later. When the protagonist in *Through the Night* confronts the most horrible and grievous things he can imagine in the Slovakian nightmare house, he says:

There’s nothing here. Apart from me. Everything is dead, I’m the only thing alive. I can do what I want, but that’s about it. Everything I’ve believed in and taken part in, they’ve only been my own illusions, created in order to conceal the emptiness I’ve lived with, where there’s nothing to be found, where there’s never been anything to be found, other than what I’ve been forced to imagine in order to endure it. [...] We live apart. We convince ourselves that we share our life with someone, but we don’t, we live alone, surrounded by others, who also live alone. None of what’s inside me will ever be a part of them. What they have will never be mine.

In the most insightful text I’ve read concerning Stig’s life and death, Stig is cited in an interview as saying the following:

To lift us out of our isolation, that’s perhaps what the greatest books do for us—the fact that they introduce us into an otherwise unattainable fellowship, into a greater connection, where our individuality, and therefore our isolation, is destroyed for the sake

of something greater. And where we lose ourselves, more than we find ourselves. That’s the great thing about it.

That’s how it is with Stig’s texts, including the darkest of them. *The Impossibility of Living* circles in its naked pain and deep sorrow around the theme of suicide as liberation, and alcohol as a surrogate for the self-chosen death:

The need to become intoxicated bears a close affinity to the desire for death. Which itself is in the same family with an incurable *Unfähigkeit* [inability], [...] *vis-à-vis* the realities of adult life. For who should it be, if not the child in me, who constantly awakens the thought in me that suicide is always a possible way out, if things get too bad?

Having been a child is the greatest sorrow of our lives. We go around and carry with us a dead child, and so it is until we die. In that sense it’s already too late to commit suicide, because when someone goes so far as to wish for his own death, he’s already dead.”

Just hold the course as you steer down Absurdity’s Way, which ends in Suicide sooner or later. Let chaos reign, Parnasses rage. The cosmos collapse. Ambition wither away. Time flow backward. Petals fold up, flower buds implode and go to seed again.

Despite the fact that it was impossible to go on living, just as it has been for so many other sensitive and intelligent people who have died by their own hand, Stig lived for forty-five years. He gave people happiness and warmth, and despite everything, experienced much happiness—many of his books, such as *Siamese* and *Sauermugg Redux*, are cheerful amidst the blackness. He’ll live on, in an ocean of tenderness, through his work and also in our memories of him.

“And then it shines: we’re all dust. Wait for me at Niemandswasser.” “The rest is silence.” ■

Translations from Through the Night
by Seán Kinsella, other translations
by Kerri Pierce.

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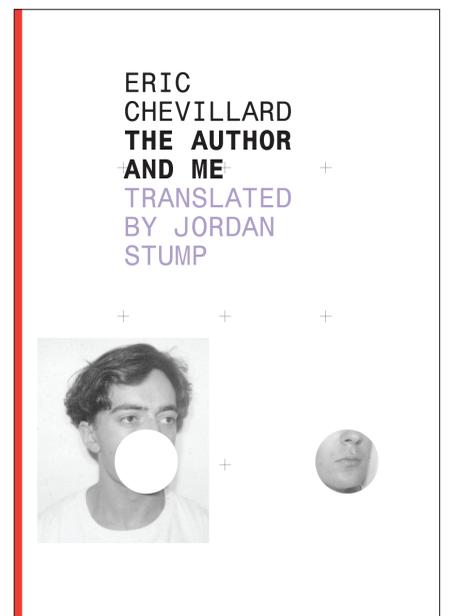
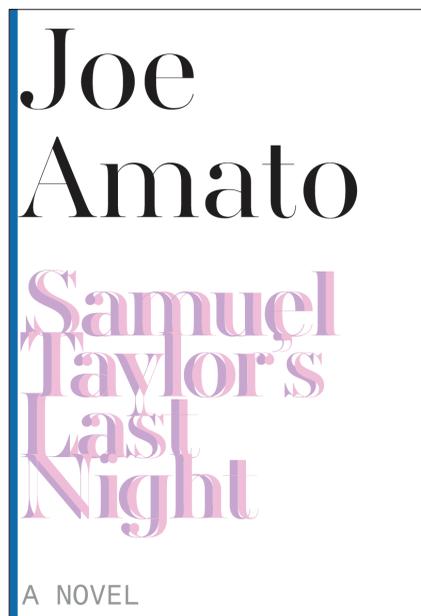
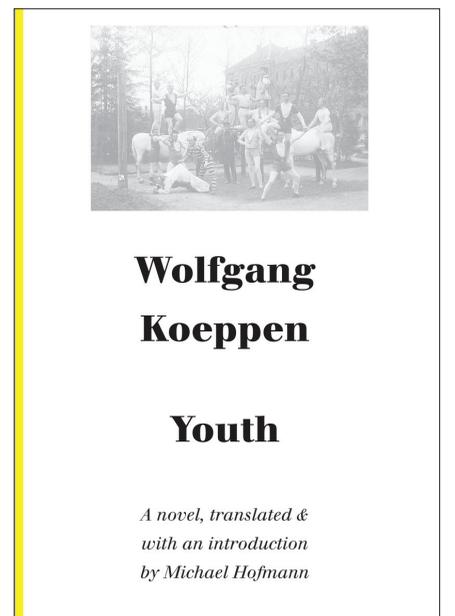
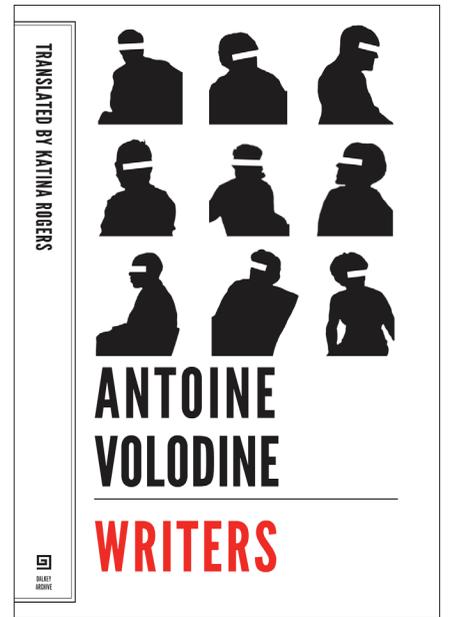
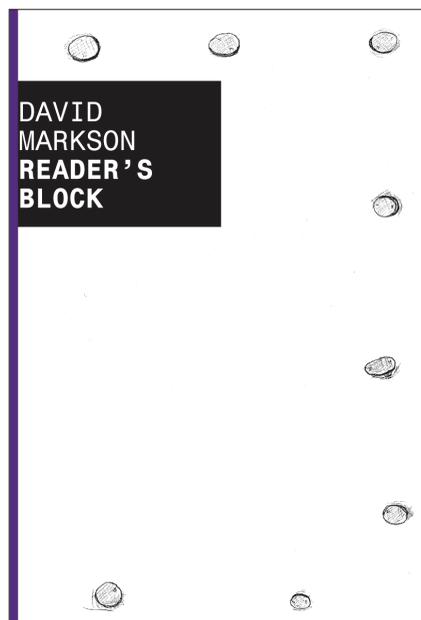
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FORTHCOMING TITLES, DALKEY ARCHIVE PRESS



Waiting for the Great Estonian Novel

Märt Väljataga

In 2005, statistics revealed that the most popular author in Estonia, if judged by public library loans, was the American romance writer Nora Roberts, followed by Sandra Brown and Agatha Christie. The grand old man of Estonian letters, Jaan Kross (1920–2007), managed a place at the bottom of the top twenty. It ought not have been a huge surprise, since it is a truism that bestsellers sell better and are read more widely than other books. According to the UNESCO Index Translationum, Agatha Christie is the second most translated author in the world (after the Walt Disney Company) and Nora Roberts is thirtieth, one place before Karl Marx.

But the statistics also showed that public libraries themselves were complicit in this situation. Recent acquisitions of romances and other genre novels far exceeded those of so-called “literary novels,” whether Estonian or foreign, classical or contemporary. Romance publishers in Estonia have targeted their product quite specifically at public libraries and not at bookstore customers.

Internet databases reveal that, in extreme cases, village libraries hold 15 copies of Barbara Cartland titles on their limited shelf-space and not a single work by Leo Tolstoy, not to mention the great names of Estonian literature. While almost all small local libraries subscribe to the gossip magazine *Kroonika*, the cultural journals *Vikerkaar* (Rainbow) and *Looming* (Creation) are rare guests on their shelves.

No wonder, then, that the situation enraged the Estonian Writers’ Union, which pointed to the discrepancy between the statistics and an article in the Estonian Public Libraries Act: “The mission of the public library is to provide the population with free and unrestricted access to information, knowledge, to the achievements of human thought and culture, and to support lifelong learning and self-education.” The Union called for a centralized acquisitions policy, which they hoped would tilt the selection of titles in favor of present-day Estonian authors.

But the local librarians — the tough and assertive ladies they usually are — were unfazed by the criticism. Public libraries are important centers of local social activity, they argued, and their financing depends to a certain extent on attendance. The task of the libraries is as much to meet the demands of readers as to shape them. And anyway, surely the egocentric, obscure and obscene works

of contemporary Estonian authors are not the right stuff with which to lure visitors. The latter point, while it doesn’t explain the absence of world classics from many public libraries, does contain a grain of truth.

The debate gradually exhausted itself. There is still no centralized acquisition policy, for better or for worse, but, in cooperation with the public libraries, the Writers’ Union organized a series of reading tours, although the results are not yet visible in the latest loan statistics.

If the conflict really is between backward librarians who do not care about literature and spoiled writers who do not care about readers, then a suitable response would be: A plague on both your houses! But the debate was decidedly more telling.

First, it attested to the fact that the authority of the Estonian Writers’ Union remains intact. Literary life in Estonia revolves around this organization of three hundred members. True, not all are poets, novelists, or playwrights, since members also include translators, critics, scholars, and other men and women of letters. Established in 1922 in the newborn Republic of Estonia in order to promote literature and authors’ interests, in the postwar period of Sovietization the Writers’ Union was incorporated into the Stalinist system of artists’ unions. During this time it served as a proxy or buffer between individual writers and the communist regime, keeping the authors in line while according them certain privileges.

During the 1960’s and 1970’s, most Eastern European countries developed a double system of culture: official culture and underground culture, whose respective hierarchies often mirrored each other. This was not so in Estonia. Perhaps due to a small population, the Estonians could not afford to have separate cultures, and the Writers’ Union in Soviet Estonia included communists and collaborators as well as nonconformists and dissidents. In many post-communist countries, the Writers’ Unions split or dissolved after the Velvet Revolutions. However, the Estonian Writers’ Union is still in good shape — probably in better shape than Estonian writing itself.

Sociologically speaking, literature, and

culture in general, had a threefold role under the Soviet regime: they functioned as a substitute for consumerism, as an expression of collective identity, and as a safety valve, enabling public discontent to be channeled into certain controlled directions. In a wider historical perspective, Eastern European nationalism can be seen as a quasi-literary enterprise, in which writers played at least as big a role as politicians. In the mid-1990’s, under regained independence and market capitalism, the number of novels published annually dropped dramatically and literature underwent a brief identity crisis. During the Cold War, Philip Roth quipped that in the West everything goes and nothing matters, while in the East nothing goes and everything matters. Estonia’s recent history has verified this (Jaan Kaplinski’s 1992 allegory of transition, ‘From Harem To Brothel,’ makes a similar point).

Nowadays one of the main functions of the Writers’ Union is to maintain the image of literature as something existentially important for society, compensating for the lack of a real market for Estonian writing. The potential readership of one million Estonian speakers is not enough to support even the bestselling authors. Another buttress for Estonian literature is the Cultural Endowment — a public foundation (re-) established in 1994 — which every year spends on literature just under one million euros raised from taxes on tobacco, gambling and alcohol. Approximately half the money is assigned to authors’ fees and publishing subsidies for books and magazines, a quarter is handed out as stipends to individual writers, and the remaining quarter is spent on literary awards, festivals, research, conferences, presentations and other public events.

These two benevolent institutions may have unintentionally contributed to creating a situation in which writing is quite separate from readers’ interests and does not much bother itself with making advances to the public.

One may assume that literature — like other human activities — springs from the mortal sins, though in Estonia’s case it cannot be greed, since the only time in Estonian literary history when writing made anyone rich was during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist periods. Vanity is a

more plausible candidate: in a small nation it is easier for a writer to become famous than read. If you have published a book and also happen to be young and good-looking, you will be especially likely to catch the attention of the media, although it won’t increase your sales significantly.

One may think that a natural state of literary affairs is such where the author writes and the product is bought by many interested readers or supported by a few generous patrons. In the Estonian case, however, the readers who matter are mostly the critics or fellow writers,

“writing is quite separate from readers’ interests and does not much bother itself with making advances to the public”

and the main provider, albeit indirectly, is the State. Still, the components of literary life are relatively independent of each other. The authors best appreciated by critics and colleagues are not necessarily the ones most talked about in the media. The authors most talked about in the media do not necessarily sell the best. The bestsellers (over 1,500 copies) often go unappreciated by critics. And authors translated abroad can be quite marginal at home.

Now what about the librarians’ rejoinder that the contemporary Estonian novel is too self-centered, esoteric, or obscene to be recommended to the patrons of village libraries? The accusation of obscenity can be safely put aside, although for a while the issue was artificially inflated by the press. But there is something in the charge of self-centeredness, since many writers have claimed, explicitly or implicitly, that the only possible way to write authentically today is to draw directly from one’s own experience. Thus Tõnu Õnnepalu (b. 1962) has declared in his book *Harjutused* (Exercises, 2002, written under the name Anton Nigov): “In this culture, where I am and what I am, the only books that can be written are the ones in which there are no other characters except the I. Nothing but internal intuitions externally observed.

Books with characters, with all kinds of uncles and cousins, their lordships, council registrars, Ivan Pavloviches and Lady N's belong to the past, to the great times of important actions. You can only rewrite these books, with minor changes. If I wish to remain honest and avoid undue copying, I have nothing to talk about except this I."

Fortunately, Tõnu Õnnepalu's "I" is sufficiently rich, intelligent, and clear-sighted to make his autobiographical musings and reflections on culture, daily politics and sexuality irresistibly even voyeuristically readable.

In August 2006 the weekly magazine *Eesti Ekspress* polled literary critics to identify the best authors and books published after 1991. Tõnu Õnnepalu, with his five books of prose and several poetry collections, written under various pen names, was in first place. Although his two attempts to write a traditional novel with a developed plot and elaborate set of characters were quite embarrassing, his confessional, (semi-) autobiographical texts have been highly acclaimed, and rightly so. The latest of these, *Harjutused* (Practicing, 2002), is in a mixed genre of memoir, confession, journal and letters, written during a short period in the 1990's, when the author served as the Estonian cultural representative in Paris. In these pages, he submits all his past commitments and feelings to merciless scrutiny. This elegiac piece contains many perceptive insights into cross-cultural resentment, snobbery, and self-deception. And the main topic of his writing is often the very writing itself, as the means of the construction of one's own identity.

Tõnu Õnnepalu's contemporary Peter Sauter (b. 1962) places somewhat greater distance between himself and the protagonists of his books. But his relationship with the tradition of the novel is as uncomfortable as Õnnepalu's. "I don't like to call myself a writer; it's kind of disturbing, unsettling," he liked to repeat, even after publishing several short-story collections. Though he finally seems to have resigned himself to the role of writer, he has so far not attempted a real novel. Instead, his oeuvre consists of stories narrated in the first person by a character who desperately craves authentic existence, life unfettered by social conventions or personal bonds. "I want simply to be. I want to be an empty and bored nobody." But simply being is still not enough for him, because sometimes he feels that even this is burdensome, or reflects: "Everything repeats itself. Activities repeat themselves, and so do thoughts." And in another passage: "I feel as if I am selling my own life to myself. I've learned that at school, and from literature, which describes life and thus kind of adds value to it." Sauter's latest book, *Vere jooks* (Haemorrhage, 2006), testifies to his progress towards

tighter narrative coherence. His typical protagonist, once a harmless loafer, has recently developed a dark, violent streak. His cravings for "pure being" or "authentic existence" result in senseless, almost ritual acts of destruction—often on himself—as if resorting to violence is the only way to resist the inevitable flattening-out of life. Sauter's international reputation rests mainly on his weeks-long drinking binge on board the *Europe Literary Express* in 2000. But his literary skills are no less remarkable. Sauter's ability to elicit sympathy for his unconventional characters and shake up our cozy moral prejudices has made him, in Tõnu Õnnepalu's words, the great moralist of his generation.

The freewheeling genre recently adopted by Õnnepalu, which mixes autobiographical reflection and essayistic musing, was in fact pioneered in Estonian letters by Jaan Kaplinski (b. 1941) in the 1980's. Kaplinski is probably the best-known Estonian public intellectual and poet. He has taken part in two poetic revolutions: the first, in the 1960's, consisted of introducing modernist diction and oriental imagery into Estonian poetry. The ambition of his incantatory songs was to heal the cleft between the self and the world, between private and public being. Despite (or rather thanks to) official suspicion, he achieved almost rock-star celebrity among his generation. In the early 1980s, in the second of the two revolutions, he renounced the shamanic claims of his poetry and took an "anti-poetic" turn—purifying his language of literary tropes and concentrating on recording little, everyday epiphanies. In recent decades he has switched to prose, writing essays, travelogues, memoirs, and "theo-fiction" in the manner of British philosopher and science fiction writer Olaf Stapleton. *Seesama jõgi* (The Same River, 2007), which took almost twelve years to write, is his first proper novel.

This semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, set in the early 1960s, narrates the efforts of Kaplinski's youthful "alter ego" to lose his innocence and attain sexual and mystical knowledge. The twenty-year-old protagonist finds an unofficial teacher in a retired theologian, who is out of favor with the communist authorities. After a summer of intellectual and erotic soul-searching, the sexual and political intrigues finally overlap, leading to a quasi-solution. KGB and university apparatchiks take a close interest in the teacher-disciple relation of the two poets. The student outgrows his mentor, who, despite accusing the human race of puerility, turns out to be a big child himself. This, in brief, is the novel's plot, in which realist descriptions alternate with mystical epiphanies, psychological probings and reflections on culture, precisely rendered shots of the social climate of the period, and big emotions with subtle

ironies. These "emotions recollected in tranquility" and tongue-in-cheek observations of his former naive self, together with its unpretentious, nimble, and occasionally self-mocking style, make the novel an unqualified success.

While Kaplinski's novel has a kind of mellow, Indian summer-like quality, the latest novel by Ene Mihkelson (b. 1944), *Katkuhaud* (Plague Grave, 2007), is a deeply disturbing, saturnine book. In contrast to the stylistic fluency of Kaplinski, Õnnepalu, and Sauter, Mihkelson's novels are written in an abstruse, heavy-going manner. But this is entirely justified by the gravity of her subject matter. As with all the authors mentioned above, Ene Mihkelson's novels draw heavily upon her own personal history, which contains all the necessary elements of a great tragedy. Her previous novel, *Ahasveeruse uni* (Dream of Ahasuerus, 2001), was voted the best book of the post-1991 period by the *Eesti Ekspress* poll.

The elusive and troubled narrator of *Katkuhaud* has been raised by her aunt after her parents went into hiding in 1949 to escape deportation to Siberia as "kulaks"—a fate met by at least 40,000 Estonians under Stalinism. In 1953, her father was killed by the NKVD (Stalin's security police). Two years later her mother "legalized" herself; in other words, came out of hiding. The narrator tries to discover the exact circumstances of her father's death, and what role his forest brethren (or "bandits" in Soviet parlance), his wife, and her sister played in it. Who betrayed whom? Were the forest brethren deeply infiltrated by the NKVD, making them mere pawns in bigger intelligence games, involving even the British MI6?

After the restoration of the Estonian Republic, the ordeals of the forest brethren have been officially depicted as unequivocally heroic acts of resistance. Mihkelson's novels reveal a more complicated story. The line demarcating collaboration from resistance, and resistance from terrorism, were often very fine indeed. A "plague grave"—a grave for the victims of pestilence whose exhumation can start a new epidemic—serves as a metaphor for the buried memories of the mid-twentieth century. The novel is composed as a series of encounters between the narrator and her aunt, who tries to confess to her role as an NKVD informer but is not quite able to bring herself to do so. Mihkelson's novel overturns the cheap stereotypes of trauma narration, such as redemption through commemoration. It shows quite unambiguously that, in cases like hers, truth does not make you free. But neither, of course, does denial. Mihkelson's personally experienced story touches something very sensitive and significant in today's collective life, in which memories and commemoration have slyly usurped

the place once occupied by utopias and designs for the future.

However, there are novelists who do not tap directly into their autobiography or personal experience in order to draw subject matter for their novels. "Books with characters, with all kinds of uncles and cousins" are still being written—with varying success. But the most conspicuous of them are not about present-day Estonia. ■

To be continued next issue.

This piece originally appeared in an edition of Eurozine, 2007.

FORTHCOMING IN DALKEY ARCHIVE'S ESTONIAN LITERATURE SERIES, APRIL 2014



Tõnu Õnnepalu.

Radio

Translated by Adam Cullen

ISBN 978-1-62897-008-1

Price: \$17.95 US / £12.50 UK

An Estonian filmmaker is returning to his homeland after spending a decade living in Paris. Oversensitive, narcissistic, and openly gay, he is stuck in an ongoing identity crisis: is he an Estonian or a Parisian at heart? Is he an urbanite or a rural hick? The story of an exile returning home and of a writer anatomizing a homeland he perhaps wishes to repudiate, *Radio* introduces into English one of Estonia's finest authors.

Tõnu Õnnepalu is one of the best-known and most intriguing authors in Estonia. Born in 1962 in Tallinn, Õnnepalu studied biology at the University of Tartu and began his writing career as a poet in 1985. Published under the pseudonym Emil Tode, Õnnepalu's novel *Border State* (1993) received the Baltic Assembly Prize for Literature.

‘Just’ Literature: *Interviews* with Two Slovenian Writers

West Camel

Andrej Blatnik’s short-story collection *Law of Desire* is published by Dalkey Archive in July 2014.

Following his previous collection, *You Do Understand*, comes this expansive series of sixteen tales about “urban nomads” lost in a labyrinth of pop culture: “We go to the movies. We read books. We listen to music. No harm in that, but it’s not real.”

A bestseller in Eastern Europe, *Law of Desire* is Andrej Blatnik at the height of his powers. He is one of the most respected and internationally relevant post-Yugoslav authors writing today.

Q: *This collection seems to suggest that the overarching ‘law’ of desire is that it is always accompanied by doubt or pain. Did you set out to write all or some of these stories with this in mind—or was it something you discovered in writing them?*

AB: In all of my short story collections, I try to put together stories that fit within a specific frame. In *You Do Understand*, published by Dalkey Archive in 2010, the frame was formal—all the stories were shorter than 500 words (at least in my native Slovenian; not all the translations managed to achieve that length.) In *Law of Desire*, after writing the first few stories, I discovered in them the *fil rouge* of desire; not just any desire—but a demanding one, and, in addition, one that brings pain as well as pleasure. And it goes without saying that a desire fulfilled seems not to be our desire anymore—isn’t that alone enough for doubt or pain?

Q: *However much your characters want to escape their desires, they seem ineluctable, despite the negatives associated with them. Is this the reason for the final tragedy of a story such as *Electric Guitar*?*

AB: I had an interesting experience with that story. When I write about a specific topic, I look for advice from people who know more about it than I do. When I finished *Electric Guitar*, I sent it to a friend of mine who is a social worker and a specialist in child abuse. She called me immediately: “Who told you about this story?” Well, nobody told it to me, it’s an act of imagination, I tried to explain, but she continued: “You need to tell me who told you about it, it’s absolutely unprofessional that this very sensitive story leaked, since it could destroy

SELECTED WORKS

Law of Desire. Dalkey Archive Press, 2014.

The Tree with No Name. Dalkey Archive Press, 2014.

even more lives if the media get to it.” It took quite a bit of effort to convince her that I really made the whole story up and that it was pure coincidence that it was very similar to another story—alas a true one—of a father and a child that her office wanted to keep as discreet as possible. We sometimes hear that no invented tragedy in literature, movies, etc., can compete with the tragedies of life itself—this story seems to prove this once again.

Q: *As the opening story *What We Talk About demonstrates*, our relationship with our desires is complicated by the fact that they cross and conflict with those of other people. For your characters this is a frustration; but for writers and readers it is the raw material of literature. Can your writing be described as managing the conflicting desires of your characters?*

AB: This management is not only crucial for my short stories to evolve but, alas, for our lives in general.

Q: *In the face of these difficulties, some of your characters (e.g., *Liza* in *Total Recall*) internalise the ‘battle of desires’. Is this a typically modernist tendency—towards a literature of the conflicted individual as opposed to a literature of social beings in conflict?*

AB: Even if this is true, I wouldn’t call it a modernist tendency; it might have to do more with the post-postmodern unstable, fluid individual. Many writers of my generation who shared Eastern and Central European cultural backgrounds and political experiences had to fight for the existence of a literature that does not necessarily serve a specific political

or national idea. Most of the writing in our region in the last few decades was primarily meant to serve a task other than a literary one. There were nations to be established, political systems to be praised or destroyed, many jobs to be done, so literary tasks were sometimes left behind.

Once the new Central European literature had managed to achieve a new freedom—the freedom to be ‘just’ literature, without any political ambition—it regained the opportunity to say something political without losing dignity. But rather than discussing the kind of great political and social topics to which everyone can relate, now literature’s subject is the politics of everyday life—which is something we all encounter—and here the individual is the battlefield. Do we pay attention to pleasure or ethics? Do we buy cheap products, which use child labour in the third world, or spend more money on stuff produced by our neighbours? The contemporary individual might not see as many social conflicts as did the individual in previous times, but he or she may feel more internal conflicts. These questions are explored in more detail in my latest novel *Change Me*, which is not available in English yet, where an advertising expert changes his life completely and goes on a mission to erase his feeling of guilt because of his successful career. He is a contemporary Don Quixote in a corporate world. Compared to him, the characters in my short stories have an easy life. ■

Drago Jančar’s *The Tree with No Name* is published by Dalkey Archive in August 2014.

A diary recounting four decades’ worth of sexual exploits; the memoir of a mental institution attendant; a familiar-looking bicycle dredged out of a river: the discovery of these artefacts sends an ar-

chivist on an obsessive quest to discover their owners’ identities and fates. Shifting between Slovenia’s post-communist present and its wartime occupation by the Axis powers, *The Tree with No Name* is Drago Jančar’s masterpiece, a compelling and universally significant story of an individual confronting the constraints set on truth by his—and every—culture.

Q: *The biblical epigraph to the novel deals specifically with the fluidity of time, and questions, in the manner of Einstein’s general theory, the relationship between cause and effect. How did these ideas about representing narrative in a non-linear way occur to you when writing the novel?*

DJ: When you go through the kind of thing that happened to me, you start thinking about the irony of history. In 1944 the Gestapo imprisoned my father in the Maribor jail and then sent him off to a concentration camp. Thirty years later the communist police and courts imprisoned me in the same jail, albeit for a shorter time and with far less severe consequences, though certainly enough to cause me to think. If a person comes out of that kind of experience whole, as I did, then he’s likely to view a coincidence like that as a strange, not very amusing, but still ironic game played out by the stupid and violent twentieth century. As I was writing this book the question of time, of cause and effect, came to inform the very structure of the novel or, if you prefer, of life and the world, which revolve in a kind of circle, perhaps a spiral. I was trying to write something like a journey through a world of dreams, a world of both visions and reality. It starts off with a bit of irony and absurdist humor, but then we travel through a spiral of eroticism, anxiety and violence. With a character who is trying to understand historical time, cause and effect, but who is then drawn into the experiment’s black hole of time and history. One German reviewer wrote of the book that it’s rather dangerous reading, that the reader may get the sense that he’s losing his footing.

Q: *Your protagonist is an archivist. Is this choice—combined with the treatment of time and causality in the novel—a way of representing the workings of the human imagination?*

DJ: By accident I came across the notebook of some eccentric who during the war started to record his erotic encounters. It was amazing: people were

fighting against the forces of occupation, then civil war broke out, and here was this guy spending his time writing about his experiences in bed. I imagined an archivist making this find, a trained professional familiar with the item's historical context, and the outlines of the novel started to take shape. The protagonist wouldn't be the marginal sex maniac with the series of women he writes about, but a man of the present day who's trying to understand the chaos of history. And when he dives into it, he senses that the earth beneath the shopping centers of today is hollow, a total abyss, a labyrinth of subterranean currents of the collective subconscious and of his own human uncertainty. The story of a modern-day protagonist began to take shape, an archivist who travels into the subconscious and underground of Slovenia's and Europe's twentieth century, with their individual and collective delusions. What starts as a realistic story shifts into a stream of associative connections, which is also the stream of the writer's imagination on his dizzying journey through time, through a dizzying melange of past and present. This released a stream of imagination that also drew me in, so that the final text contains some of my own, personal searching, as well as a few autobiographical elements from my childhood.

Q: Turning from the personal to the political—in what ways are you discussing the Balkan experience through the character of Janez Lipnik? Are the layers of trauma he experiences and the mechanisms he uses to cope a synecdoche for his native country—for your native country?

DJ: This is not just the experience of the Balkans and my country, it's Europe's experience in the twentieth century. A person could live out his whole life in some remote village, and yet History would enter his life in the form of variously uniformed people, each of whom was convinced that in the name of some social or national ideal he was helping to create a better world. In their wake they left corpses, charred ruins and survivors with wounded souls who to the end of their days could not grasp what purpose it all served. Two world wars, a revolution, and finally, at the end of the century, the bloody collapse of Yugoslavia. Of course it's a synecdoche. Slovenia's Karstic landscape is riddled with subterranean caves and whole unseen rivers, and the same goes for Slovene history: under the surface it's littered with the bones of those murdered during the war

and afterward. We stroll through shopping centers, but beneath and behind us are the remains of people who wanted to live, but weren't given the chance. *History, the blind tumult of man*, as the Slovene poet Edvard Kocbek wrote.

Q: In answer to a question from Dalkey about his short-story collection Law of Desire, your fellow Slovene, Andrej Blatnik says that 'rather than discussing the kind of great political and social topics to which everyone can relate, now [contemporary Eastern European literature's] subject is the politics of everyday life [...] and here the individual is the battlefield. Do we pay attention to pleasure or ethics? Do we buy cheap products, which use child labour in the third world, or spend more money on stuff produced by our neighbours?' Janez Lipnik, surrounded by bags and shoppers in the shopping mall and paralysed by his recollections, seems in some ways to illustrate Blatnik's point. But do you agree that the individual is now the battlefield in your literature—or does The Tree With No Name demonstrate that political and social questions are still of enormous significance?

DJ: To the mind's eye of my protagonist, as he's surrounded by bags and shoppers in the shopping mall, a bizarre, cataclysmic image appears of a landscape through which the shoppers are pushing their shopping carts toward some far-off, rugged mountains, where all of their objects are taken away from them and thrown onto big heaps and they're deprived of everything they thought was the joy of their lives. My protagonist, a historian, knows that at some point man is left with just his naked body and the challenge of surviving. Once you've seen the heaps of clothing, eyeglasses, and wigs in the museum at Auschwitz—and I've seen them, all the things that were taken away from the victims—you can never forget them. Who's to say that the human animal is incapable of repeating those scenes of brutality? My novel takes a sensitive individual on the margins of human political idiocy and tries through him to transcend the battlefield of everyday life—that's why he travels from reality into the imagination, from the chaotic, dark facts of historical material into the light of literary images and to an attempt at grasping the cosmic order or, if you prefer, the cosmic disorder, and man's place in it. In my understanding of literature the big questions of politics and society are always resolved on the backs and in the souls of frail and vulnerable individual human beings. ■



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15 Irish Films for Your Consideration

Kathryn Toolan

***In the Name of the Father* (1993)**

This film has everything: an Irish director, heavy Northern Irish accents, jean jackets and Jim Morrison hair, Daniel Day-Lewis, the Troubles, a worried “Mammy,” Sinéad O’Connor crawling involuntarily down your spine with her melancholic wailings, and of course, Daniel Day-Lewis.

***Intermission* (2003)**

Without a doubt, Colm Meaney’s greatest performance to date, as a vigilante garda hell-bent on ridding Dublin of its scumbags, a goal he can only reach with Clannad as his musical accompaniment. Other key players include Cillian Murphy, Deirdre O’Kane and the brown-sauce-tea-loving petty criminal, Colin Farrell.

***Angela’s Ashes* (1999)**

If one is having a hard day, one must pause for a moment and consider the childhood of Frank McCourt. Your toothpaste ran out, you missed your bus and stubbed your toe? Well, Mr. McCourt lived in a single room with every member of his extended family; TB, polio and dyphteria were close relatives (by blood); and by the age of 18, he’d only seen the sun twice (three times at a push), through the varying degrees of rain that barraged his skull/tenement/Limerick city.

***Hunger* (2008)**

Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* objectively examines the internment of political prisoners during the Troubles in the 1980s, focusing primarily on the life and death of the leader of the H-Block hunger strikes, Bobby Sands. Although focusing on a violently political period of Irish history, *Hunger* showcases the human stories behind the well-known stereotypes of the Troubles: the prison guard, the young rebel, and the fearless leader.

***In America* (2002)**

Jim Sheridan’s semi-autobiographical drama focuses on the hardships faced by an Irish immigrant family as they attempt to make a new life for themselves in Hell’s Kitchen, New York. Nominated for an Academy Award, the film is most notable for the superb performances of its youngest cast members, the Bolger sisters, who play the family’s children.

***My Left Foot* (1989)**

Daniel Day-Lewis’s versatility as an actor, Jim Sheridan’s subtlety as a director and Christy Brown’s extraordinary strength as an individual came together to create this magnificent drama, and when Brenda Fricker also came on board, history was made.

***The Quiet Man* (1952)**

John Wayne plays a retired boxer who returns to reclaim his family farm in Inisfree. There he falls for (1) the sensationally beautiful Irish countryside and (2) the sensationally beautiful Maureen O’Hara. The greatest Irish tourism campaign ever launched.

***The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006)**

Set in Cork in 1920, during the Irish Civil War, the relationship between two brothers is shattered when they decide to fight for opposing sides. Ken Loach’s award-winning tale was one of the highest-grossing independent films ever made in Ireland, only topped by *The Guard* (2011).

***Michael Collins* (1996)**

Think that you’re an unpatriotic pacifist? After 133 minutes of Neil Jordan’s 1996 über-sensational biopic, prepare to want to quash every Sasanach *creatúr* that crosses your path.

***Dead Meat* (2004)**

Leitrim. Stifling seclusion, dense forestry, labyrinthine roads and impenetrable silence. How could we make this place worse? Flesh-eating bovine.

***Garage* (2007)**

Pat Short portrays a seemingly simple petrol station attendant, Josie, disregarded by his peers due to his quiet, simple nature. When teenager David starts working with him the two develop a relationship. Josie begins to come out of his shell, but after a lifetime of stifled self-expression, his attempt to find intimacy leads him to make a decision that will change his life, permanently.

***The Guard* (2011)**

The most successful Irish independent film to date, this black comedy tells the story of Galwegian garda Gerry Boyle, played by Brendan Gleeson, and a high-ranking FBI agent, played by Don Cheadle, who must put aside their differences (stemming mostly from Boyle’s cultural ignorance and casual racism) to investigate the murder of a young garda by a ruthless gang of drug traffickers.

***Adam and Paul* (2004)**

Another black comedy, this time following the lives of two addicts living in Dublin. Their lives revolve around scoring and consuming heroin, leading to several dangerous predicaments. The film’s strongest theme is the persistence of man, however dismal the circumstances. Their misguided optimism and poorly disguised vulnerability make their characters almost lovable (well, as lovable as heroin addicts can be).

***The Dead* (1987)**

John Huston’s last film (released posthumously) is testament to his dedication to his art. His adaptation of James Joyce’s short story is one of the only commercially successful adaptations of Joyce’s work that doesn’t cause one to re-experience one’s dinner.

***In Bruges* (2008)**

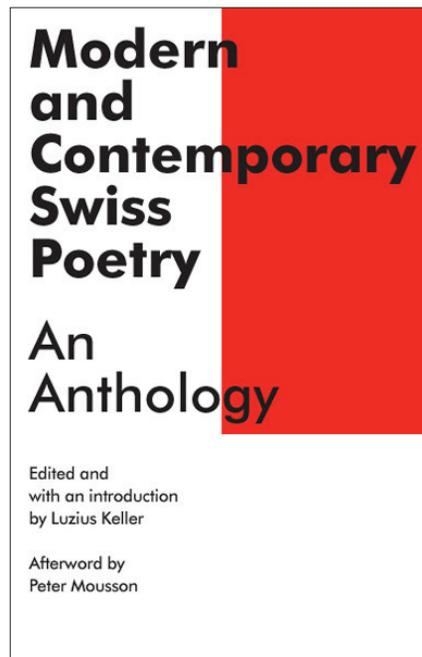
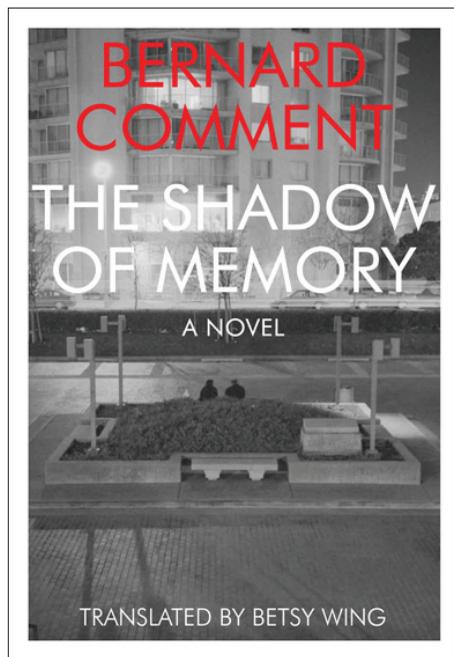
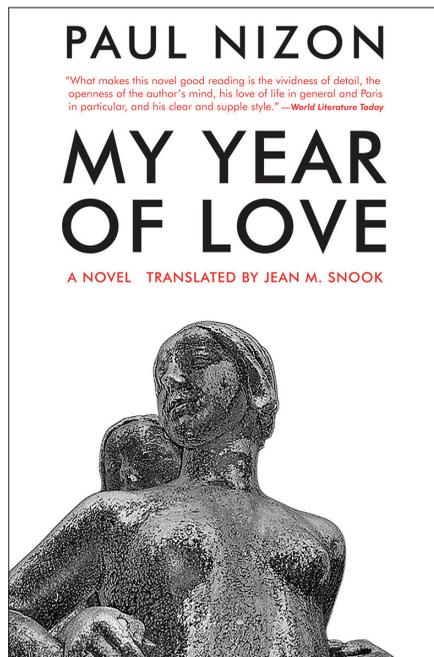
A cult classic, *In Bruges* proudly takes its place on this list of cinematic greats. It tells the story of two Irish hit-men (Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson), who travel to the city of the title, where Gleeson is to execute Farrell, on the order of their boss. *In Bruges* also features a death scene to end all death scenes, involving a tower, some coins and Luke Kelly’s *Raglan Road*. ■



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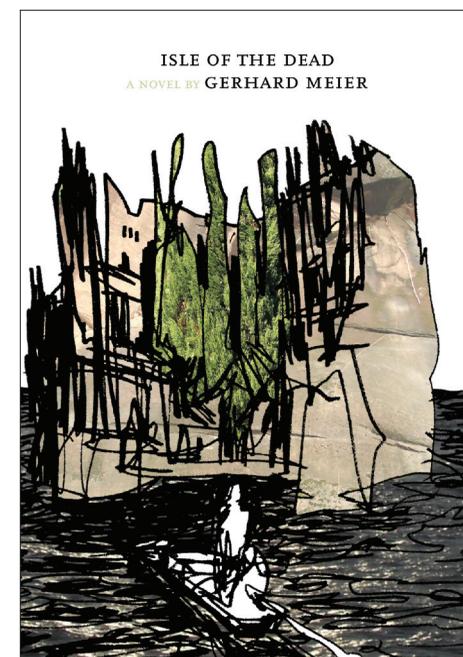
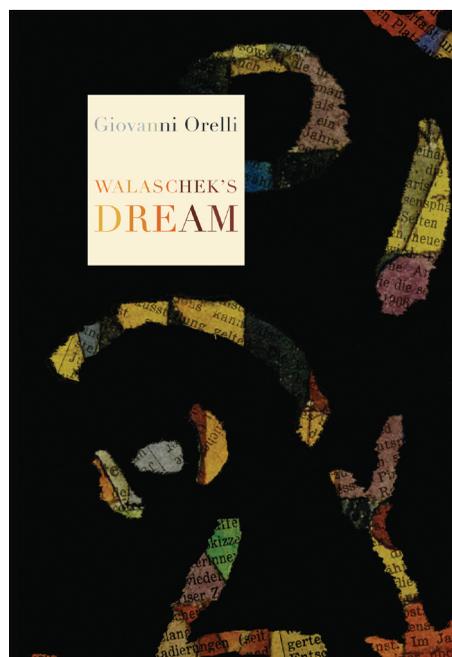
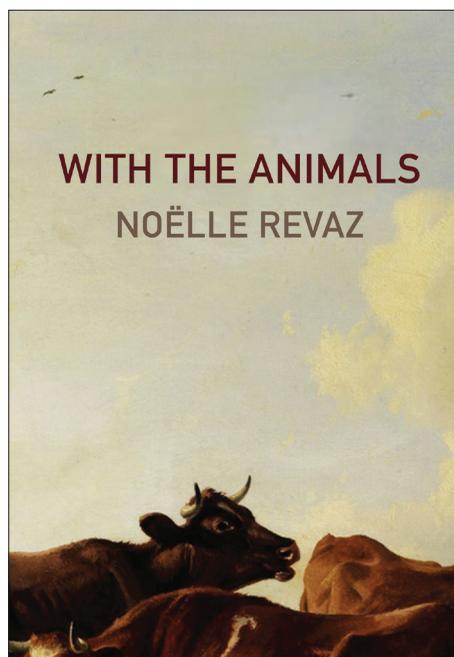
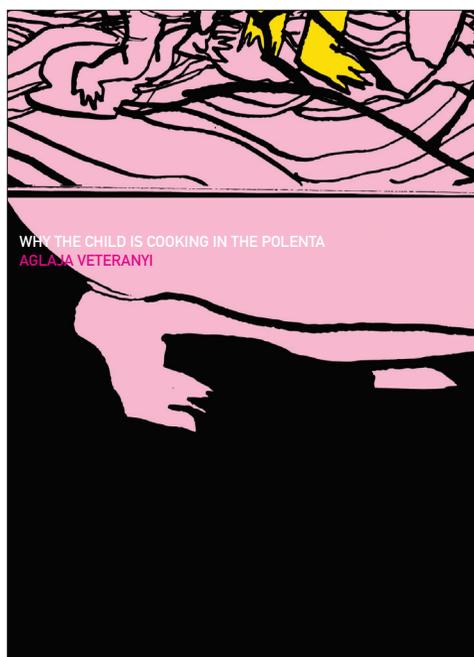
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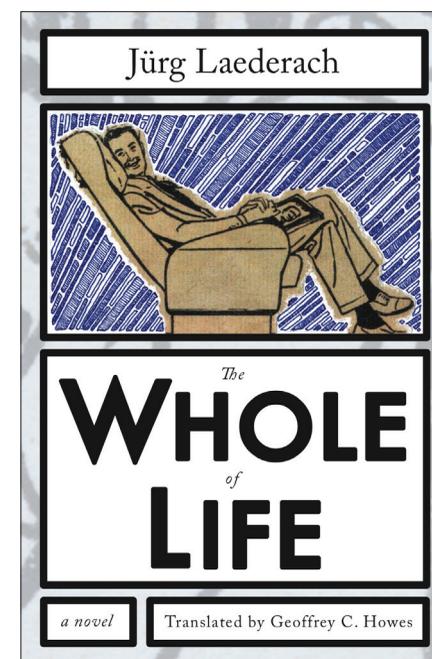
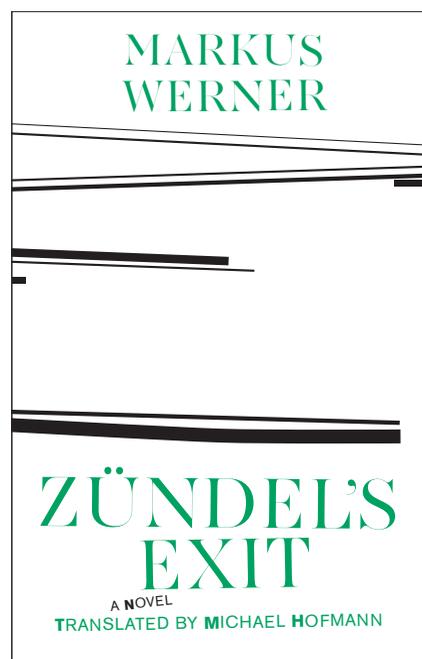
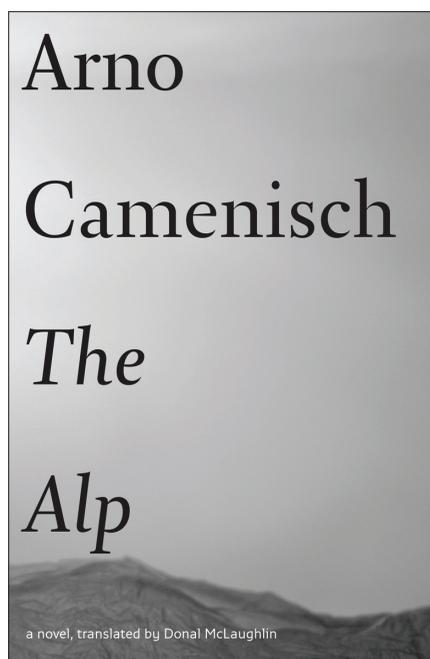
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Reading Kjersti A. Skomsvold's *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am*

Sarah Baume

*In the following piece, Sarah Baume revises and updates her reflections on *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am*, which originally appeared on the weblog HTML Giant (htmlgiant.com) in early 2012.*

Although I know I shouldn't, sometimes I judge a book by its title.

At first glance, *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am* suggests some kind of self-help manual promoting weight loss by means of low-intensity cardiovascular exercise. But putting the title aside and judging instead by my copy's front cover, (something else I know I shouldn't do) it's clear this can't be the case. The artwork of the Dalkey Archive Press 2011 translation reminds me of a work of outsider or naïve art. The colors are piglet pink, imperial purple and battleship grey. In a forest of leafless trees against dusky sky, a woman is standing with her back to a trunk, invisible except for her white dress and white shoes. The woman turns out to be Mathea Martinsen, the title turns out to be a reference to Einstein's theory of relativity, and the book's content turns out to be a moving

SELECTED WORKS BY KJERSTI A. SKOMSVOLD

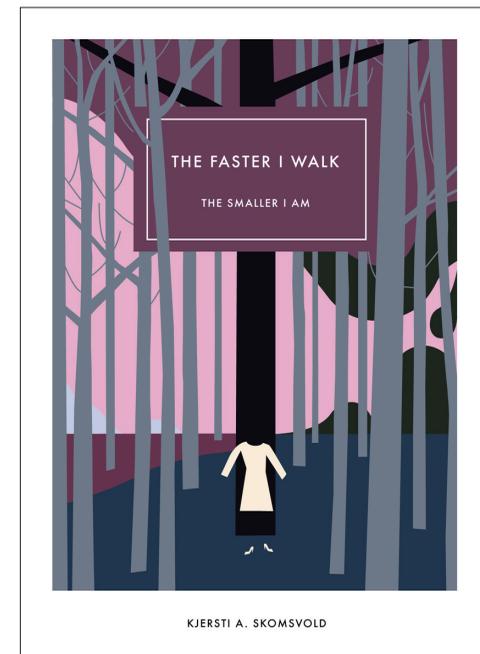
The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am. Dalkey Archive Press, 2011.

portrayal of losses far greater than a few inches off the waistline.

Mathea is childless, widowed and "almost a hundred, just a stone's throw away." All of her life, she's been overlooked. "The spun bottle never pointed at me, the neighborhood kids never found me when we played hide-and-seek, and I never found the almond in the pudding at Christmas . . ." Now she lives alone in the same apartment block in Haugerud, a suburb of Oslo, where she has spent all her married life. Mathea likes to knit ear warmers, read the obituaries and start new rolls of toilet paper. She is surprisingly proud, yet appallingly lonely: so lonely she buys the same groceries as strangers she passes in the aisles of the local store in order to achieve a sense of fellow-

ship; so lonely she listens to the sound of distant sirens and wishes they were coming for her, "because I'm wearing clean underwear and will be dying soon. But no, there's someone else in the ambulance instead, someone who's no longer responsible for their own destiny."

Mathea's story commences in the aftermath of her husband's death and with the realization of how little her own life has amounted to. "I didn't do nearly enough," she says, "and nothing mattered anyway." She resolves to make some kind of impact, however pathetic, before it is too late. The problem is that Mathea is disproportionately afraid of the world: so afraid she'd rather let all of her teeth fall out than make a dental appointment, so afraid that her idea of living dangerously is to neglect to look left and right before crossing the road. "I'm just as afraid of living as I am of dying," she says. It takes colossal effort for her even to accomplish the most unspectacular of tasks: to stop and read the fliers on a bulletin board, to start a conversation with a dim-witted man standing in a clump of bushes, to shop-lift two tubes of strawberry jam from the grocery

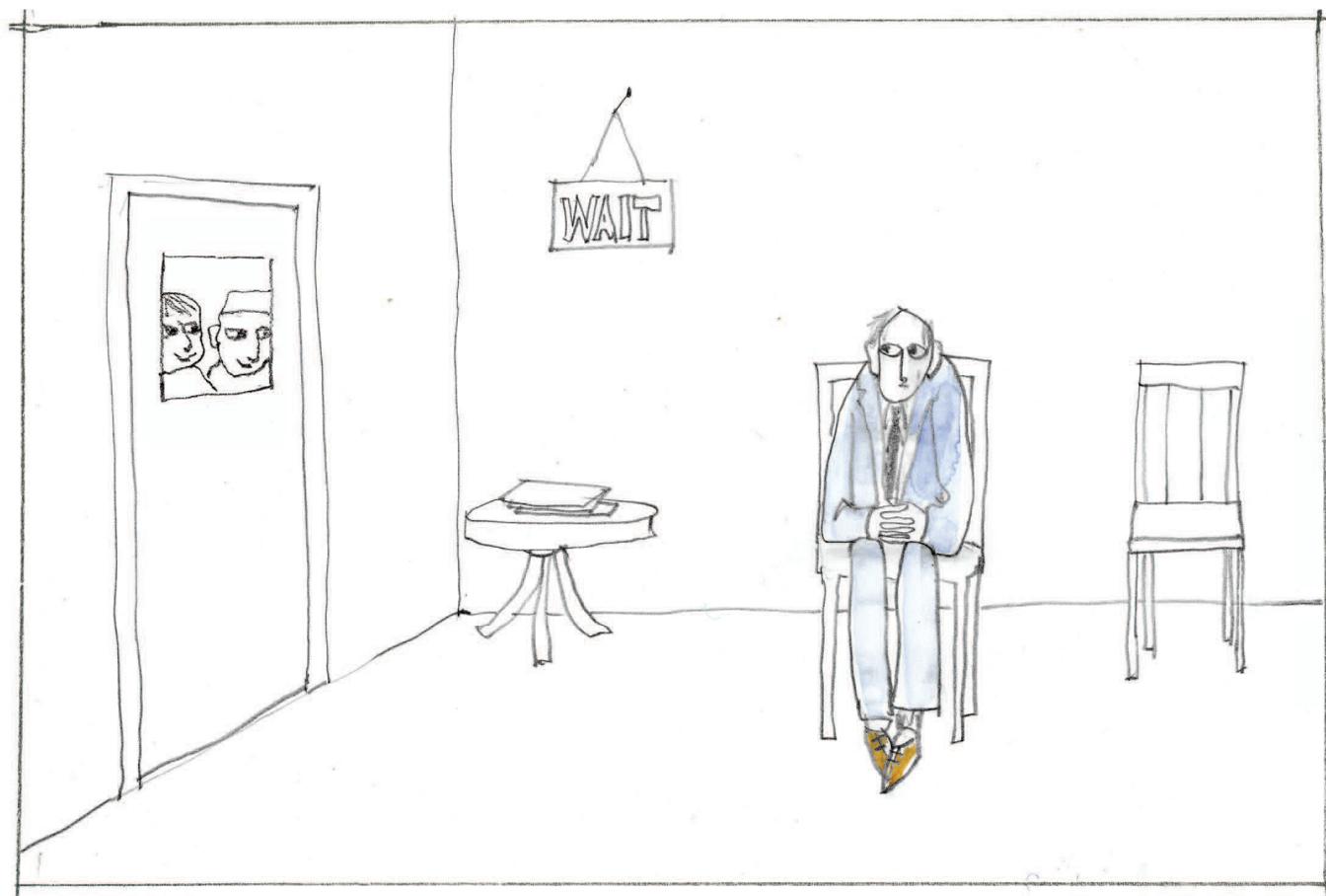


store.

Having lost her husband, and lost any sense of opportunity—on the second page, Mathea says, "I'm wishing I could save what little I have left of my life until I know exactly what to do with it."—perhaps the greatest loss of all is that of dignity. Mathea might have felt more dignified if she were she not so afraid or lonely, or even were simply content with having existed so long and left such little mark. But even when she sees an item on the TV news in which her favorite presenter, talks to "someone who thinks our goal in life should be to leave no trace," still Mathea rejects the nobility of an existence which passes without mess and ends without mourners. "Wouldn't it be nice if someone remembered how pretty and smart and funny I was . . ." she wonders, although she doesn't "have much hair left," although she can scarcely think of a name for a Dalmatian that isn't either "Black" or "White," although laughter is something which she doesn't "really remember how to do anymore." Mathea gets up the next day and, driven by an unfounded sense of self-importance, by the oddest and subtlest kind of vanity, goes about assembling a time-capsule of keepsakes to bury in her apartment compound's front lawn.

Although I know I shouldn't, sometimes I judge a book by the author's miniaturized photograph somewhere between the cover blurbs.

I find Kjersti A. Skomsvold inside a



French flap. She is intimidatingly beautiful, with the finely boned and nicely symmetrical features which are supposedly typical in Scandinavia. I think, somewhat begrudgingly—how can someone so young and pretty possibly write authentically from the point of view of a character so old and toothless, so wretched and lonely? Surely great literature can only arise from a horrible life, and surely a horrible life is lived with a particularly horrible face?

Nonetheless, one of the book's most striking aspects is the unswerving distinctiveness of the old lady's voice. It never once slips out of Mathea into Kjersti. The innate sincerity of Skomsvold's narration doesn't quite make sense until I stumble across her opening remarks from a panel discussion on "Loneliness and Community" at the *PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature*. "My plan in life was to be a computer engineer, and for some years all the writing I did was in programming language. Fortunately life doesn't always turn out the way we plan [...] maybe all we want in life is a sorrow so big that it forces us to become ourselves before we die."

She goes on to explain something of the circumstances which breathed life into her inner Mathea. "I got ill, and I had to move home to my parents and live in their basement. [...] I didn't have studies, friends, a boyfriend, or any of the activities I used to have to define myself." And so the book was gradually pieced together from two years' worth of post-its stuck above Skomsvold's sick bed, and from thoughts about infirmity and solitude and death. "I'm glad I didn't know how hard it is to write something of quality," she says, "because then I probably never would have tried." Skomsvold admits that she hadn't read

a lot of books nor harbored any driving ambition to become a writer, and it shows. It's my impression that most authors who work for years on paring back their style, actually become constrained rather than liberated by their scholarly smartness. The unfussy and unaffected prose of Skomsvold's debut, however, never feels forced; it just sounds like Mathea.

"a group portrait of people who don't fit neatly into society's archetype . . ."

Although I know I shouldn't, once I'm done judging a book by its title, its cover and the author's face, I'm inclined to judge it against the yardstick of whatever else I'm reading at the time.

This means *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am* is up against *Gooseberries*, the Chekov story in which Ivan Ivanych, an aging veterinary surgeon, shares a fable with some friends in a lamp-lit drawing room one rainy night. There comes a point at which he says,

it's obvious that the contented person only feels good because those who are unhappy bear their burden in silence; without that silence happiness would be inconceivable. It's a collective hypnosis. There ought to be someone with a little hammer outside the door of every contented, happy person, constantly tapping away to remind him that there are unhappy people in the world, and that however happy he may be, sooner or later life will show its claws; misfortune will strike—ill-

ness, poverty, loss—and no one will be there to see or hear it, just as they now cannot see or hear others. But there is no person with a little hammer; happy people are wrapped up in their own lives, and the minor problems of life affect them only slightly, like aspen leaves in a breeze, and everything is just fine.

As I'm sure many studies of Chekov have already pointed out, the author himself is the person with the little hammer. Through his stories, without preaching or creating caricatures, he brought to light the worries, difficulties and sorrows of society's voiceless malcontent.

"The question I get [asked] the most abroad is whether people in the Nordic countries are as extremely lonely as the main character in my book," says Skomsvold in an interview with the *Galway Independent* in advance of her appearance at the 2012 *Cúirt International Festival of Literature*. "The answer is yes." Despite the drastic shift in era and situation, it strikes me that Skomsvold is continuing Chekov's great modern literary tradition of "tapping away." Nearly all the minor characters she depicts are subtly uneasy in their own skin. Intentionally or unintentionally, *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am* is a group portrait of people who don't fit neatly into society's archetype: there is the short-sighted little girl who has invented a game of "priest and corpse"; there is the woman at the Christmas party whose hair can never be long enough; there is the old man who goes to the emergency room to report some suspected drug addicts outside his house. And at the helm there is Mathea Martinsen—the unhappy embodiment of all those who look perfectly ordinary yet suffer their unfathomable

strangeness in burdensome silence.

Near the end of *Gooseberries*, Ivan Ivanych declares that "happiness does not exist and it should not exist, and if there is a meaning and purpose to life, then that meaning and purpose is certainly not for us to be happy, but something far greater and wiser." As soon as I read that, I thought of a Mathea equivalent. I thought of the last conversation she forces herself to have with the dim-witted man, Åge B., in his clump of bushes. "Who said life's supposed to be good?" He says. "Isn't life supposed to be good?" She says. "No," Åge B. says. "It's supposed to be hard."

The book ends about eight pages later (and although I know I shouldn't judge a book by its ending), it's a good end, a dignified end.

Having finished *The Faster I Walk, the Smaller I Am*, my daily life continues to bring my way all those inane tasks so hideously necessary for prolonged survival: washing up, brushing teeth, tying shoelaces, buying cheese. And as it does, I find myself thinking of Mathea, of all the Matheas. I see a house at night with only one window lit, I hear a grumble of thunder in the distance, I flick past the obituaries page in the newspaper or go to start a new roll of toilet paper and Skomsvold comes at me with her little hammer. I am beginning to understand that little hammers are probably the best way to judge books after all: by the subtleties of how they come back to haunt me, by the niggling awareness of the unseen and unappreciated, by the small changes they make to the way in which I move so thoughtlessly through the world.

"Do you feel better?" Åge B. says.
 "Yes," Mathea says.
 "Good," Åge B. says.
 "Good," says Mathea. ■

NOTES:

All quotes from Kjersti A. Skomsvold's opening remarks at the panel discussion entitled "Loneliness and Community" given at the 2011 *PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature* in New York were taken from a transcription which she shared with *The Mantle* and which may be found in full at <http://tinyurl.com/3p6xq5p>

Kjersti A. Skomsvold's brief interview with Declan Rooney of the *Galway Independent* was published on April 18th 2012, in advance of her appearance at the *Cúirt International Festival of Literature*.

Both quotes from *Gooseberries* by Anton Chekov were taken from *About Love and Other Stories: A new translation by Rosamund Bartlett* which was first published by Oxford University Press in 2004 and reissued in 2008.



surgeon limbers up



first steps

Fiction and Musical Form

Peter Dimock

I asked Peter Dimock to write a short piece about novels that would also serve as an apologia pro labora sua, in light of the expected accusation that his own novel could have somehow been made simpler, more reader-friendly, and more entertaining—John O'Brien, Publisher.

“I do not regret a single moment spent devising the novel’s formal exercises”

I subscribe to the theory of the novel as the literary genre in which everyday speech gets road-tested as a vehicle for vernacular culture’s ability to represent and communicatively engage the history being lived in the present. I will not take up your time attempting to argue this theory’s superiority over others. I offer it to you as a preliminary bid for your patience and as a defense of the principle underlying the composition of my fiction.

The conceit behind my novel, *George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time*, is that recent American history is most accurately and usefully represented from within a language that on its surface imitates and mirrors our present, everyday language’s spectacular failure to adequately or accurately represent the harm of the history we have been living over the last fifty years and more. This is to say that recent American history is most truthfully represented from within a common language saturated by a failure of historical self-consciousness. I use the adverb “adequately” here in a hopeful sense: I believe that the novel and its traditions of reading are still available to us as a means to excavate real but unrealized possibilities of more adequate—and new—representations of present history that remain latent in our everyday speech. But to mobilize these possibilities I believe it can become necessary to estrange ourselves from our own common use of words in order to put us in immediate contact with our own, often coerced, complicity in the destruction that flows from our own everyday language’s enforced historylessness.

I have fairly extensive and intensive training as a classical musician. My mother wanted to be a professional cellist and passed on to her children an

inchoate sense that in classical music resided a realm of transcendence accessible to those who could appreciate, or much better, execute its technical demands well enough to experience directly the musical thought of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, or Brahms. I have played the cello from the age of nine. In graduate school, while becoming paralyzed by the presence of blank pages when trying to write a dissertation on the creation of a national narrative for American history, I studied cello for three years with Aldo Parisot and attended his weekly master classes at the Yale Graduate School of Music. I was invited to play for the master class once and performed Beethoven’s 7 Variations for Cello and Piano on “Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen” (“In Men Who Feel Love” from Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*).

As a historian I wanted to understand how the triumphalist American national democratic narrative and the national experience of slavery were related at the level of American vernacular language’s ability to represent the present as the result of the legacy of the collective historical experience of slaveholding. Studying classical music while writing a bibliographical essay on the historiography of “the subjectivity of slavery,” I was continually haunted by my own lack—or refusal—of any knowledge of jazz as a musical form.

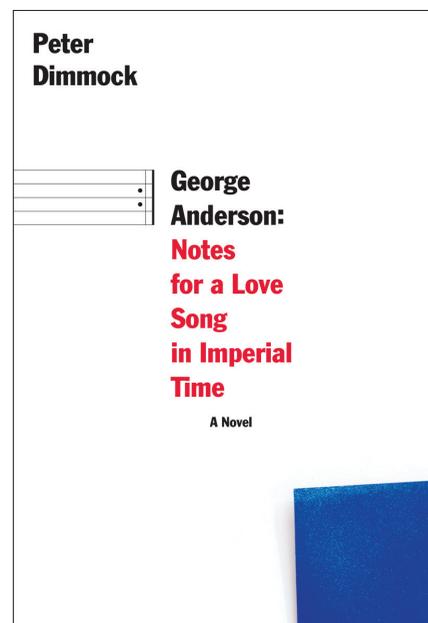
When I asked a friend where I should start if I wanted to teach myself about jazz, I was struck by how quickly he answered, “John Coltrane’s *Crescent*.” “How were you able to answer so immediately?” I asked. “That album once saved my life,” was his answer.

So I listened and read and eventually came across the passage in the Coltrane biography by musicologist Lewis Porter in which he quotes Coltrane, explaining that three of the five songs on *Crescent* came to him first in the form of words (this may have been true, in fact, for a great deal of Coltrane’s music). Only when the songs had been completed as musical sound did the words fall away and become superfluous. (Most of the sheets of paper on which the original words were jotted down were left lying around and have been lost. Coltrane himself seems not to have remembered them.) In interviews he conveyed the sense that he felt that *all* the work of the words had been done once the musical notes came to him. It was as if the words as distinct units of meaning became

wholly dissolved within the tonal relations of the melodies he discovered for them.

Both as a historian and as a musician, I found myself asking, “What must it be like to create meaning inside a language whose immediate construction and use for centuries had been partly devoted to denying—formally, legally, practically—the speaker’s capacity, status, and right to create the meaning and value of his own autonomy and coherence from the words he spoke and wrote in his own voice?” This question seems to me to pose an extreme aesthetic and ethical problem of form from within the American language itself. I, who am a beneficiary of all the advantages that unreserved trust and rigorous training in the capacities of the language I was given to use, now realized there might be some value—some necessity even—in considering what it would be like to experience directly—and then create meaning within—a language whose dominant formal properties were devoted to betraying my entitlement to full humanity.

What would a work of homage to a 1964 recording by John Coltrane, which had saved my friend’s life, by a beneficiary of American history sound like if written from inside a strictly accountable democratic historical knowledge of that language’s always structurally immediate—but always repressed by its beneficiaries—bad faith?



This formal aesthetic experiment was the original impulse behind the writing of *George Anderson*—a source for the book that is now no longer visible from inside the novel itself. My hope is that I know enough about music theory—and am myself a good enough musician—to be able to have used musical form to create a revalued sound of American vernacular public and private speech that

registers in an accurate and resonant way the destructiveness of the assumptions behind American triumphalist historical narrative that I believe is embedded in most moments of contemporary American daily life.

I have no illusion that I have successfully accomplished any such delusionary, eccentric formal aesthetic ambition in the composition of *George Anderson*. But I do not regret a single moment spent devising the novel’s formal exercises with which the narrator attempts to compose a democratic musical method for American history under present circumstances and conditions. I provisionally recommend that readers try this half-daft and disorienting experiment for themselves. The music I recommend without reservation.

Why do I accord the novel such formidable powers to create or repress historical consciousness and to accurately register the state of social coherence in the face of the history that is being lived in the present? Maybe because I have worked in book publishing so long, I find myself continuing to believe in the persistence of emancipative possibilities in the Enlightenment tradition of print literacy as a social technology that can foster imaginative freedom. Inherent in that tradition of freedom, I believe, is a logical commitment to democratic social equality that the communicative reciprocity of close literary reading both establishes as a value and partially enacts through its practices.

The questions I was asking myself as I was writing *George Anderson* were, “How is the emancipative tradition of literary fiction to be continued and forwarded in our present?” and, “What would that Enlightenment tradition of emancipative literacy really sound like if it were naively insisted upon and rudely imposed on the present by a narrator of absolute sincerity but one who had perhaps become unhinged inside his own motives, desires, and ambitions living as a beneficiary of American power at the beginning of the twenty-first century?”

The text I have written is my best, provisional answer to those two questions. The device of using musical form as the novel’s structuring principle was my best effort to create a contemplative place from inside American language—but outside the American triumphalist national narrative—in which to consider imaginatively—and perhaps even to experience in an estranged but recognizable form the psychological toll and ethical costs—of that still potentially emancipative tradition’s current abuses and misuses. ■

SELECTED WORKS BY PETER DIMOCK

George Anderson: Notes for a Love Song in Imperial Time. Dalkey Archive Press, 2013.

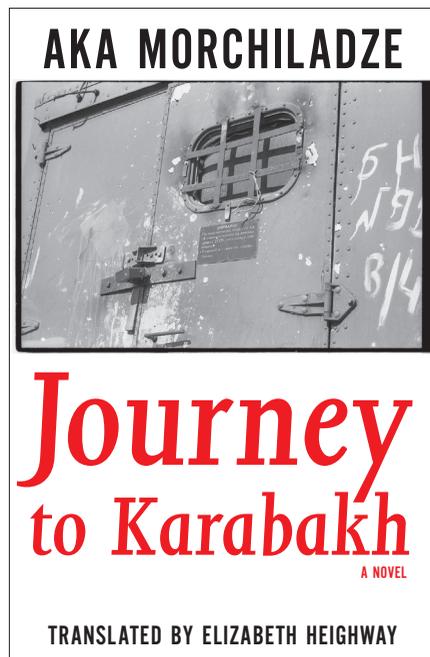
A Short Rhetoric for Leaving the Family. Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

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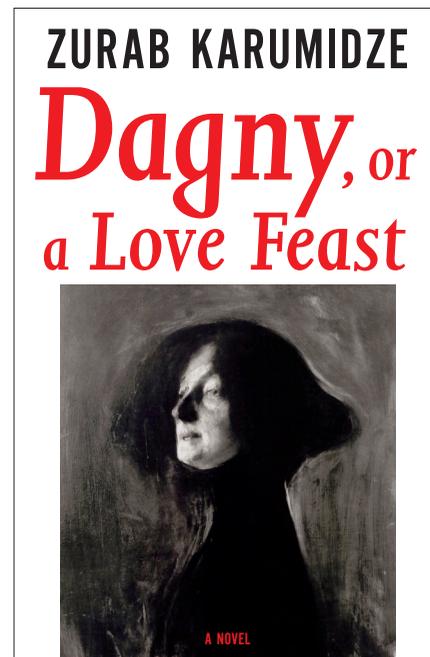
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Aka Morchiladze, born in 1966 in Tbilisi, is one of the most respected writers in Georgia. He studied and later taught Georgian history at Tbilisi State University, worked as a sports journalist, and hosted a television show on unknown pages of Georgian history. He is the author of twenty three novels and three books of short stories, from which numerous plays and films have been adapted. *Journey to Karabakh* is his first novel.

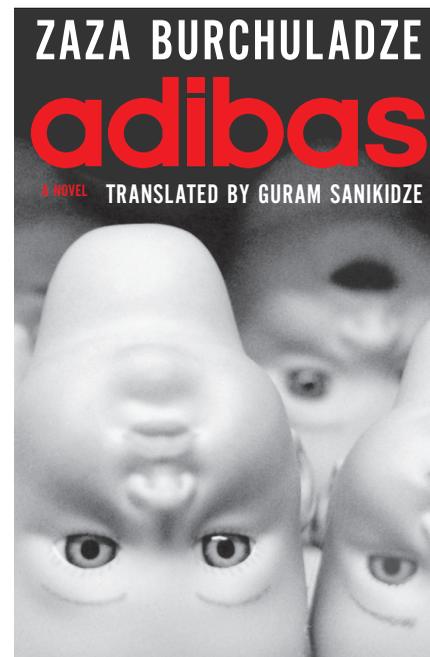
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Zurab Karumidze has a degree in English Language and Literature from Tbilisi State University. In 1994, he spent a year at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as a Visiting Fulbright Scholar studying American postmodernist fiction. His publications include essays, short stories, novels, and a history of jazz.

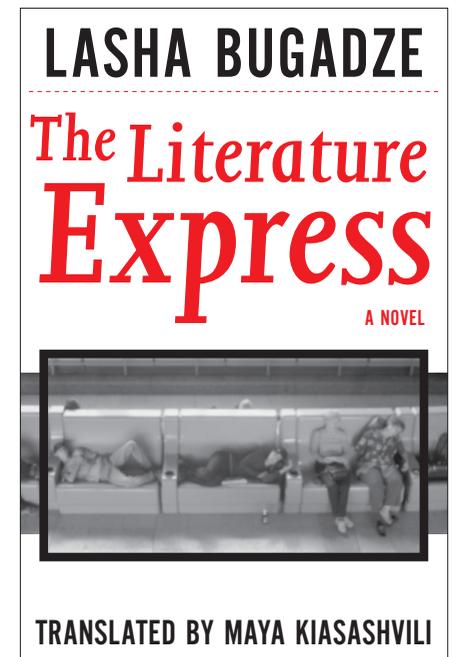
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War is raging in Georgia, Russian fighter planes are thundering overhead, and yet, for some, the falling bombs cause no more impact than the slight ripple moving through the purified water of their swimming pools, or the rattling of a spoon in their cappuccino cups. *adibas* is a tragic satire describing the progressive falsification of life, invaded by consumer goods, consumer sex, consumer carnage. A “war novel” without a single battle scene, Zaza Burchuladze's novel anatomizes the Western world's ongoing “feast in the time of plague.”

Zaza Burchuladze was born in Tbilisi in 1973. He has been publishing his stories in Georgian newspapers and magazines since 1998. His other novels include *Mineral Jazz* and *Inflatable Angel*; he also authored a short story collection, *Instant Kafka*, and a collection of essays entitled *Conformist Essays*. Regarded in Georgia as a provocative and experimental writer, Burchuladze has also translated the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Daniil Kharmis into Georgian.

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A bevy of mediocre writers are invited to a seminar aboard a specially chartered train, and this novel tracks their progress across Europe: bitter, bickering, and self-absorbed. Aboard this Literature Express is a Georgian author whose love for the wife of his own Polish translator seems as doomed as his hopes for international success; worse still, it seems all the novelists congregated on the Express intend to write their next books about their journey on the train... Can our Georgian author compete? Is there any hope for contemporary literature, or, barring that, at least his own little love affair? The Literature Express is a riotous parable about the state of literary culture, the European Union, and our own petty ambitions—be they professional or amorous.

Lasha Bugadze was born in 1977 in Tbilisi. He is a playwright, novelist, newspaper columnist, and television and radio announcer. He has authored four novels and numerous plays; his works have been published in Georgian, Russian, Armenian, French, German, Polish, and English. In 2011, he received the first prize in the BBC Radio Playwriting Competition for his play *Navigator*. Another of his plays, *The President Has Come To See You*, was performed in London Royal Court Theatre in 2013, the first Georgian play to have been staged in Britain. His story “The Sins of the Wolf” appeared in Dalkey Archive's Best European Fiction 2013.



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Reading Arvo Pärt

Scott McLaughlin

To borrow the title of John Gribbin's book on chaos theory (*Deep Simplicity: Bringing Order to Chaos and Complexity*), there is a "deep simplicity" to both the sound and musical organization manifest in every aspect of Pärt's pieces. This reference to chaos theory is not arbitrary; underlying the emotional weight of Pärt's music is a system of numerical patterns and systems whose objectivity is, for the composer, an expression of purity that brings his music closer to God.



In November 2012, Dalkey Archive Press published *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, an excellent new book of writings on Pärt's work, including in-depth essays on his compositional technique, philosophy, and the use of his music in film, as well as an extensive interview with Pärt and his wife Nora by Enzo Restagno, from which most of the quotes in this article are taken.

Born in 1935 in Paide, Estonia, Pärt eschews the folk-derived nationalisms of many of his contemporaries in favour of a universalizing restraint that springs from his deep-seated religious beliefs. Living and composing under the Soviet occupation of Estonia, Pärt began his career as a resolutely modernist composer, eagerly absorbing the Western techniques and sounds that trickled under the Iron Curtain. His work slowly granted him national and international fame, which in itself became a source of tension with the local authorities, ultimately forcing him to abandon Estonia for Berlin, where freedom from the constraints of the Soviet censors allowed

Arvo Pärt is one of the most enduringly popular living composers, known for his gentle spiritualism and for music whose surface calmness belies a complex emotional foundation.

SELECTED WORKS

Arvo Pärt in Conversation.
Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

him to develop his music as he wished.

His fame in the West grew from this time, thanks to the support of the publishing house Universal Edition, the patronage of the iconoclastic ECM record label, which has so far released twelve CDs devoted to Pärt's music, and the inclusion of his music in over twenty feature films. His work has also brought him many accolades and honors throughout the world, not least his election to the Pontifical Council for Culture by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011. In the last ten years his music has also started receiving the scholarly attention it deserves, both for its technical means and aesthetic concerns, as well as for Pärt's "cult-like" appeal and popularity.

For those unfamiliar with Pärt's music, the starting point must be the explosion of works from 1977, which arose out of his newly developed "tintinnabuli" system and ended several years of compositional silence. In these pieces there is a simplicity: the music mostly moves slowly in patterns and waves that, while always changing, have a quality of timeless inevitability. His *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* is nothing more than descending minor scales, but this most mundane of musical patterns is made achingly beautiful in the overlapping lines of Pärt's arrangement. This musical material could not be more perfectly formed; the piece feels like a distillation of 200 years of tonal composition. The simplicity of Pärt's music is beyond mere craft, rather it has an unforced quality, there is no rhetoric in his invention, the material and processes unfold as naturally as time itself, unbound to worldly concerns. Where his earlier, modernist, works are the sound of a composer almost frantically searching for a voice, the tintinnabuli works exhibit a serene and confident "arrival."

Before 1976, Pärt's music is highly variable in style, though with a little searching one can find the roots of the musical concerns that are so clear in his later work. *Solfeggio* (1963), for example, is a short choral work that foreshadows the contemplative nature of much of the later music. The piece is written using "only the white notes"—the C-major

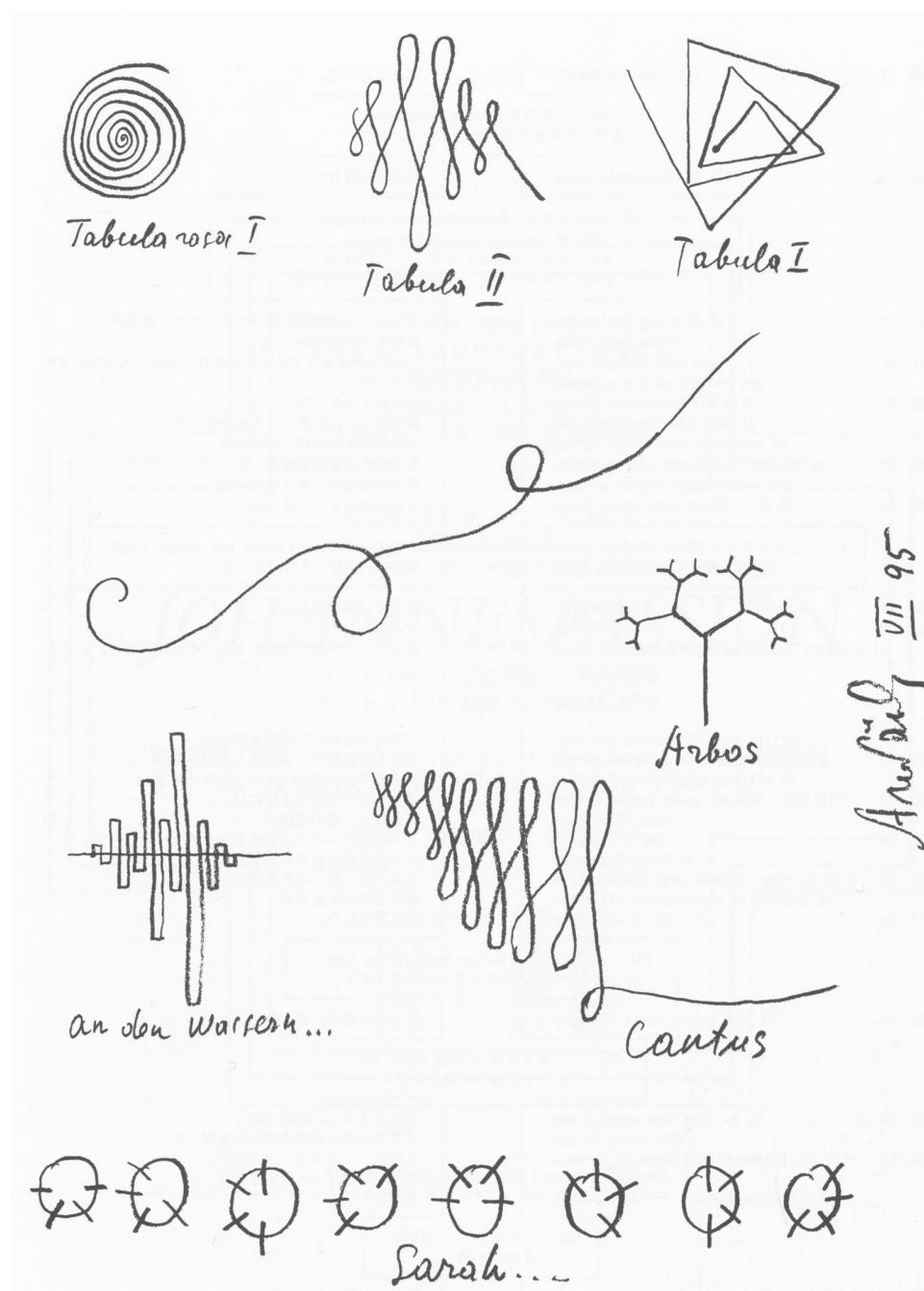
scale—but constructed using loose serial techniques to create, as Pärt scholar Paul Hillier describes them, "diatonic dissonances" that flow gracefully over each other. With serial techniques the composer sidesteps the gravity of tonality by distributing notes so that they are statistically equal, assigning numerical patterns that have no objective relationship with musical or tonal reasoning. Rather than choosing notes because they sound "good," the composer uses a numerical pattern that he finds interesting, thus avoiding years of intuition that favours the musically "correct" over the musically novel.

Although *Solfeggio* sounds superficially like religious music, Pärt avoids potential spiritual overtones, which would have been unpalatable to the Soviet regime, by limiting the text to the syllables

of the abstract and pure sol-fa. Five years later, Pärt would be more direct: his return to choral writing—*Credo* (1968) for chorus, piano, and orchestra—while very well received by the public at its first performance, scandalised the authorities with its setting of a Latin text, leading to persecution of the composer and interrogation by party activists as to the political aims of the piece.

"each single note is written as if with a fist clenched in protest."

It was not only Pärt's religious ideals that created tension with the authorities, his musical language at this time also courted controversy. With *Nekrolog* (1960–61), the earliest piece Pärt himself considers more than simply student work, he became the first Estonian



composer to employ serial techniques and was criticised by the censors for the work's perceived "formalism." While Pärt generally makes no claims to be an actively political composer, to compose as he wished was incompatible with Soviet ideology: he says of *Nekrolog* that "each single note is written as if with a fist clenched in protest."

In other works from this period Pärt uses collage techniques, mixing abrasive and expressionistic styles with more familiar historical ones. There is a sense here of a young composer assured of his technique but not yet convinced of his compositional voice. The composer says, "if you have the feeling that you don't have a skin of your own, you try to take strips of skin from all around you and apply them to yourself." The Symphony no. 2 (1966) is turbulent and modernistic throughout, but closes with a sublimely restrained orchestration of Tchaikovsky's "Sweet Day-Dream," a piano piece for children. This opposition of musical styles is not intended to be kitsch or to ape the "grotesques" of contemporaries Schnittke or Shostakovich. Instead, Pärt is evoking childhood innocence, which is also referenced at the beginning of the symphony by a disturbing chorus of squeaky children's toys. In *Credo*, a choral and orchestral development of Bach's "Prelude in C" from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is juxtaposed with expressionistic and violent orchestral writing, the oppositional elements existing, as Hillier describes them, "as linked forces, each containing the seeds of their opposite, with a continuum of gradual disintegration (and reconstitution) lying between them" (see Paul Hillier's *Arvo Pärt*, p.58).

As Pärt's composition matures across this period, his use of discontinuity in the collage technique is slowly replaced by a homogenization of musical materials as he moves from external manipulation to immersion and internalisation. By Symphony no. 3 (1971), Pärt's discovery of Gregorian chant has resulted in a work that sounds modern and has

echoes of the modular construction of collage-type pieces, but resounds with the stylistic tropes of early music. Here the composer is no longer employing quotation to construct antagonistic musical arguments, but instead completely absorbs the quoted music into his language, where ultimately it acts as a "catalyst" for the composer's next phase of development, the tintinnabuli system.

"in tintinnabulation the voice of stasis and the voice of motion sound simultaneously"

The latin "tintinnabulum," means the sound of small bells. Pärt named his new system the evocative "tintinnabuli" because it is built on the musical triad (the three pitches that make up the basic major or minor chords), which to Pärt sounds like a bell. There is a level of physical truth to his association. The triadic relationship is an aspect of any harmonic sound (such as the sound of a single flute or piano note, or the human singing voice), and this mathematical structure of pitch and timbre is partially why we find such sounds pleasing. When the notes of a triad are slowly repeated and permuted they create a sense of metastability—an ambiguous part-to-whole relationship as each note is sounded both as a single entity and as a separable but connected part. This is also a characteristic of the inharmonic sounds of bells, in which we can hear either individual harmonics or a single gestalt sound, depending on how we listen. There is a sense of harmonic stasis in the movement of the triadic pitches that can be contrasted with the sense of motion in melody. Pärt's tintinnabuli system is the weaving together of two musical voices. The melodic voice (m-voice) is usually

some sort of scale, with the attendant sense of melodic motion. To balance this there is the tintinnabuli voice (t-voice), which moves in step with the melodic voice but only uses the pitches of the triad and so has a static quality. Like the sense of visual motion that arises from the interlocked lines of a Bridget Riley painting, in tintinnabulation the voice of stasis and the voice of motion sound simultaneously to effect a mesmerizing sense of both movement and stillness.

Pärt says of the first tintinnabuli piece, *Für Alina* (1976), that "it's not the tune that matters so much here, it's the combination with this triad, it makes such a heartrending union. The soul yearns to sing it endlessly" (see the film *24 Preludes for a Fugue*). Tintinnabuli is built from the blocks of traditional musical tonality that our ears find very familiar, yet its highly systematic construction relies on numerical patterns rather than emotional intuition. The seed of Pärt's compositions is often a pattern or form, expressed numerically then composed into a musical analogue. For example, he describes the early work *Perpetuum Mobile* (1963) as rising "out of a mathematical and philosophical idea . . . intended to represent a spiral path that reaches the point where it started, albeit on another level." The composer goes on to say,

"if you have the feeling that you don't have a skin of your own, you try to take strips of skin from all around you and apply them to yourself."

At that time I was convinced that every mathematical formula could be translated into music. I thought that, in this way, one could create a more objective and purer kind of music. If I had succeeded by other means in creating a music free of emotion, I would have been able to distance myself from twelve-tone [serial] music.

One of his most popular tintinnabuli works, *Fratres* (1977), takes an almost crystalline form of nested musical patterns in which the same musical object is repeated in a slowly descending sequence while its inner cells simultaneously send new material outward: it is a ritual procession viewed through a kaleidoscope. The pattern is clear and simple, and reveals itself with a minimum of examination. However, the music is more than this repetition and folding, it

carries an emotional weight that seems enriched rather than smothered by the abstraction of Pärt's compositional process. Like John Cage, Pärt's objectivity frees him from intuition and ego, and, as with Cage's experimental music, the listener can have an emotional response without the composer actively constructing emotional "content". Originating in his religious beliefs, this musical objectivity is central to Pärt's composition, but is compositionally expressed as rule systems and processes.

Similarly, Pärt says the religious texts he sets "are bound to universal truths, so [. . .] they touch upon intimate truths, purity, beauty, that ideal core to which each human being is bound!" Extending this idea into the music he says: "in the beginning was the Word, [. . .] I believe that this concept should not only be conveyed in the text, but in every note of the music as well, in every thought, in every stone."

As with the music, his textsetting uses processes, a system of "encoding" syllables to notes so that each word is a pattern in itself; the didactically titled *Missa Syllabica* (1977) is the first application of this technique. This process Pärt relates historically to the church tradition of intoning text, wherein each syllable and element of punctuation is given the same weight in delivery. This is very different from the more common method of text setting wherein the emotional semantics of the words shape the musical form. At the heart of Pärt's musical thought is a drive towards transcendental objectivity and a striving for universal expression.

Since leaving Estonia in 1980, Pärt has steadily produced two or three new works each year. His increasing fame has led to bigger commissions, larger ensembles, and, most importantly, the freedom to work within timescales physically large enough to reflect the music's profound sense of timelessness. Like the large canvasses of Mark Rothko, these later works evoke great depth with a minimum of material; they become an environment that envelops the listener in rich hues. Pärt's method and muse allow infinite variety as he searches for "a universal music in which many dialects are blended together."

Pärt's cult status has not changed, but his audience has: it grows steadily because his work, like that of M. C. Escher, provokes a kind of human wonder that transcends simple artistic or musical taste. Pärt composes music that reflects the simple and direct truths of his religious faith, and such directness holds something for everyone who hears it, regardless of their own beliefs. Pärt has captured something fundamentally human about tolling bells and made from it a unique music that is greater than simple representation—it is a resonance of being. ■



On Isms and Ists

A Letter to an Unknown Recipient on Dostoyevsky and Sartre

Louis Paul Boon

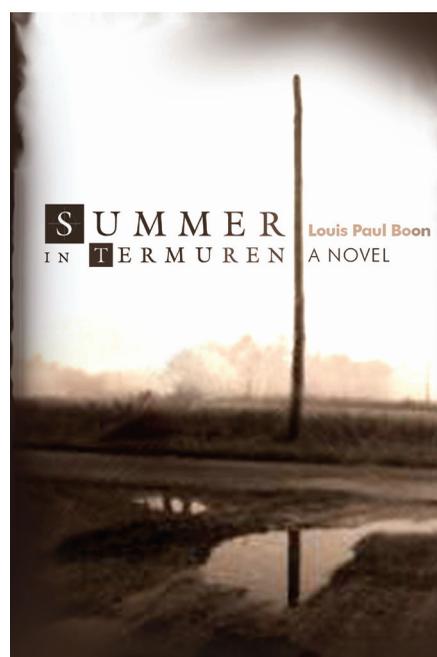
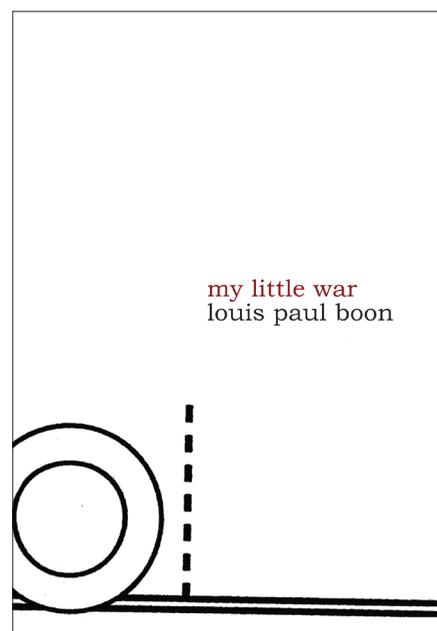
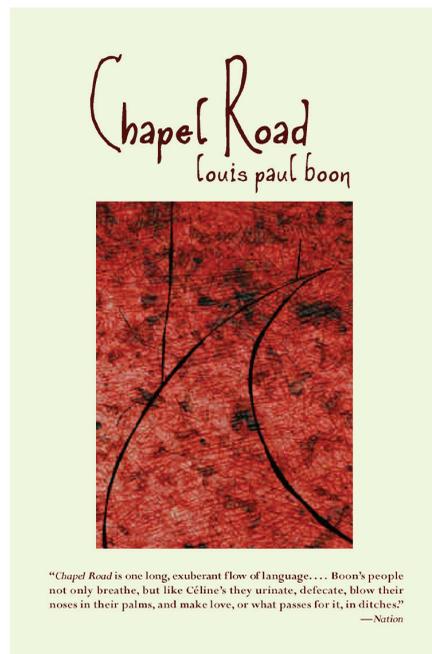
Use of “we”
Tautologies
Whores and scumbags
And . . . and . . . and . . .
Punctuation with “ . . . ”s

So long as
As long as

I have previously said that books need to be written out of passion or boredom, out of anger or *just because*, but never to prove a point. It’s the writer that matters, not the underlying theory. Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* is a ridiculous book, while *The Imitation of Christ*, by Thomas à Kempis, is a miniature masterpiece. I also stated that the primary task of a book is to seize the heart and soul, rather than to function as a technically flawless piece of furniture. And when substance and style—be it classical, experimental, or dada—work together in near-perfect harmony, then that’s even better.

But there is another thing. I would never ban a work, for example, because it clashes with my personal views; ideally I would omit such self-evident statements, but my correspondent forces me to spell it out. I applaud him for telling me that he only wants to write books that aim to bring joy, and financial and social security to his fellow man. I also prefer such books, but only *as long as they are written by a master*. However, I completely disagree when he refers to other authors, such as Dostoyevsky and Sartre, as degenerates and scumbags: “Are Dostoyevsky’s and Sartre’s so-called heroes really anything but disreputable and depraved characters? –The worst sort of villains, poisoning humanity’s simplest and most natural sentiments with their wicked ways. Why the need to understand and empathize with murderers, whores, and drunks? Why all the interest in these beasts and their filth?”

I have said before that real writers and poets are a bit like seers or prophets, that they function like signposts or seismographs. It’s true; they can sense what’s going on in this world as if they were delicate instruments or creatures with antennae. No matter how foolish this may sound, and no matter how much I may be ridiculed, what I say is true. There are those who stumble through life and cannot be bothered, and there are those who seem to be able to sniff out what lies ahead. It comes as no surprise that writers and poets (as well as the prophets of old, who were nothing more than



poets) primarily belong to the second group. The recipient of this letter may be a little behind the times if he really wants contemporary authors to write in the way Gorky and Zola once did. These two heavyweights wrote books that were indispensable fifty-odd years ago—only if you are not really up to speed, can you still revel in their works.

Dostoyevsky, on the other hand, was a step closer to modern man, who has become cunning, secretive, and perhaps slightly more debased. His preface to *Notes from Underground* may say that his protagonist is purely a product of the imagination, but the writer also claims that these types of people *have to exist* somewhere in our metropolises. Reading this in our day and age may make us smile: we now know that the author himself was one of these types and, more importantly, that big cities are now teeming with such characters.

“and there are those who seem to be able to sniff out what lies ahead.”

And what about Sartre? Open any newspaper, and the front page, as well as the second and third, give accurate descriptions of the type of thing Sartre’s characters are up to all day. I know that some prefer to turn a blind eye to these people, thinking they are the exception and that the rest of the population still consists of law-abiding, honest and upstanding citizens. Theoretically, it is possible to build a model society from only the honest and upstanding—but such a society would collapse like a house of cards once it turned out that one of the creatures of Sartre’s “twisted imagination” (who are all too prevalent nowadays) had been hiding among its well-

SELECTED WORKS BY LOUIS PAUL BOON

Chapel Road. Dalkey Archive Press, 2003.

Summer in Termuren. Dalkey Archive Press, 2006.

My Little War. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

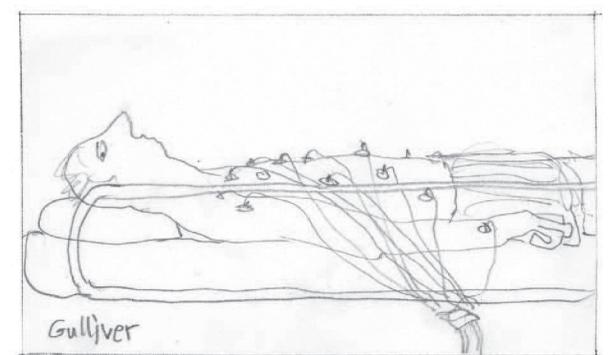
meaning masses. And right away this society would have to face the fact that it has created concentration camps, that it has built ovens, that mass graves have been dug, and that children are being burned alive while an orchestra is playing louder and louder to smother their cries.

Regardless of this, it is perfectly feasible to continue writing books about the virtues of men or compose poems on the beauty of autumn (even Ilse Koch wrote some, while she was working as a guard for one of the most infamous concentration camps, where she fashioned lampshades out of human skin). But literature produced in this manner has no connection whatsoever to real life.

In reality, Ilse Koch was a monster who could, nevertheless, write poetic crap about autumn. Whereas Sartre is a virtuous man and a brilliant writer who sensed that certain aspects of our society were about to go South. And even if Sartre had only written odes to autumn, he might still have been one of the greats—because there would still be the possibility that these poems would have somehow conveyed a fragment of our zeitgeist. Even Kafka with his apparent escapism draws a painfully accurate portrait of this world.

That is the essence of what I said at the beginning of this article: you are allowed to write novels and poems on any subject, as long as you really are a writer or a poet. And isms or ists don’t even come into it. ■

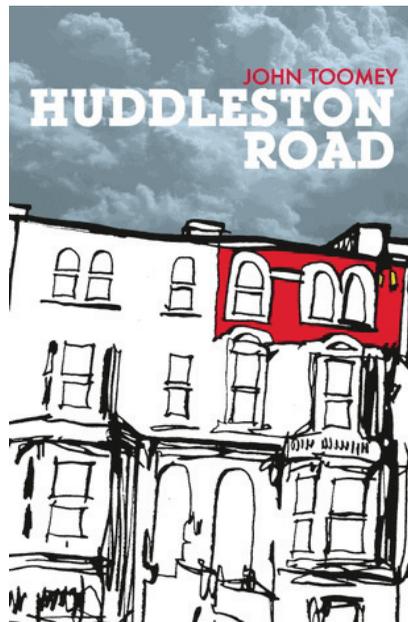
The original version of this article appeared in Vooruit, 21 August, 1954. Translated by Wouter Mathijs Mulders



Part of Nothing: An Interview with John Toomey

Niall Keegan

John Toomey is the author of two novels, *Huddleston Road* and *Sleepwalker*, both published by Dalkey Archive. He is currently working on a new novel with the working title *Slipping*.



Q: Your first two novels are both anchored by a sense of disillusionment and confusion; these states are familiar to us all in our formative years. To what extent have personal experiences influenced your writing?

JT: If you mean have I, myself, any experience of chronic depression, then no. I've been down, sure, and I've experienced bouts of disillusion, but I've found that those have lessened in both frequency and intensity as I've grown older. I'm no more optimistic about society in general, or about us as a species, but I'm as happy as I've ever been. I've found a way, made my peace with the world. I'm content to persevere irrespective of how the world at large behaves. As a younger man, I had expectations of the world, I think. But now I have none. I live my own life, and I'm happy with that paltry excuse for self-determinism. So, any disillusion in the work may derive from my attempt to come to terms with the human condition, but it's not personal experience, as such. The story, the narrative structure, the characters are all fictional. But the driving sentiment and tonal undercurrent has, at least to a degree, to be autobiographical. How else do we understand anything other than through our own experience?

Q: How conscious was your decision to move the action in *Huddleston Road* away from Dublin to London. Did you want to get away from the specific aspects of Celtic Tiger Ireland dealt with in *Sleepwalker*?

JT: It was one hundred percent a conscious decision. I simply wanted to move away from what I knew. Or I had written all I knew about Dublin already, perhaps. The next chapter of *Sleepwalker* is something I haven't worked out yet. I tried, initially, to do a post-boom novel and had about 30,000 words done but it

SELECTED WORKS BY JOHN TOOMEY

Sleepwalker. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

Huddleston Road. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

just wasn't working for me. The initial impulse of the novel is still present but the panorama hasn't yet revealed itself. So it must wait. I needed to do something completely different and as blunt a strategy as it seems, I began by simply relocating my story to a place that wasn't home. I don't think it's that significant a factor, in that I don't think the location of this book is relevant to the narrative. With *Sleepwalker*, Dublin—the city itself and the zeitgeist of those years—were active players in the narrative, whereas this book is a story of two people. And while I felt that Vic's displacement from his home was important, it could have been to anywhere. It needn't have been London. I wanted to write a different kind of book, and tried too hard to do that at times, but after much cutting and soul-searching I got there.

Q: To what extent did your time spent in London influence the novel?

JT: My experience living in London was moderately significant. It was a mixed time for me, something that, even with the benefit of over a decade's worth of hindsight, I have conflicting feelings about. That conflict, perhaps, is something I was trying to resolve in the book. But it is not autobiographical in any factual way. I experienced the freedom and the excitement of being a young man from Dublin arriving in London with nothing yet decided, and all dreams still possible. But, as Vic does, I also felt very alone at times, particularly in my post-graduate and first working years of my life there. Vic has no real family, other than his cousin, Orla. And his isolation is part of why he is dragged into Lali's mess. Sometimes it can be hard to see how instrumental to your well-being all those family and friends support structures are until you have left them and returned to them again. I dragged some of that experience into Vic's character. I felt the eyes through which the story was revealed needed to be an outsider's,

that the man at the heart of it needed to be displaced, vulnerable to seduction, and desperately in search of a home in a place that wasn't his home. I wanted to explore how a place can slowly envelop you, so that, before you realize it, it has become your home and yet you're not really happy.

Q: How much of the story of *Huddleston Road* did you map out before you began writing and how much did you have to adjust once the characters developed during the writing process?

JT: I always think I have the story, the trajectory of it, when I begin. And in the sense that I know where it starts and where it will end, I do. But what happens in the middle tends to shift; you see opportunities to develop characters, or

“The two books I have written are nothing like the kind of books I enjoy reading.”

kill them off, and halfway through a sentence you can type something that you hadn't intended at the beginning of that sentence. This happens quite frequently, but most of these diversions are dead-ends. Having a good instinct for which ones to pursue can save you a whole lot of heartache. Unfortunately, with *Huddleston Road*, I followed too many of those turns and hit too many dead-ends. That's why such a short book took such a long time to write—nearly five years. I had three or four novels in one and it required radical surgery and an objective eye to redirect me. It's more concise as a result and closer to what I'd intended at the outset.

Q: There is a far more philosophical and theological bent to *Huddleston Road* than *Sleepwalker*; are these subjects that have touched you in your own life?

JT: I delved into some Durkheim and read a little around the area of suicide

in advance of writing Lali. A lot of that thought and reading was philosophical or sociological. In the original manuscript there were also long tracts that dealt with the philosophy of suicide that were ultimately cut, for the coherence of the narrative they had to be . . .

There was also, in terms of theology—and in relation to myself I use that term with great caution—a dream where Vic conversed with God. Within it there was a discussion of what God is and how his personified existence could be justified and reasoned. But that was a little self-indulgent really. If Vic had been religiously devout and the events had challenged his beliefs, I might have got away with it. But as the novel stands, Vic shows no interest in religion or spirituality, so there was no justifiable reason for this dream and this discussion. I liked the piece, mind you. But it didn't help the story. In the wake of Lali's death he shows a passing interest in the question of what becomes of us after life, but it's not an ongoing question in the novel. That wasn't the point of the book. It was to explore a troubled relationship, how people end up in them, why they stay, and how they might survive them.

Q: In terms of influences, who have been the most important writers for you?

JT: I don't know. If I get past page thirty of any book, I tend to enjoy it. But for argument's sake, let's say Dickens. Then in order of preference, but I retain the right to change this at any moment: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, Scott-Fitzgerald, DeLillo, Doctorow, Zadie Smith, Kureishi, and there's something I cannot explain that I love in Beckett. And Shakespeare, obviously, and Bill Bryson. A.A. Gill's journalism. And Tom Humphries—the best sports journalist I've ever read.

Q: Do you feel part of any new school of contemporary Irish writing, if one exists at all?

JT: The two books I have written are nothing like the kind of books I enjoy reading. I write in the only way I can and when the work is finished it's almost unrecognizable to me. It's minced experience, fragments of everything that's ever happened me or that I've read or listened to or watched, that's congealed so that it looks like something else. It's all me and yet none of it is. If there's a new school of contemporary Irish writing, I'm unaware of it. I loved Colum McCann's *Dancer*, it was something utterly different and I was intrigued that it could come out of an Irish man, a man who had attended the same school as I had, though we don't know each other, and the same school where I now teach. I like Kevin Barry too. I like the way he writes. But that's as far as I could go regarding contemporary Irish writing. Fundamentally, I feel a part of nothing. ■

Notes on the Dissolution of Literature

Jorge Etcheverry

As the borders that separate literature from testimony or document become increasingly nebulous, literature as a singular entity becomes no more than a memory anchored by the convention of a name. But what of literature's singularity in relation to a country—Chilean or Canadian literature, for instance?

Cultural change occurs slowly, and largely underground, and for a time the old labels remain stuck on new jars. Although doing so is now regarded almost as a cliché, it is still necessary to talk about multiple literatures. The notion of a universal and unique literary canon has been widely dismissed, recognized as Western, patriarchal, and dominant. In its place, a range of literatures and critiques have emerged, or come out from hiding, variously linked to age and gender, and to social, regional, cultural, religious, ethnic, special interest, or other groups.

It seems, then that status has been granted to the genres of gay and lesbian, women's, feminist, indigenous, regional, sectorial, and social class literatures, even if they are germinal or preexistent. In Chile, literature "of the people" has the historical and political backing of a canonic form of socially committed literature. Now, for the first time, another literature is emerging, one that openly displays and recognizes the lifestyles and discourses of urban middle-class youth (or former youth).

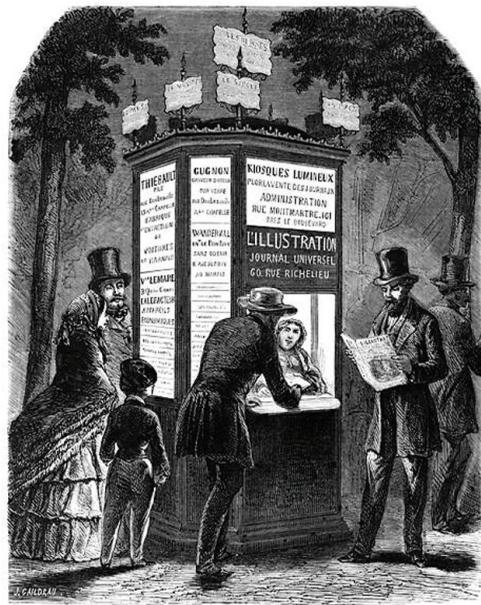
Correspondingly, critics are now grouping authors by region and province, not by generation only, nor solely as authors from the south (as was done with poetry in the 1960s and 1970s); nor as exiled writers who emerged from the 1973 coup and whose existence could no longer be ignored. Such literature is no longer exiled, but instead is now "from abroad," "from Region XIV" of Chile's thirteen, or "diasporic," and thus situated within the context of other, non-Chilean, literatures of exile and immigration.

Chile currently lacks a concept of transplanted literatures, although this may emerge. Such literatures exist in developed Anglo-Saxon countries as so-called "ethnic" literatures, or in Canada, at least in certain circles, as "literatures

of lesser diffusion."

Chile, as a relatively successful enclave, if not in terms of equality then in terms of globalization and as a bridgehead of neoliberal economics, has become a magnet for Asian populations, and for migrant populations from poorer neighboring countries. Given this character, it is only a matter of time before these immigrant communities develop their own cultural enclaves and literatures.

One example of which I am aware is the Palestinian Democratic Committee of Chile's virtual anthology of Arab Chilean writers—authors who are part of the Palestinian migration or descendants of the "ancient land." As another example, if you will excuse the self-reference, I once returned to Canada after a conference of Region XIV poets, organized by Chilepoesía, to find an email in which a Basque television program asked to interview me as a Basque writer.



Individual literatures have found or are finding a place in Chile in the context of institutional literature. There are already hints of a parallel institutionality and market in the case of women's literature, the most solid and well developed sector, which comprises incipient feminist critics, publishers, and websites. And in some regions there has also been editorial activity, criticism, and a growing awareness of literature written by Chileans abroad.

But this Marxist shift toward the populace, from literature to literatures, is of course a social phenomenon. In some way, the writer as individual—with all of the romanticism, eccentricity, and impatience that this entails—is being replaced by, or finds herself obliged to coexist with, the representative author, who stands out because she can be perceived as a "voice," as the "expression" of the collective she represents, and who, in the best case, embodies the collective.

The author is now a spokesperson, and her duty as writer is inseparable from her public negotiations as promoter of the advancement of her group within wider society, advancement that could guarantee equality in terms of civic conditions or freedom of expression. At least in the Global North—as developed countries in the Old and New Worlds are euphemistically called—if an outsider to a group speaks or writes on its behalf or from its members' point of view, they are looked upon with some suspicion and moral reproach, as if having committed a cultural appropriation.

It need not be said that in these new literatures, what can be roughly termed "content" predominates over "form." Distancing is sacrificed for, or subordinates itself to, the message. The point is to depict both a state of things and the situation of the literary emissary in light of, and above all within, this state.

Furthermore, discourses in the social sciences, and particularly within development and aid organizations of the so-called "Global North", tend to affirm the singularities at stake in the process of globalization, with its imposition of homogeneity. So-called localization thus becomes a kind of dialectical positive pole in the movement for the safeguarding or institutional inclusion of those groups, cultures, ways of life, and even languages, whose particular characteristics are threatened by the simplification of the economic trade system. Along with this, human relations, patterns of production and consumption, and lifestyles are forced to become more and more rapid, or else die out or succumb to vestigial isolation.

Many of these differential bodies of writing were established through intense sectorial struggles for rights in the "Global North." Despite such aggressive beginnings, the most influential of these literatures have attained an appreciable portion of the literary market and with that a comfortable place in the literary institution.

This occurred with the literature and culture of alternative sexual preferences, Black culture, and to a certain extent Native American culture, all of which acquired distinctive profiles at particular historical moments. In differing ways and to varying degrees, all of these movements proposed that, in order to obtain rights and opportunities for minori-

ties and subordinated groups, the system in force at the time had to be replaced.

An example can be found in comparing Marxist, feminist, and African-American movements for civil rights and political affirmation. At the same time and in the same climate, literatures of exile with precedents in the socially committed and militant literature of Latin America emerged.

In this way, what just a few decades ago was considered the writing of Latin American (mostly Chilean) exiles in Canada began to constitute the nucleus of a Canadian Latin American literature. However, in a democratic regime, it was impossible to affirm the legitimacy of the cultural manifestations of some subordinated or minority sectors without extending such affirmation universally. Thus, in the most institutionally advanced countries of the first world, political interest in multiculturalism grew, running parallel to the demographic increase in exiled or immigrant populations.

"the writer as individual is being replaced by, or finds herself obliged to coexist with, the representative author"

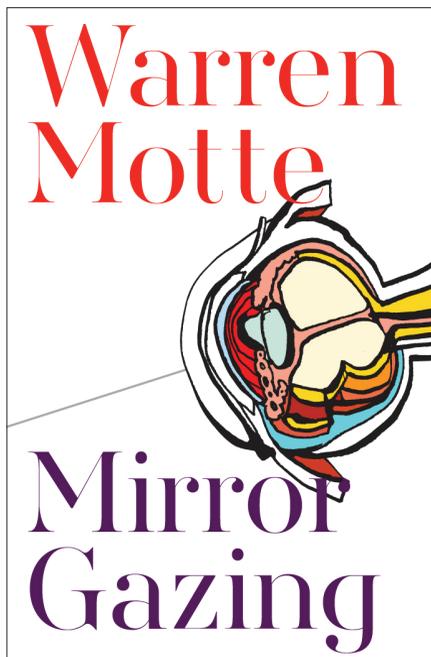
This tendency, however, cannot extend beyond the moment being lived within a system. The principal actors and their institutions are functioning within the system, which provides the only significant vehicles of institutional diffusion. In general, the various marginal, minority, or subordinated sectors do not secrete a literary institutionality that would need a parallel market, a niche market, or a micro market.

In Chile, then, the current literary institution in force encompasses to a greater or lesser extent authors who are "representative" of minority or subordinated groups, and whose representatives and activists do not propose a parallel cultural institution with its own editorial apparatus, criticism, and distribution. Rather, the Chilean literary institution encompasses authors who aspire to "mainstream recognition." Their editorial instantiations and critics nervously scrutinize every corner of the country to see if a new regional, cultural, generational, gender, or idiomatic shoot will spring up. They then bring it to "public light" and integrate it into the mainstream through consecration and publication in critical and academic venues. ■

Translated by Kate Grim-Feinberg

RECENT & FORTHCOMING TITLES, 2014

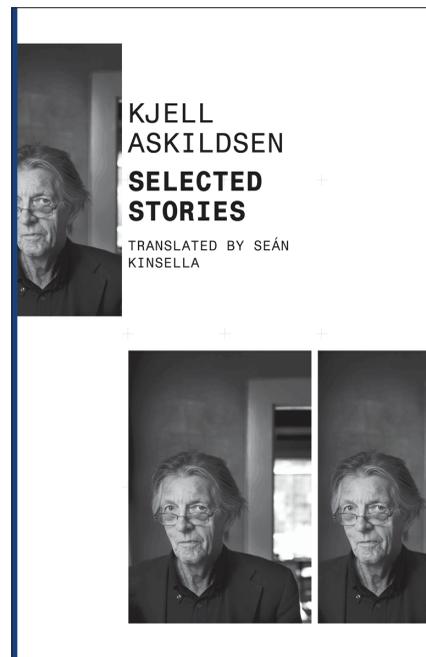
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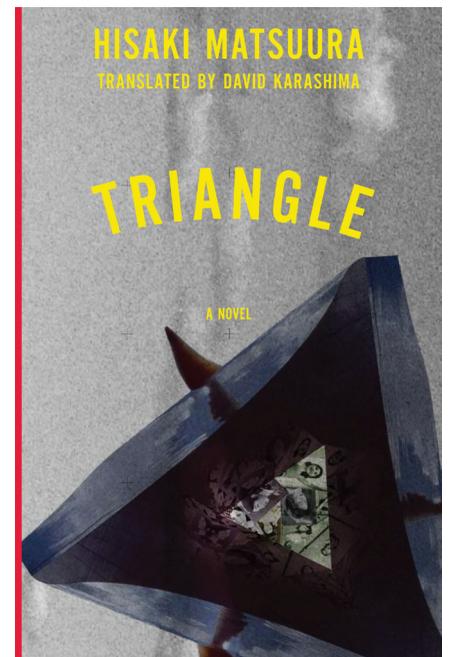
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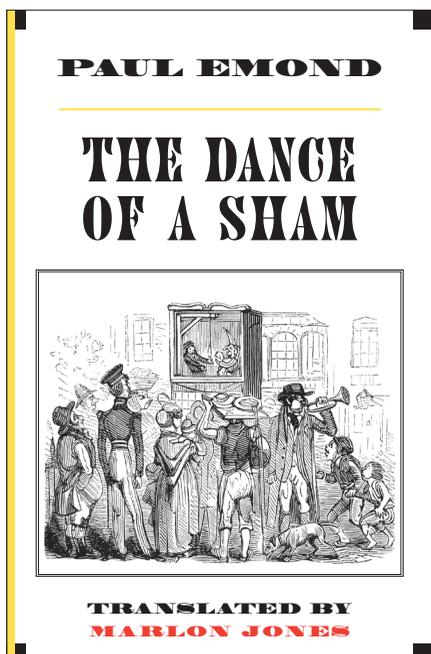
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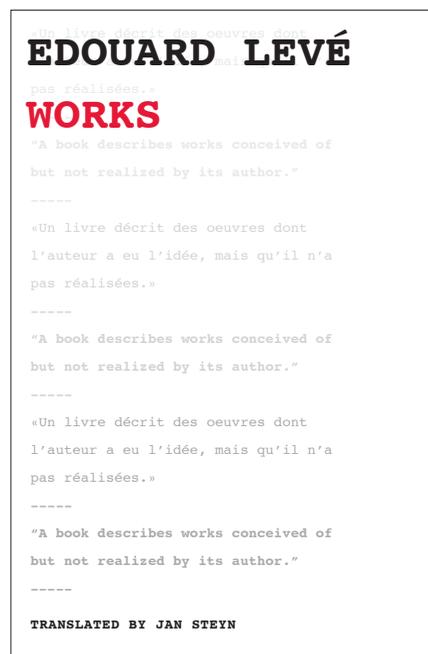
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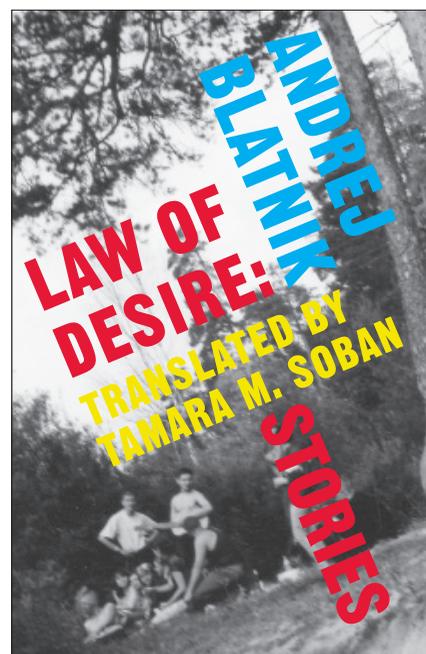
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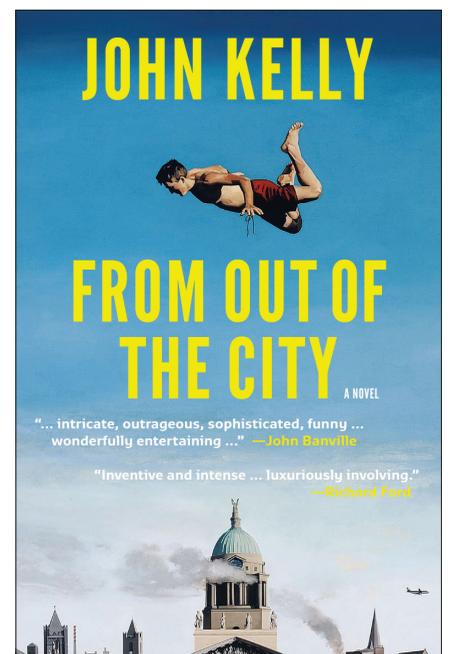
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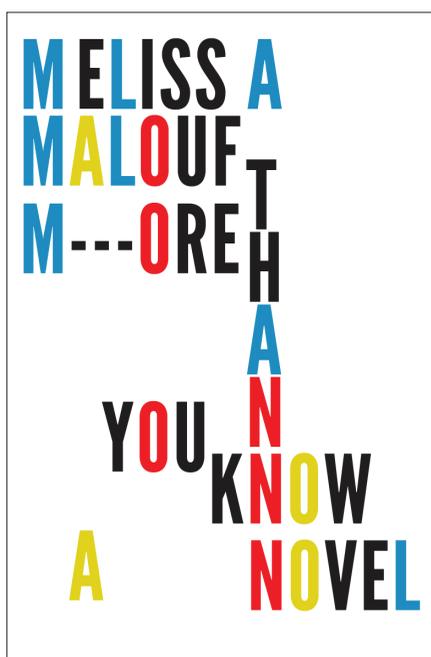
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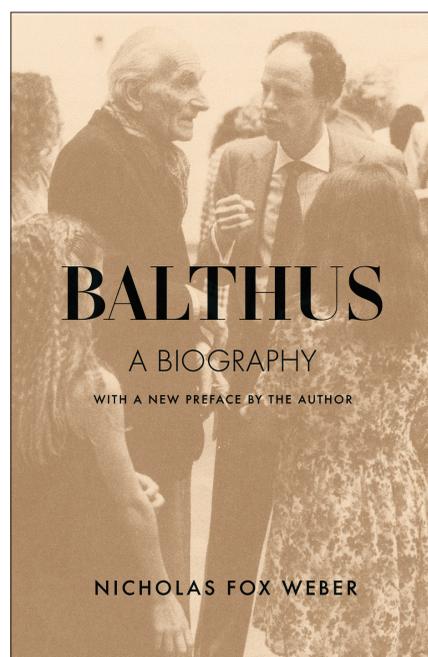
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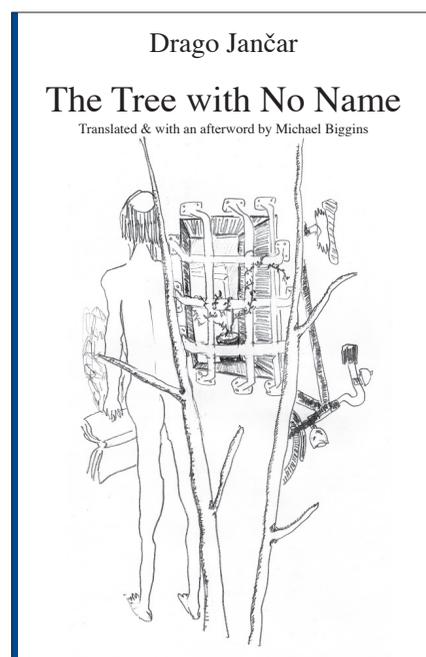
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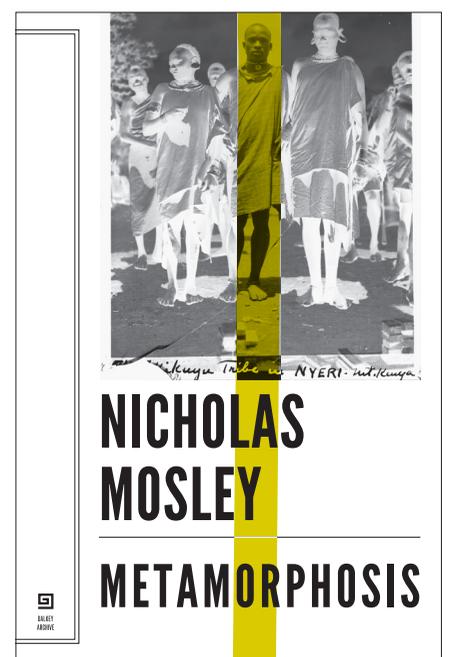
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Translocal Writing from the City of Kafka

David Vichnar

I am a Czech publisher/translator/Joyce scholar, and also the current editor of the English version of Czech Literature Portal, which is the chief reason why I met John O'Brien of the Dalkey Archive Press at the Slavia Café in Prague in September this year. He'd come to Prague in search of interesting contemporary Czech authors deserving of English translation and it was as a Czech-into-English-into-Czech interpreter that I was to take part in his conversations with the writers. Before the authors themselves arrived on the scene, O'Brien spoke with several Czech critics and literary scholars who were to provide him with their best author recommendations. It was as part of this talk that I ventured to deflect the discussion so as to focus on writers active in Prague yet already writing in English.

What is popularly known as "expat literature" or, in more highbrow terms, "translocal" writing, takes place outside its author's native language. Its chief difference from exile writing, as practiced by e.g. Joyce—who, although a nomad, always and only wrote of his native Dublin—is that its narrative emplacement and frame of reference are those of the foreign reality in which it comes into existence.

“does the translocal writer address the locals—who don't share his language; or his home community—who don't share his lived experiences?”

Translocal writing merits its special category chiefly for two sets of reasons: one external—to do with the literary industry; and the other internal—the “poetics” and “pragmatics” of its creation. For various reasons—linguistic, financial and because of literature's institutional, pedagogical underpinnings—and despite a globalized economy, literature

is still bound by national concerns and interests. Translocal writing undermines these by refusing to fit into national pigeonholes, or at least by attempting to merge two or more into a supranational one. In terms of the poetics, the basic, but interesting, question is that of all literary communication: “Who am I writing for? What kind of reader can I expect to read this and what will their cultural background be? How much of their pre-understanding and knowledge can be taken for granted?” In other words, does the translocal writer address the locals—who don't share his language; or his home community—who don't share his lived experiences?

The problems the literary and publishing industries see in translocal writing are legion, but, as the example of the post-1990 Prague Anglophone scene suggests, there are also ample benefits to be reaped: interesting work that experiments with crossovers between cultures and languages; unusual instances of influence across national traditions; accumulations of creative momentum and energy. Just how fertile the ground is in Prague is demonstrated by established writers like Tom McCarthy or Joshua Cohen, both of whom spent several formative years there in the mid-to-late-90's and both of whom, although later relocating back to the Anglo-American world, have drawn on their translocal experiences ever since.

It was to promote exactly this kind of writing, which is informed by the peculiar circumstances of its creation, that a small independent publishing house, Equus Press, was recently founded in Prague and over the last year has already published four titles. Yet Prague Anglophone authors remain—with only a handful of exceptions—unknown to the publishers in the Anglo-American world and the impact of publishers such as Equus or even the better-known Twisted Spoon Press and Mat'a Books, is limited. It is important that these names be introduced to the broader publishing industry.

I have selected ten of the most interesting, innovative and, to my mind, still largely underappreciated writers that have appeared and have actively participated in the Prague literary scene over the past two decades. Most of them are

primarily novelists, and two of them are chiefly poets. Most are still Prague-based, even though at least three have relocated, taking their translocal experience with them. Two of them are born-and-bred Czechs who, for various reasons (largely to do with the pre-1989 oppressive regime) found themselves writing in English. One of them has been dead for seventeen years.

It goes without saying that this is a hopelessly personal list, based on my own experience and aesthetic preferences. My only hope is that, despite its limitations, the list may be of service to those keen to navigate this still poorly charted territory.

★ ★ ★

Louis Armand is a writer and visual artist who has lived in Prague since 1994. He has worked as an editor and publisher, currently lectures in the Philosophy Faculty of Charles University, and is an editor of *VLAK* magazine. He has published seven collections of poetry and a number of volumes of criticism. He is the author, most recently, of *Clair Obscur* (2011) and *Breakfast at Midnight* (2012)—both published by Equus Press. He has worked tirelessly to spread awareness of the past and present riches of the Prague Anglophone scene (demonstrated by his monumental anthology from 2010, *The*

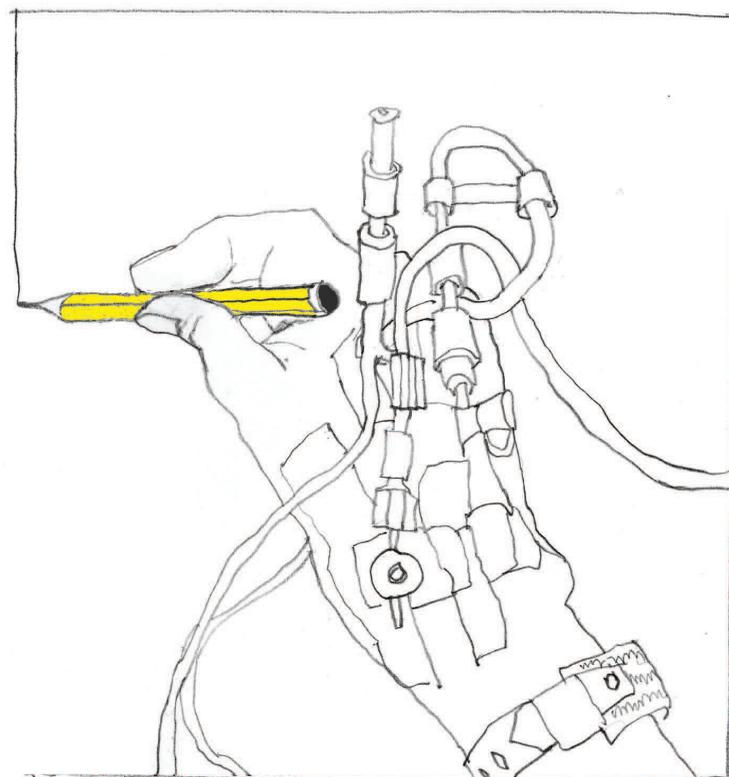
Return of Kral Majales, Litteraria Pragensia), with which he's been involved since 1994. His *Breakfast at Midnight* has been described as “Mickey Spillane meets Georges Bataille on speed.” He's currently at work on his largest and most ambitious project, a Prague novel with the working title *Combinations*.

★ ★ ★

Laura Conway is a writer, editor and publisher who has lived in Prague since 1994. Her collections of poetry include *To Knock Something Hard in the Dark* (Bench, 1981), *My Mama Pinned a Rose on Me* (Red Flower Ink, 1986), *The Cities of Madame Curie* (Zeitgeist, 1989), her serial opus magnum *The Ministry of Strange Obsessions* (2000), and *The Alphabet of Trees* (with Kateřina Piňosová; Concordia, 2001). She edited *Optimism Monthly* from 1999–2000 and was the founder of Prague's “Alchemy” reading series.

★ ★ ★

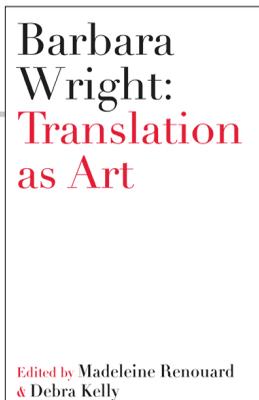
Vincent Farnsworth moved to the Czech Republic in 1994. With Gwendolyn Albert he founded the magazine *Jejune: amerika eats its young* in 1993. His poetry has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *RealPoetik*, *Prague Literary Review*, *Room Temperature*, and *Big Bridge*. His books include *Little Twirly*



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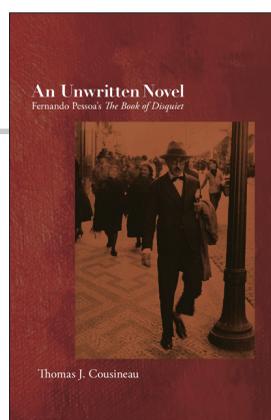
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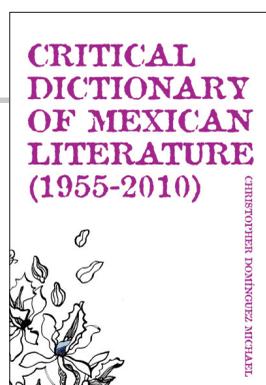
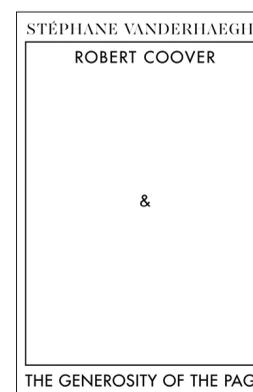
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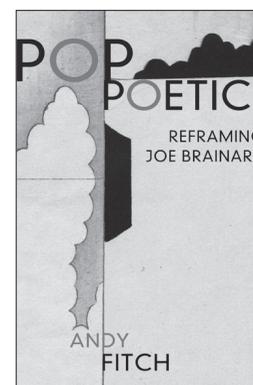
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Things (Norton Coker, 1992) and *Immortal Whistleblower* (Lavender Ink, 2001). His selected poems were published in 2011 by Litteraria Pragensia Books under the title *Theremin*.



Thor Garcia has been on the scene since 1992, working at Radio Free Europe. He is the author of several short-story collections and the monumental novel *The News Clown* (2012, Equus Press), which has been praised as a “tapestry of a post-apocalyptic society whose debt-bound, clueless denizens are so anaesthetized by noise, shopping and drugs, prescription or otherwise, they are unaware that the calamity they fear as bogeyman has already overtaken them” (Jim Chaffee, nthposition).



Holly Tavel moved to Prague in September 2009 as the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship. Her work has appeared in *Torpedo*, *Elimae*, *McSweeney’s*, and *Diagram*. She is formerly editor of *Neuroscape Journal*, and a co-curator of *Psy. Geo.CONFLUX*, an annual New York-based psycho-geographic project. Her visual and conceptual art has featured in group shows at the Participant Gallery in New York, and at Art Interactive in Cambridge, MA.



Travis Jeppesen lived in Prague between 2002 and 2006, where he co-edited *Prague Pill* (2002–2003), *Prague Literary Review* (2005), and *BLATT* (2006–2007). His first novel, *Victims*, was selected by Dennis Cooper as the first in his “Little House on the Bowery” series for Akashic Books in 2003. His second novel, *Wolf at the Door*, was published in 2007 by Twisted Spoon. A contributing editor to the online literary journal *3ammagazine.com*, Jeppesen currently lives and works in Berlin.



Ewald Murrer was born in 1964, the son of poet Ivan Wernisch and painter Helena Wernischová. He published his first works in the *samizdat* magazine *Garáž* in the early 80’s. His work has appeared in the anthologies *Child of Europe* (Penguin, 1991), *This Side of Reality* (Serpent’s Tail, 1996) and *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno* (Catbird, 1997). Since the Velvet Revolution he has been active in a number of literary journals, and was founding editor of *Iniciály*. His first book-length poetry collection appeared in 1992 as *Fog Behind the Wall* (Mlada Fronta). *The Diary of Mr Pinke* (1995) and *Dreams at the End of the Night* (1999) were both published in English by Twisted Spoon Press. *Nouzové zastavení času* (Emergency Halt of Time) was published in 2007 by Host.



Phil Shoenfelt is an English musician, poet and novelist who has lived in Prague since 1995. To date he has had a total of 15 CDs released on various independent record labels, and has also authored three books: *Junkie Love* (a fictionalised autobiography), *The Green Hotel* (poetry and song lyrics) and *Magdalena—Book One*, a collaboration with the Czech poet and visual artist Kateřina Piňosová. *Junkie Love* was first published in Czech translation in 1997 as “Fet’ácká Láska” by Mat’a Books, and has become something of a cult classic for young Czech readers. The book was published for the first time in English in 2001 by Twisted Spoon Press, and went on to win the Firecracker Alternative Book Award (2002) for best book in the Drugs Books section. Phil has a forthcoming novel, *Stripped (Part One)*, which will be published in Czech translation, again by Mat’a Books, later this year. *Stripped* is a trilogy about the downtown NYC music/drug scene in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.



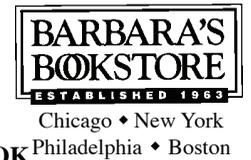
Ken Nash is a freelance illustrator, animator, cartoonist, graphic designer, musician and songwriter. He lived in Prague from 1992–94, and again since 2001. Since 2002 he has organized the Alchemy Reading & Performance Series. He is the author of *The Brain Harvest* (2012, Equus Press), which has been described by Clare Wigfall as “taut, intelligent, eccentric, and wholly engaging, a wonderful debut from a very talented new writer.” Local Prague media have praised it as “the crystallization of one of Prague’s most resourceful and imaginative English-language writers” (Prague Post). *Prague Art Review* has likened the functioning of his short story to that of the joke: a Ken Nash story “does things to you physically, pulls half-voiced inadvertent sounds from your body, little snorts. And when it ends, but refuses to close, it leaves you in a sort of breathless shock, waiting to see what will happen.”



Lukáš Tomin was born in Prague in 1963. Denied access to secondary education at age fifteen, his first works were published in *samizdat*. In 1980 his family emigrated to England. From 1985 to 1987 Tomin alternated between living in London, Montreal and Paris, where he wrote his first novel *The Doll* (Twisted Spoon, 1992). In 1991 he returned to Prague, where he resided until his death in 1995. His work appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The New Statesman*, *Literární Noviny*, *Iniciály*, and *Host*. Two further novels were published by Twisted Spoon: *Ashtrays* (1995) and *Kye* (1997). His work presents a unique blend of avant-garde technique and hardboiled anti-moralist allegory. ■

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Here There Be Monsters: Rediscovering Contemporary Catalan Literature

Helena Buffery

In the run-up to the 1992 Olympics, the somewhat incongruous question “Do you know where Catalonia is?” appeared on full-page spreads in UK broadsheets, as well as in *Time* and *Newsweek* in the US. The campaign formed part of a project to use media coverage of the Barcelona Olympics as a platform from which to achieve wider recognition for Catalan cultural tradition, marking it as different from that of the rest of Spain. And there can be no doubt that the cultural policies and programming negotiated around the celebration of the XXV Olympiad contributed to placing the Olympic city, if not Catalonia itself, firmly on the international map. 1992, of course, was a year given over to other “discoveries”: the Spanish capital Madrid enjoyed the accolade of European City of Culture, and Seville hosted the International Expo, events that encouraged new audiences to uncover the cultural wares of a formerly fledgling democracy now arguably in full flight. But it was also a year marked by the commemoration of a more controversial encounter, the quincentenary of Columbus’s “discovery” of the Americas in 1492. The map of discovery in 1992 was thus both heterogeneous and somewhat treacherous, a palimpsest that changed in aspect according to socio-economic, cultural and geopolitical location.

Twenty years later we might, of course, reflect further on the landscape revealed by that year of “discovery,” above all on the way in which it served to legitimize a view of the Spanish-speaking world as a shared cultural space unified by a common language, thus down-playing its multilingual and multicultural character. As far as Catalan culture was concerned, such a vision had in previous decades served as justification for the repression of a language perceived as a threat to the unity of the Spanish nation. The outcome of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) led to an intense period of cultural and political “purification” in Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands, with books burned, strict circumscription of cultural production in the local language, and the repression or forced reassignment of educators and public servants to

SELECTED WORKS FROM DALKEY ARCHIVE'S CATALAN LITERATURE SERIES

The Dolls' Room. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

The Siege in the Room: Three Novellas. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

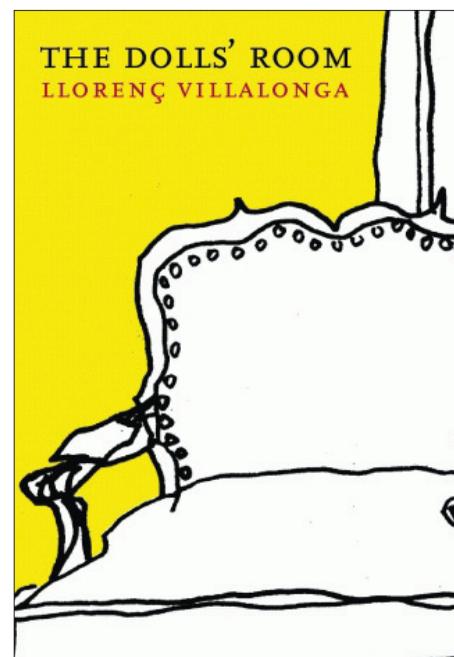
Ariadne in the Grotesque Labyrinth. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

other parts of Spain. The language and culture survived largely as a result of the resistance of writers, educators and citizens, who continued to use Catalan in so far as they were able, whether in clandestine journals, civic educational projects or, later, in the many publishing ventures that began to appear at the late 1950's and early 1960's, as Francisco Franco's dictatorship began to show a more liberal face in tune with the opening of the Spanish economy to international markets and tourism.

“The landscape is quite a varied one, including works from different geographical locations, periods and genres, as well as more hybrid, experimental writing.”

What is surprising is the quality of many of the works published during the period of cultural repression, from the poetry of Salvador Espriu, who by the 1960's had been transformed into a mythical figure for his role in “saving the language,” to the soon to be canonical and internationally recognized classics *Bearn o la sala de les nines*, by the Mallorcan writer, Llorenç Villalonga, and *La plaça del diamant*, by Barcelona-born novelist Mercè Rodoreda, then living in exile in Geneva.

Less surprising is the emphasis placed on recovering, restoring and promoting this battered and fragile literary tradition in the years after Catalonia was granted the limited home rule negotiated during Spain's transition to democracy. Aware that cultural legitimacy and prestige required external recognition, there was a focus on translation and internationalization, but this often centered on a limited number of works, and names perceived to be “Universal Catalans,” and any shifts from this vision were generally owing to the personal interests of particular translators or academics. In



English, especially, this meant that at first the most translated genre was poetry, with versions of classic texts by the fifteenth-century Valencian poet Ausiàs March, by the post-war civic poetry of Salvador Espriu, as well as by J. V. Foix, Carles Riba, Josep Carner, Joan Salvat-Papasseit, Jacint Verdaguer, Miquel Martí i Pol, and, more recently, Narcís Comadira and Joan Margarit.

As far as narrative is concerned, from the 1980's the prolific translator David Rosenthal introduced works by Rodoreda, including a new version of *La Plaça del Diamant*, rendered lyrically as “The Time of the Doves”; *Tirant lo Blanc*, an extraordinary fifteenth-century Valencian novel; and *Solitude* by

the pioneering woman writer Caterina Albert (Víctor Catala). Other narrative landscapes translated into English include the comically ambiguous and absurd worlds of Pere Calders and Quim Monzó; the intricate historical excavations of Jesús Moncada's lost Aragonese universe of Mequinensa in *The Towpath*; Carme Riera's heterodox depiction of an early-modern Mallorca irrevocably marked by the Spanish Inquisition (*In the Last Blue*); and the dark, all-pervasive ruins of the Spanish Civil War in Joan Sales, Jaume Cabré, Maria Barbal and Lluís-Anton Baulenas. Furthermore, the last few years have seen new vistas opened in the irreverent detective novels of Teresa Solana, in the monstrous anthropologies of Rodoreda's posthumous novel, *Death in Spring*, and of Albert Sanchez-Pinol, and in the multicultural contact zones plotted by Moroccan-Catalan writer Najat El Hachmi. Other texts by Catalans available in English include the experimental writings of Salvador Dalí and Joan Brossa, Joan Fuster's acerbic *Dictionary for the Idle*, as well as a wide range of plays by Sergi Belbel, Josep Benet i Jornet, and Lluïsa Cunillé, amongst others.

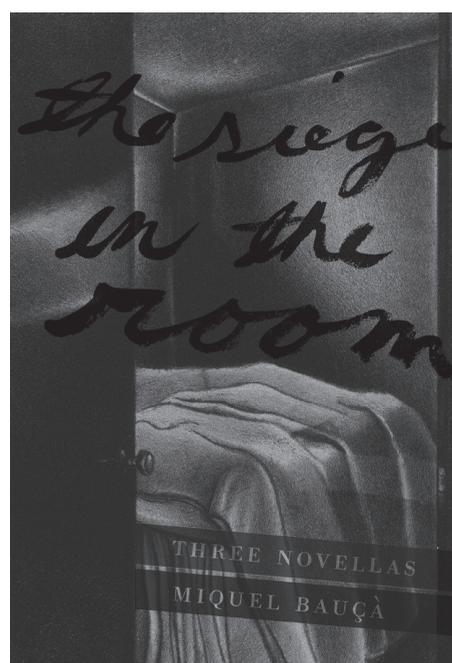
The landscape is quite a varied one, including works from different geographical locations, periods and genres, as well as more hybrid, experimental writing. Yet it continues to lack visibility, with relatively few reviews in English language media. In general the most conspicuous elements continue to be versions of a handful of late medieval and modern classics, alongside the burgeoning number of pseudo-historical mystery and crime novels set in Barcelona, many of them published originally in Spanish. The translations published by Dalkey Archive as part of its new Catalan Literature Series set out to explore new geographies, uncovering voices from parts of the Catalan-speaking territories outside Barcelona, and introducing more experimental texts, such as Espriu's *Ariadne in the Grotesque Labyrinth* and Miquel Bauçà's *The Siege in the Room*.

In the first book in the series, Llorenç Villalonga's *The Doll's Room* (a reissue of Deborah Bonner's excellent 1988

translation of *Bearn o la Sala de les nines*), the reader is taken on a voyage to nineteenth-century Mallorca, whose elite was still made up of ancient noble families with names harking back to the early thirteenth-century conquest of the island. The largely monolingual Catalan-speaking population, represented by its nostalgic, orthodox Catholic narrator, Joan Mayol, is undergoing an inexorable decline, which, in his rewriting of history, Mayol attributes to the influx of foreign ideas of progress and modernity. However, his inescapable attraction to the more subversive behavior and ideas of his enlightened, rationalist patron means that we are also able to glimpse a more ironic sub-text, that of Don Toni Bearn's Faustian memoirs, which hint at dark family secrets of incest, cross-dressing, homosexuality, promiscuity and Freemasonry. Taking us through the changing spaces of a century seen through the life of a dying aristocracy, the novel pushes its readers to move beyond prevalent domesticating or exoticizing cartographies and capture the cultural specificity of everyday existence in a different space. Completed in the late 1950s, on the very threshold of mass tourism to the Balearic Islands, the novel tends to satirize the tourist's worldview, whether through reference to Georges Sands' mistaken belittling of Mallorcan peasants for believing that tuberculosis might be a contagious disease, or through the grotesque exoticism

Ariadne in the Grotesque Labyrinth, rendered perhaps too poetically by Rowan Ricardo Phillips, is the first of Salvador Espriu's narrative works to have been translated into English, and is made up of 34 stories, written and rewritten over a period of 40 years. First published in 1935, it was a text intended to break with the normalizing tendencies put in motion by contemporary standardization of the Catalan language. Set in a superficially abstract space—Lavinia, which masks the real identity of Barcelona—its stories range across the different spaces of early twentieth-century Catalonia, capturing a diversity of voices, distinguished by gender, geography, education, politics and social status, voices and dialogues which are themselves the subject of commentary and debate amongst the collective of actor-readers who populate Espriu's narrative universe. The prevailing satirical tone would indicate that, on first publication, *Ariadne* was partly intended to be read as a *roman à clef*, reflecting the intergenerational hypocrisy and often grotesque social mores of its time. However, in later rewritings the immense socio-cultural gulf between Republican and post-war Catalonia is bridged by Espriu's insertion of more nostalgic and mythical poetic landscapes, written in the 1940s and 1950s, incorporating the endeavor to create a space in which the Catalan language might survive. Thus, the obsession with death, deformity, carnivalesque ritual and social deviancy comes to symbolize a more general struggle for survival, whilst Espriu's concern with communicating a range of registers to a rapidly changing Catalan readership, which lacks access to a variety of contemporary texts in its own language, suggests that style and message cannot be so easily divorced.

The texts published in *The Siege in the Room*, ranging from the prize-winning *Carrer Marsala* (1985) to the 1992 novellas *El Vellard* and *L'escarcellerà*, at first sight offer a range of sterile non-sequiturs, which Martha Tennent has cleverly sought to place in dialogue with the work of Samuel Beckett and Thomas Bernhard, pointing to the underlying flight from the "literary" at the heart of Bauçà's project. Fleeing from dialogue (the gregariousness of the socialization process so deplored by his invariably misanthropic narrative voices), here literature is not about representation or communication, but about its negative. Similarly, texts like *Carrer Marsala* present a photographic negative of Barcelona, of Catalonia and of the Catalan-speaking territories, traceable only in scant references to real places, as well as the often repugnant social practices associated with them. This is less the abstract space described by Tennent in her preface to the translation than a temporarily squatted non-space, a negation



of what is understood through everyday social transactions as lived space. In later works, Bauçà's anthropology of this curiously compelling kind of negative, non-lived space is linked explicitly to the particular cultural crisis experienced by the Catalan territories. Yet it is a space that can also be recognized as symptomatic of a more general late-modern malaise, where the signal to noise ratio becomes ever greater.

Bauçà's posthumously published work, *Rudiments de saviesa* (*Rudiments of Wisdom*, 2005) includes the following poem-aphorism: "True surrealism / is an anthropological fact: / having nothing to do with art. / It appears only in tribes / on the small side, conscious / of their weak consistency—both recourse and expression—/ like the Belgians or the Catalans." Considered in his lifetime as somewhat of an anomaly in Catalan literature, this maverick writer was himself described admiringly by Julià Guillamon as a tumor or excrescence on the face of contemporary Catalan culture. It remains to be seen whether such monsters have the potential to bring an elusive visibility to Catalan literary culture, shrouded as it is by the labyrinthine alleys, bars and bookshops of Barcelona that populate Spanish-language originals, such as Carlos Ruiz Zafón's *The Shadow of the Wind*. The three texts published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2010 present a diversity of Catalan landscapes that lie beyond the sparkling limits of the city of ivory, evoking Catalan-speaking chronotopes captured and mythologized at the moment of their dissolution and dispersal. They reveal a Catalan geography that historically, as is suggested elliptically in *The Doll's Room*, stretched to parts of Italy, and even the Vatican (the Borgias themselves were of Catalan-speaking Valencian origin), but that now finds itself threatened with a kind of terminal, suicidal decline, transmitted through the violence, monstrosity and sadomasochistic tendencies represented in some of its literary excrescences. ■

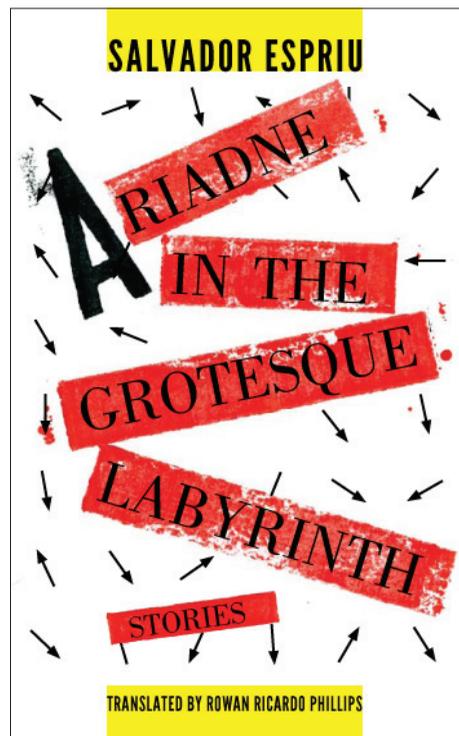
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Francesc Trabal
Waltz
Translated by Martha Tennent

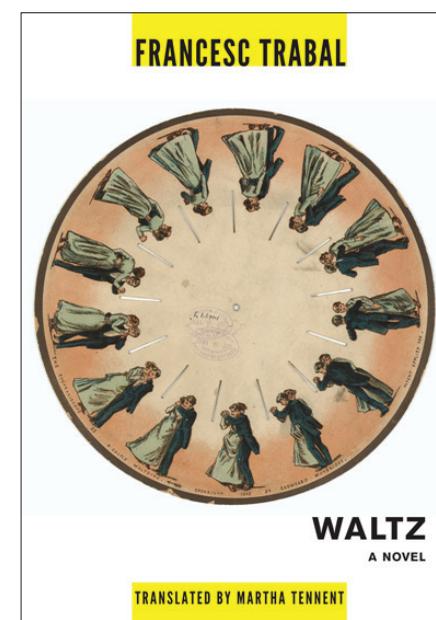
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Dalkey Archive Press, 2013

First published in 1936, and considered one of the most groundbreaking and significant novels written in Catalan, *Waltz* tells the tale of an idle, introspective, and somewhat oblivious young "man without qualities" as he stumbles through a milieu of civic upheaval and bourgeois tragedy, waltzing from one prospective bride to another, never willing to compromise his ideals, and so never quite becoming an adult. With one foot in the romanticism of Goethe or Kleist, and another in the wildly differing takes on the modern novel provided by Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust, respectively, *Waltz* is an occasionally absurd comedy of indecision and indolence structured in imitation of the dance from which it takes its title.

Francesc Trabal was born in Sabadell, Spain, in 1899. He contributed to numerous magazines from an early age, and was a centrally important author, editor, and journalist for the Catalan community before being forced into exile after the Spanish Civil War. He died in Santiago, Chile, in 1957.



of the English "painter" Miss Murray, who sees everything through the lens of her late discovery of the senses on a previous visit to Southern Europe. In contrast, the narrative privileges the virtue of close contemplation, whether of beauty or monstrosity, in order to gain an insight into a lost world, so often presented in other parts of Spain, as a way of excluding difference, as having been "invented."



Reading Jacques Roubaud

Jacques Jouet

Dear reader. In these few lines I shall attempt to convince you to join the growing number of Jacques Roubaud aficionados. That is, if you haven't already.

If you like books and you like them open, amusing, profound, poignant, playful, erudite, insightful, contemplative, and confident, then this author and these books are for you. You won't find many books like them and they exist under the name Jacques Roubaud.

I have never encountered such an intense knowledge and passion for the art of writing as those of Jacques Roubaud, a man I have been lucky enough to associate with at Oulipo for almost thirty years. The intensity of his oeuvre demands, my dear reader, a reading as attentive as it is active. I shall endeavor to be as direct as possible in my homage. I shall even unashamedly (though regret-

tion at least) above all others, London rather than Paris, Castellio the Tolerant rather than Calvin. The list goes on.

Roubaud the poet knows everything there is to know about his art, reciting works by heart, reading avidly, and composing copiously. He fears nothing, neither humor, nor the lyricism of loss and emptiness, nor formal logic, nor the city as subject (Paris, London, and others), nor nursery rhymes for children and early readers. Roubaud is the poet of presence in the world, "I am the finger that taps on the here and now," the poet of an extreme formalism that is at once an extreme substantialism, driven by the concept of "formal meaning." For him, poetry cannot be paraphrased, "It says what it says by saying it," and the practice of poetry comes with a theory that is in no way obscurantist, reflecting his embracing of poetry as a craft. Roubaud

penned two essays fundamental in this regard, relating to classic poetic works that definitively disprove the notion of any established dichotomy between content and form: one on Rimbaud's "What are the stains of blood to us, my heart . . ." (*The Old Age of Alexander*), and one on Jaufré Rudel's "The Song of Distant Love" (*The Inverted Flower*). The first poem signifies the political unsettling of the Paris Commune through the formal unsettling of the alexandrine; the second signifies the affirmation of love and its loss through the interplay of the relative placement of rhymes.

The poet who "belongs to something" travels on foot, through cities and along the length of the Mississippi, and is himself but a small step in the composition of poetry. But the real poet is he who travels the world to be embraced by it, to recite and to live poetry (*Churchill 40 and other Travel Sonnets*); he with the light touch and playful language of the Fumistes and the Hydropathes, whose humoristic provocations, linked to rhyme and growing out of Wittgenstein's ludic language, should not be forgotten.

Poetry for "the memory of language," the love of language, the love of love . . .

"There is nothing more disengaged than the work of Jacques Roubaud, nothing more separate from the concerns of civilization and enlightenment."

Also at the origin of Roubaud's work is mathematics (the theory of categories), derived from the Bourbaki masters and his career as a teacher. There are more than a few traces of this influence in Roubaud's grand poetic *Project* (a cornerstone of his oeuvre, closer to a scientific method than any form of self-expression) and the craft of the mathematician is always inflected in his writing. With his *Project* (see *Description of the Project*. Mezura n°9, 1979), Roubaud set out a framework for the future and put into motion years of work that could be understood from an existential perspective as an "alternative to voluntary disappearance," a quiet euphe-

SELECTED WORKS BY JACQUES ROUBAUD

The Great Fire of London: A Story With Interpolations and Bifurcations. Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.

The Loop. Dalkey Archive Press, 2009.

Mathematics. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

Some Thing Black. Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

The Form of a City Changes Faster, Alas, Than the Human Heart. Dalkey Archive Press, 2006.

mism for personal tragedy following the suicide of one of his brothers, a suicide which could have become an unfortunate model (Roubaud's work for a long time made allusions to the subject, and finally addressed it explicitly in *Categorical Imperative*). The *Project* set out poetry to write, theory to construct, readings to be made, and unlimited formal research to be completed. It was also the blueprint for a novel, *The Great Fire of London*, that runs parallel to the *Project* and which was to Roubaud what *The Man Without Qualities* was to Musil. Prose, therefore, with one eye on poetry, inspired by the Middle Ages and the time of the Grail, with *Lancelot* as its basis, just as the songs of the troubadours formed the basis of his poetry.

The scope of the *Project* was huge: knowledge, composition, life. And necessitated collective endeavor. Reviews (*Change, Action Poétique, Poésie*); groups (*Change* again, Oulipo, the Polivanov circle, the Centre for Comparative Poetics—who completed a massive amount of work on the alexandrine, the sonnet and its many incarnations in different languages, in all their frequency and formal variation); numerous collaborations (rhythm theory with Pierre Lusson, *Grail Theatre* with Florence Delay); innumerable poetry translations; and more recently the translation of the *Book of Ecclesiastes*.

Roubaud's vision of poetry has little to do with sunsets (though something to do with the sunrise) and even less to do with literature. For him—and in contrast with the conventional understanding of literature as encapsulating the poem, the novel, drama, and even the essay—poetry reaches far beyond the limits of this term.

Space is made for mistakes and for melancholy, for the death in life, "the words of poets are my life, the death of my forebears is my life . . ." culminating in his great book of loss, *Some Thing Black*, a book that even Roubaud's detractors

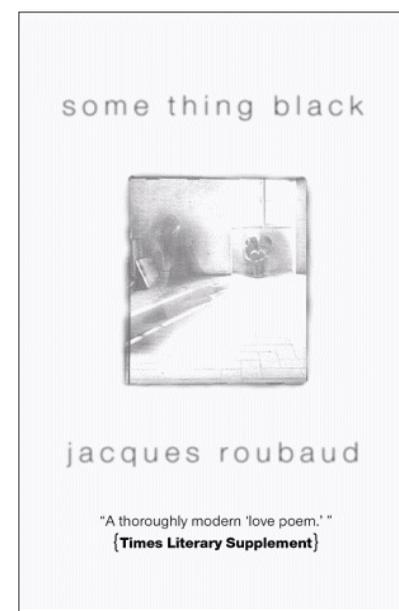
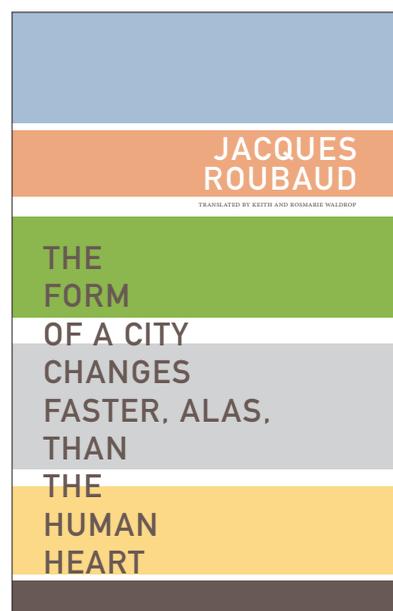
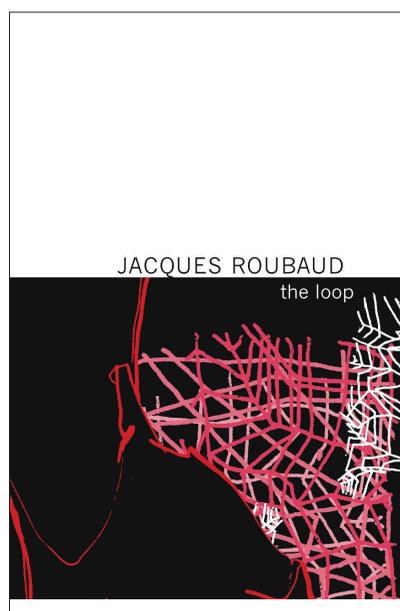
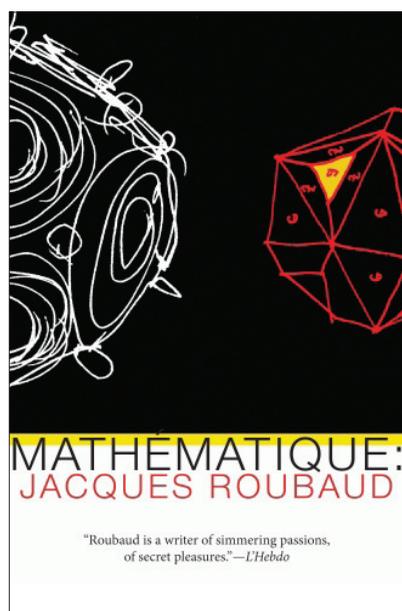


fully) set aside my personal limitations in order to bring it to fruition, for I admit that I am neither scientist nor mathematician. And yet I have read and continue to reread his work, which in fact offers a great introduction to these fields and opens up avenues for future discovery.

Roubaud's work begins seriously in 1965, with the publication of an exceptional book that was instantly recognised as such: ϵ (*Signe D'Appartenance*). This is a truly profuse piece of work that has been developing across a broad range of fields for almost fifty years; but it is above all a book of poetry, or at least has poetry at its core.

Roubaud expressed a belief in the necessity of maintaining poetry "as an art, a craft, a passion, a game, an irony, a form of research, an insight, a violence, an independent endeavor, and a way of being" (what a list!), and he turned to the troubadours as the perfect example

of what he saw as a required archaism: "The archaism of the troubadours is my own." This standpoint can be seen as a reaction to the reverence in which French poets were held in the 1960's, with their surrealism, absolute and resolute modernity, and political engagement, all movements with a strong tendency towards tearing things up and starting again. In contrast, the Provençal poets of the twelfth century were, for Roubaud, his poetic forebears, demonstrating technical knowledge, formal invention, both clarity and obscurity, and a dedication to poetry written for love alone. For him, it was not by starting from scratch that we can create something new, but by carefully selecting our genealogy: Que-neau rather than Breton, and the American objectivists rather than the Beat Generation, but also Jane Austen rather than Balzac, Gertrude Stein rather than Joyce, Churchill (or his 1940's incarna-



have acclaimed (how often pain garners praise!). In this unillustrated book, photography is, however, omnipresent as the pastime of a dead person, but also as evidence of a past in which black and white skip through their full range of metaphors, from coffee, to the pubis, to the night, to writing on a page . . .

The *Project* was already gigantic, “in many people’s eyes idealistic,” but curiously, Roubaud, in trying to even partially accomplish it, in the end came to add a second part which proved to be its keystone.

If “poetry is the memory of language,” then it was only appropriate to explore memory, an exploration Roubaud achieved through prose. The seven mighty volumes of the unfinished *The Great Fire of London* are “memory prose.” It was meant to be a novel “distinct from the *Project* though still part of it, telling the story of the *Project* as if it were fiction, providing the *Project* with a roof that, like those Japanese roofs that extend far beyond their buildings’ facades and curve down almost to the ground, would have provided the necessary shade for its aesthetic protection.” This vision of the novel was never realized. In its place there came a succession of clauses and intersections, of daily deposits of prose that never

made a journal or *mémoire*: they made memory prose. This was an ambitious endeavor that could be considered an alternative to Proust, to the extent that we will never really do justice to *The Great Fire of London* without having considered the differences between the works. There is, in Proust, an irenicism with regard to memory and an implicit trust in the reconstitution of lost time that Jacques Roubaud does not share. Roubaud remains troubled and at some distance from any Proustian rediscovery. *The Great Fire of London* (Le Grand Incendie de Londres) has recently been abridged by Roubaud to *Gril*—not *Gil*, *Gril*: Roubaud is stretching himself over the coals.

Why was this novel impossible? Why was its plan destroyed? Why this “destruction” of the first novel and “dissolution” of the last? Will *Gril* be finished? Or is it a failed novel designed to make more room for poetry, as maths had done? Has the end been written? All of these questions make *Gril* an inexhaustible read.

There is nothing more disengaged than the work of Jacques Roubaud, nothing more separate from the concerns of civilization and enlightenment. The activity of Oulipo, of which Roubaud is current-

ly the central figure (Oulipo remains an unfinished work and has had as its central characters the duo Queneau/Le Lionnais, the meteor Perec, and now Roubaud), is founded on the notion of potentiality, a notion that Roubaud never stops exploring. It is impossible to comprehend Roubaud’s Oulipian ideas without first accepting the scientific metaphor of poetic endeavor: project, axiom, solution, demonstration, and the infinite centripetal expansion of possibility. And all this serving to nullify the Oulipo sceptic’s eternal question: “But can you still find things to look for?”

One can still see in Roubaud a clear concern for the transmission of values founded in a cultured, hardwearing, and enlightened family, a concern affirming the value of man’s (historical) responsibility in the time of the religion of rights (in a present separated from History). *The Last Bullet Lost* and *Wild Garden* should be read in this regard.

All this is Jacques Roubaud; a certain vision of the poet as the heart, the atom, around which the electrons and planets of mathematics, prose, English literature, and potentiality turn with varying degrees of freedom, and all according to a system with its own rules, exceptions, and catastrophes.

He is an author in whose work everything has a meaning and does not allow us to pick and choose. His oeuvre is generous and should be read with generos-

“His oeuvre is generous and should be read with generosity”

ity, accepting its shifts and changes, and it is gently subversive, rendering notions of style obsolete. More than *Exercises in Style*, it is an exercise of styles. For there is no such thing as “Style,” there are only “styles” (see the ten styles of the Japanese author Chomei in *Gril*), some of which are light, some of which are serious, some quickly penned, and some demanding a great deal of work. There can be no absolute style. So long live the “invisible prose” of Jane Austen, and let us forget Flaubert and his anxieties . . .

You will find in this man’s work something to think about, something to learn, and something to entertain you, as well as the irrepressible joy that rests at the heart of every art.

Today, dear reader, you should be reading Jacques Roubaud. ■

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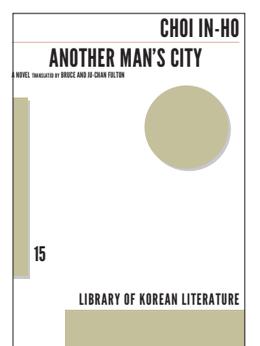
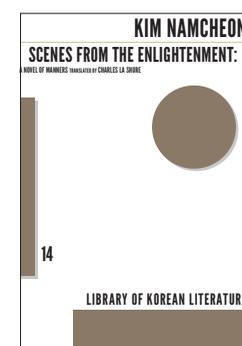
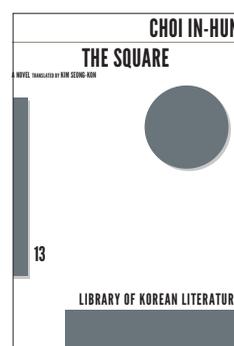
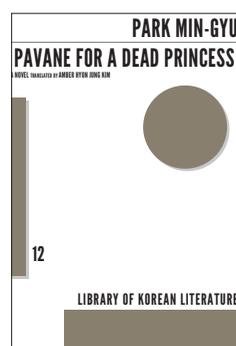
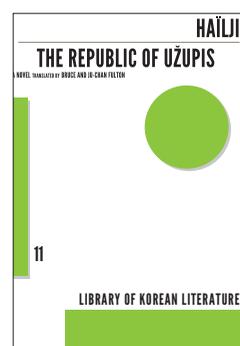
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An Interview with John E. Woods

Kathryn Toolan

*John E. Woods is an award-winning translator of German literature. Throughout his career, he has translated the work of Thomas Mann, Ingo Schulze, Christoph Ransmayr and Arno Schmidt. He was awarded the PEN Translation Prize twice—for his edition of *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind in 1987, and for *Evening Edged in Gold* by Arno Schmidt in 1981. His translation of Arno Schmidt's *Zettels Traum* (Bottoms Dream) is a forthcoming title from Dalkey Archive Press.*

Q: How does translating Arno Schmidt compare to translating Thomas Mann and Christoph Ransmayr? Is there a comparison?

JW: Translation is, as I am wont to say, an impossibility. Every language is unique to itself. So a translator tackles that impossibility anew with every author, with every sentence for that matter. Thomas Mann is a master of German grammatical intricacy. Those long sentences work because every semantic nuance is embedded in a grammatical one. English depends far more on syntax for its complexities. Just ask any English speaker what a dative plural might look like. To compensate for Mann's grammatical richness, I tried to fall back on the richness of English vocabulary, not always successfully of course. But I hope the total aesthetic experience, which after all is the translator's nirvana, corresponds at some level.

Christoph Ransmayr's texts are dithyrambic, the prose hurtles you into deep, dark isolation. Hurling prose is possible in both languages, or at least I tried to find counterparts to both that driving force as well as the existential loneliness.

Arno Schmidt is in one sense just another case of impossibility. The density of his prose is *sui generis*, even in German, which can be intimidatingly dense. Then there's the word play, the dance of literary references, the Rabelaisian humor, all packed into what I like to think of as "fairy tales for adults." So, what does a translator do? He puts on his fool's cap and plays and dances and hopes he amuses.

Q: Often referred to as the "German Joyce," Arno Schmidt openly admitted his admiration for Joyce as a writer. What was his opinion of other Irish writers?

JW: Schmidt was an autodidact and a polyhistor. Joyce came late in his reading, and for Schmidt it was less a matter of discovering a new kind of prose than of finding multiple links to his own work. Other Irish authors? Well he certainly knew and had his opinions about, for example, Shaw, whom he quotes on occasion, and mocks for his opinionated cockiness, probably because Schmidt himself was at least as opinionated and cocky; and Synge, whose *Playboy* he

quotes with apparent approval. Wilde also came rather late in his reading, but he quotes him with attribution five times in *Bottom's Dream*, and several times without attribution, primarily and surprisingly the poetry. Beckett he dismissed, claiming that minimalism is too easy, but my guess is he admired him more than he would admit, even to himself. As for Flann O'Brien, as far as I know he was unaware of his work.

Q: Arno Schmidt never shied away from the tough subject of war, in *Nobodaddy's Children* (1995) he presents three realities: pre-war, post-war and a third, the middle of World War Three. Do you think this was why, in post-war Germany, his work was not given the recognition it deserved during his lifetime? How do you think his work would be received today?

JW: Schmidt was a contrarian, at odds with the Adenauer Restoration of post-war Germany. But then so were a lot of German intellectuals at the time. His loathing of the military, his own experiences of the ugly horror of war, and, perhaps even more significantly his life, as a refugee after the war (he had lost his library! The ultimate affront for a man who lived within his own mind), all

contributed to his Jacobin outlook and won him few friends in the academic establishment of the time. But it was the prose itself that offended—it was seen as so contrarian, so unlike anything else before or after him, it excluded him from a wide readership and general critical acclaim. Now, more than three decades after his death, he has won a committed readership, and indeed the acknowledgment of academia, as one of the most significant German writers of the twentieth century.

“[Schmidt] is a fearless author who does what he knows he must do and thumbs his nose at taboos.”

Q: How did you decide on the titles for your translations *Bottom's Dream* and *B/Moondocks*?

JW: Titles are often a bugbear. 'Kaff, auch Mare Crisium' could of course

SELECTED WORKS BY ARNO SCHMIDT

Collected Novellas. Dalkey Archive Press, 1994.

Nobodaddy's Children. Dalkey Archive Press, 1995.

Collected Stories. Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.

Two Novels, The Stony Heart & B/Moondocks. Dalkey Archive Press, 1997.

Bottom's Dream. Forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press.

have been called *Podunk*, also the *Sea of Tears*, or something of that sort. Not exactly a convincing title, is it? Although the *Sea of Tears* has a certain power. Added to which is the pun on *Kaff* in German, which means both a remote hamlet and chaff. So I just played with the possibilities, landing on "boondocks" as a synonym (*sans* pun unfortunately) for a backwater kind of place, which triggered the rhyme in my brain. And since the latter Schmidt loved to use fractional spellings, one letter set atop another, it just seemed like a good fit. As for 'Zettels Traum,' there really was only one possible title. In the classic Schlegel-Tieck translation of Shakespeare, "Bottom, the weaver" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is given the name "Zettel," which is the warp of a fabric. And it is of course Bottom's dream which is a central metaphor of the novel. Lost again is a pun, for a *Zettel* is also a small slip of paper, especially one used to jot something down on; Schmidt used thousands of such slips of notepaper to construct his later novels, by arranging them in large homemade file-boxes. Also lost, at least at first for the English speaker, is the fact that in German your *Po* is your "bottom," and after all it is a novel about Edgar Allan Poe. As I said at the beginning: translation is an impossibility.

Q: Arno Schmidt's prose is layered, but never to the point of complication. It is concise, sharp, fragmented at times but deliciously human, intimate and real. How do you think younger audiences will read him?

JW: Arno Schmidt has always attracted a younger readership, and most of those readers stick with him. He is a fearless author who does what he knows he must do and thumbs his nose at taboos. That alone I think is what makes him a voice that younger, serious readers connect with. He is also at times foolishly opinionated, unnecessarily arcane, and always a man of his own time and place, all of which can set up barriers for those same readers. Yet even what may seem his "faults" lead to revelations about himself, and more than any other writer I know, he is willing to risk relentless self-exploration. His words are who he is. That kind of literary honesty resonates with younger readers and it's an addiction that can last a lifetime. ■



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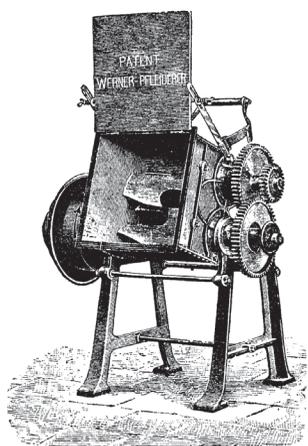
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Waiting for Dr Buckley

David Dwyer

Dr Buckley is a vague, incommunicative man who lives down the Lane in Dublin. An American ex-patriot of over thirty years, he remains singularly American in attitude, dress, and expression. He is verifiably a man of medicine (semi-retired), but also, he says, a philosopher, spiritualist, interpreter of dreams, handyman, tour guide, confidant of various members of the Gael, Church leader, reformist, poet, and psychiatrist (all unverifiable). I met him shortly after coming to Ireland two years ago when he offered his services as an advisor concerning "matters of the Irish mind." This meeting took place in Toner's. He is a man of opinions (verifiable). When not avoiding patients, he travels throughout Europe and back to his country of origin ("a dark, dark place where only madmen are allowed to govern").

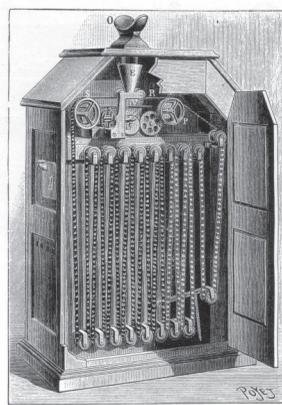


⇒ In Buswells' lobby, there was a young woman trying to explain to an older man what a "vegan" is. The man assumed it was a cult of some kind. I took him to be from Mallow because of his seriousness and failure to smile; it was as though he feared his face might crack. Men from Mallow are of a certain kind; they don't take to irony very well and this would suggest a lack of intelligence. But I digress. The discussion about vegans soon deteriorated into talk of animal and vegetable rights, with the man insisting that vegetables also had a life and that the woman and her cult were responsible for whatever pain the veggies might experience whilst being chomped in her oversized mouth. The exchange became heated, leading eventually to the woman saying that being a vegan had become her career, that she toured Ireland giving talks and she had even received several grants to fund her now annually published *An Irish Vegan Cookbook*. The man, who apparently hadn't been able to access any coffers, was shocked and inquired about the basis upon which a vegan cookbook could possibly be worthy of grant money. "It's about Irish vegetables, written by an Irish woman who lectures to Irish people, demonstrating the art of cooking, containing Irish recipes [Dear God!], and is printed right here in Ireland." The man walked away muttering something unintelligible but clearly foul.

⇒ I have long thought that, as concerns people and institutions of power, a brick in the head is much more persuasive than reason.

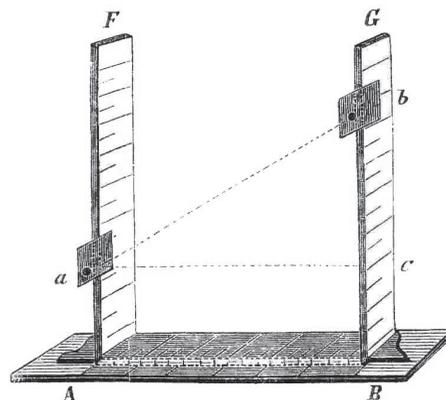
⇒ The Oslo taxi driver asked me where I was from. When I told him Ireland, he asked if Ireland was a part of Great Britain. I thought I must be talking to an American.

⇒ American tourists are unbearable: my stomach gets queasy when I hear their voices. Instant memories captured on their cell phones: "Lucille, did you see that, did you see it?" "Yes, honey, I saw it." "But did you see it? Wow! Did you see it, Lucille?" "Yes, I saw it." "Did you video it, Lucille?" "Yes, I videoed it, honey." "Let's play it, Lucille, let's play it." "Okay, honey." "Look at that, Lucille, wow, can you believe it?" "Yes, I can believe it, honey." "Wow, look at that! But you didn't hold it right, I knew you weren't holding it right, Lucille." "I never hold it right, honey." George, or Frank, or Allen, or whatever his name is, never saw it the first time because he was watching Lucille not hold the cell phone right. But now he is reliving her not holding it right. The Americans never see anything. But they have recorded for posterity their not having seen it.



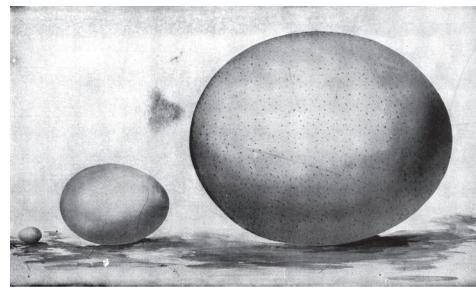
⇒ The sole advantage of old age is that you no longer have to measure up to anyone's expectations. You don't care what people think of you, and you don't care what you think of them. You don't even care what you think of yourself.

⇒ Paul's in London has become a problem. It once had the best baguettes in the city. During any stay in London, I'd get to a Paul's three times a day for the baguette with ham & cheese. About six months ago, the sandwich got shorter and the baguette no longer had the taste it once had. Things in this world always get worse.



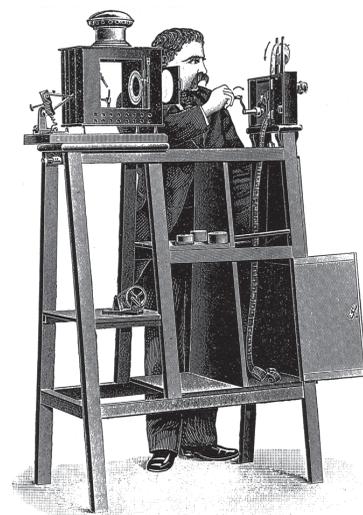
⇒ The one and only value I've been able to find in romantic relationships, as they are called, is that you have someone to grab a table in a fast-food restaurant before you find yourself standing with a tray in your hand and no place to sit. This value is not to be underestimated.

⇒ Just down the Lane here is the finest pub in Ireland: Toner's. Most of my disquisitions take place there. The other night the subject was "Man, God, and The Waste of It All." The attendees paid little attention until I told the sordid story of a French woman I once knew. That one kept the boys awake.

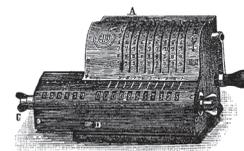


⇒ One must admire the beleaguered arts councils in these difficult economic times and how they deal with less money but still manage to be innovative and far-thinking, as they say they are being. In better days, the word excellence was used, perhaps even over-used, to describe what would be supported. In bad times, when government reduces support for the arts, *excellence* gets replaced by *community*: "art that will speak to the largest possible audience, to the common man, for the sake of learning and entertainment." My own personal belief is that art should cause one stomach pains, generate a reminder of how totally alone we are in this universe, totally alone and dispensable, totally alone and spat upon by the politicians who have caused economic collapse. Instead, art becomes what makes us feel good and reassures us that the people with power have our best interests in their hearts and minds, that we should be grateful with nothing, and that if anyone is to be blamed, it's *us*. And so they give us entertainment, something that will lull us into silence.

⇒ In a café on Gloucester Road, London, a thirty-something American man is talking to a young British woman, who seems as though she'll cut her wrists if she has to listen to him much longer: "It's so cool, it's so cool . . . I have three shout-outs on my blog . . . Three shout-outs . . . They even have those women toilets in the room . . . Women toilets . . . So fucking cool, so fucking cool . . . My wife said, "Wow! Wow!" You know what I mean? Fantaaaaastic . . . So fucking cool . . . So fucking British, so British . . . Like, really cool . . . I said to her that it was like, so fucking cool . . . I really love the British, really love them . . . They are so cool . . . The way they talk, it's SO British . . ." This man, at least 35 years of age, was talking like a sophomore in college: "chiseled" American speech, one bland phrase on top of another, and laughing all the way through his embarrassing enthusiasm . . . Ah, America! Learn to speak! The South provides the only color that remains in American speech, but the South is another story . . . I would mention the name of this café, but I fear Americans would then frequent it more often than they do now.



⇒ Has anyone seen Dolan? He arrived here in Dublin at about the same time as I did, all those many years ago. Another American seeking refuge. I've not seen him in a week or more. Dolan is a madman. He came to Ireland to become a key maker. Such ambition. Have you ever heard of someone seeking a profession as a key maker? Dolan did. And now he's a bitter man because life has been unkind to him. Too old to get a woman and even getting too old to make a key. God bless him. ■



Confessions of a Guilty Freelancer

William O'Rourke

The following is an excerpt from the preface of William O'Rourke's Confessions of a Guilty Freelancer, which was published in summer 2012 by Indiana University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Indiana Press.

The Internet has turned writers into content providers, most often working for free. The word freelance is now becoming literal, at least the "free" part. Why?

Lots of reasons.

Higher education, for one. Just as there used to be clear distinctions between commercial and literary fiction (and nonfiction), distinctions that, over time, have become decidedly blurred, there are fewer distinctions separating the work of what professors do in order to retain their jobs. Scholarship must be created, scholarship, which, in the past, did not necessarily pay enough to provide a celebration dinner, but which was necessary to keep the maker employed, and, thank the Lord, eventually tenured.

The growth in the academic world of the creative writing MFA over the last thirty or so years (increasing from a handful of such programs in 1970 to over three hundred, currently) has dragged hundreds of writers, novelists, poets, and non-fiction writers into the same world the dedicated scholar inhabits. Publish or perish. And the changes

that circumstance has brought about are easy to see. For one, check the back of any volume of, say, *The Best American Short Story* volume, pre-1945. You will find 1–2 pages listing the publications from whence the stories have been picked. More than half were high-paying journals, the long-gone slicks, many defunct or empty now of fiction.

Now, there are thirty pages of journals listed in the 2010 volume, with only a handful of high-paying publications included. Most are subsidized journals, existing because of universities or the ample pockets of a few rich people. Other than in advertising, the short form of both non-fiction and fiction is largely a non-remunerative form, except for a fortunate few.

I am not a member of the chorus of MFA program bashers. I don't believe we have an oversupply of writers; if anything, we have an undersupply of readers. Reading literary non-fiction and fiction is not part of the popular culture; it is an activity of the unpopular culture, but, nonetheless, it is still alive.

In the unpopular culture, the literary one, the current situation is not healthy. When Barnes & Noble and Borders began, such large stores were considered

predators, out to eliminate the mom-and-pop bookstore business; but it quickly became obvious the big-box outlets were turning books into objects to be looked at. The stores were galleries of books (and coffee shops); now, even they are imperiled, teetering toward bankruptcy.

The literate culture supposedly demolished the oral culture a couple of centuries ago, making literacy an elite and dominating bastion. But, the oral culture has now come back with a vengeance. Technology has led the way: the Internet, the Web, communication in general (cell phones and the like), operate in a volatile mixture of oral and loosely written speech, a medium that requires typing, or "texting." The latest form of half speech and half prose, from Twitter, the "tweet", has not ushered us into a new golden age of the brilliant aphorism. We now see, we now look, and occasionally hear; but fewer read, except for what can fit on a screen. (And writers played a foreshadowing role, when they abandoned their typewriters and began to stare at their work magically materializing on a screen when they adopted computers as "word-processing machines.") Recently, I saw a picture in a major newspaper of grandparents giving

a Kindle to their eight-year-old grandchild; when grandparents play that role, good-bye print culture.

In our largely aural-visual culture, we have reached an odd place in the pernicious division—not just of income, the gap between rich and poor—but of literacy. There is now a slice, not that much bigger than the one percent of the population that controls so much wealth (though, of course, not the same people), who can be called hyper-literate. These are the people who used to read the book reviews that have now disappeared from so many newspapers.

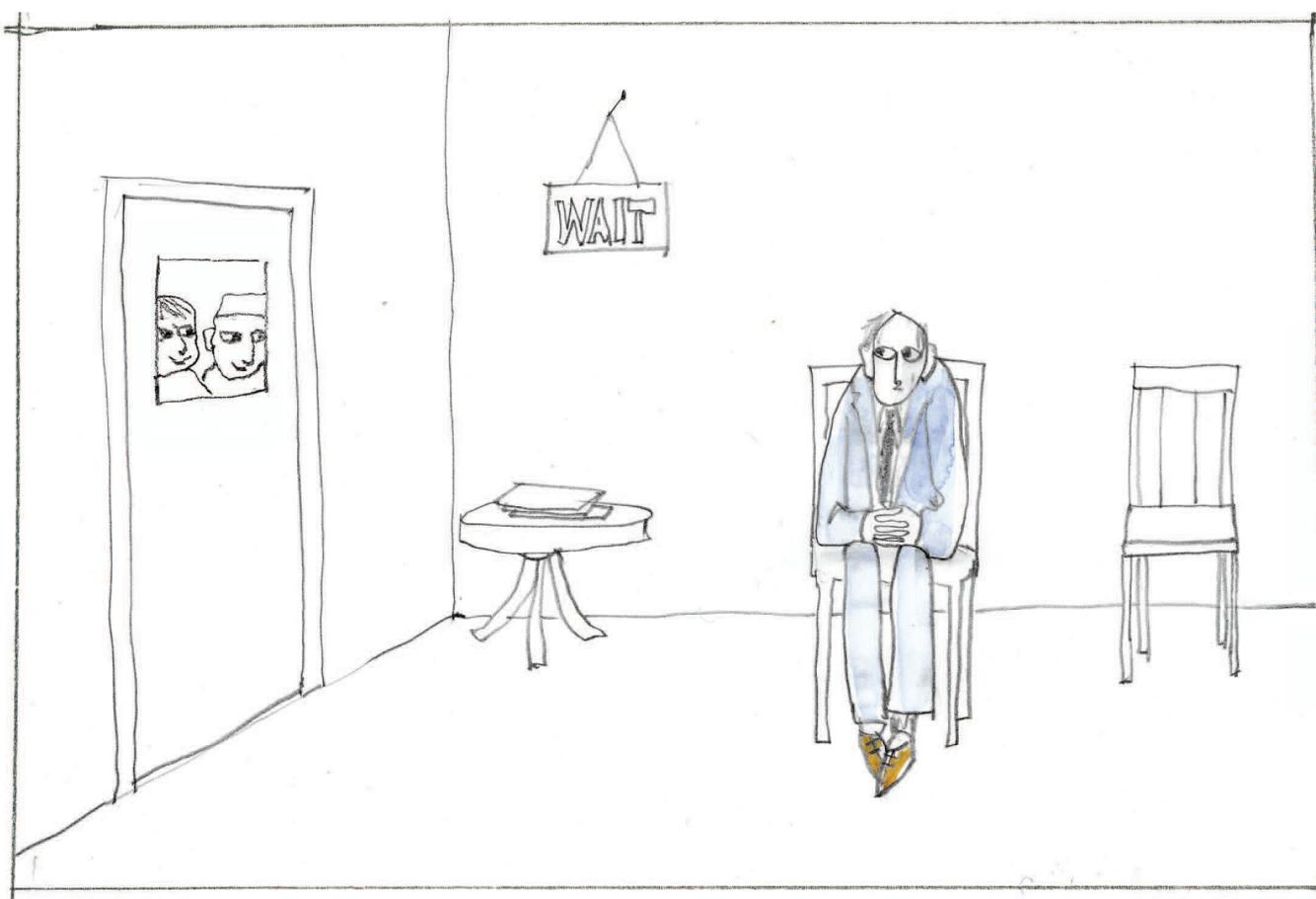
The division of literacy and money continues to echo the economic distribution our country now lives with. The top ten percent of the income distribution are certainly the book buyers, the book buyers of so-called "better" books. For the non-buyers there are the libraries, always under siege by government budget cutters.

But libraries have taken over the distribution of the aural-visual popular culture too, as well as the unpopular culture of literary fiction and non-fiction. And, then, like the poor, there are many who read almost nothing, or nothing like books. The poor may have flat-screen TVs, but not yet Kindles.

I don't mean to be apocalyptic. But I am prone to taking the long view. The old days of freelancing, when writers tried to make a living cobbling together cash from diverse publications, is certainly over, though, in the way of the wild man in the woods, one or two such people may be still doing it. But many writers are writing for free (especially those who do it as a second job), just as college graduates the last few years find themselves working as unpaid interns post degrees.

And the ascendancy of the memoir over the past two decades and its fast and easy relationship with the truth has contributed to the general diminishment of overall literacy. The lack of trust begets confusion, which, in turn, lessens the status of the endeavor.

Our winner-take-all society operates in the literary sphere as fiercely as in the rest of the world. More and more power is given over to the gatekeepers that re-



main; book reviews are shutting down, even as the number of “books” published each year continues to rise (if you just go by ISBN numbers.) The *New York Times Book Review* rules over a kingdom which now consists mostly of the abandoned villages and crumbling castles of departed nobles and their former duchies. But its power remains considerable. The setting of fashion is a high-capital operation. *The New York Review of Books* remains, most likely because of its lack of any competition. The rarest thing for most contemporary writers is to have their work written about beyond a 700-word limit.

And occasionally even fashion setters are upended. In a society where even the self-declared tastemakers do not know who are the best writers anymore, once in a blue moon outside agitators (usually judges of a few powerful prizes, themselves high-capital operations—the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, etc.) can shake things up.

Nearly twenty years ago in *Signs of the Literary Times*, SUNY Press, 1993, I wrote of the case of Larry Heinemann’s novel *Paco’s Story*, which was nominated for the National Book Award for the best novel of 1986, but was passed over for review by the *New York Times Book Review* until the nomination. The *NY-TBR* testily reviewed it after the nomination, but took a defensive tone because its own judgment had been questioned on who was who and what was what, even after the novel won the prize.

And it happened again in 2010, when Jaimy Gordon’s *Lord of Misrule* was nominated (and then won) the National Book Award for fiction. This time, the *Times* ran a review and an article and the *Book Review* mentioned it, too, in a news column, though not a review, but the paper wasn’t as pugnacious about its oversight as it was in Heinemann’s case. It seemed to have learned a lesson. Humility is in order in these days when no one, evidently, is able to keep up with all that is happening.

Even an Edmund Wilson couldn’t keep track of the literary world today. And that, at least is being acknowledged, if only begrudgingly. But, as any writer of books knows, there are three things

“The New York Times Book Review rules over a kingdom which now consists mostly of the abandoned villages and crumbling castles of departed nobles and their former duchies.”

one hopes for: to be published, to be reviewed, and to turn up in bookstores. What one learns is one of those must happen (publication), but it is even more difficult to capture all three.

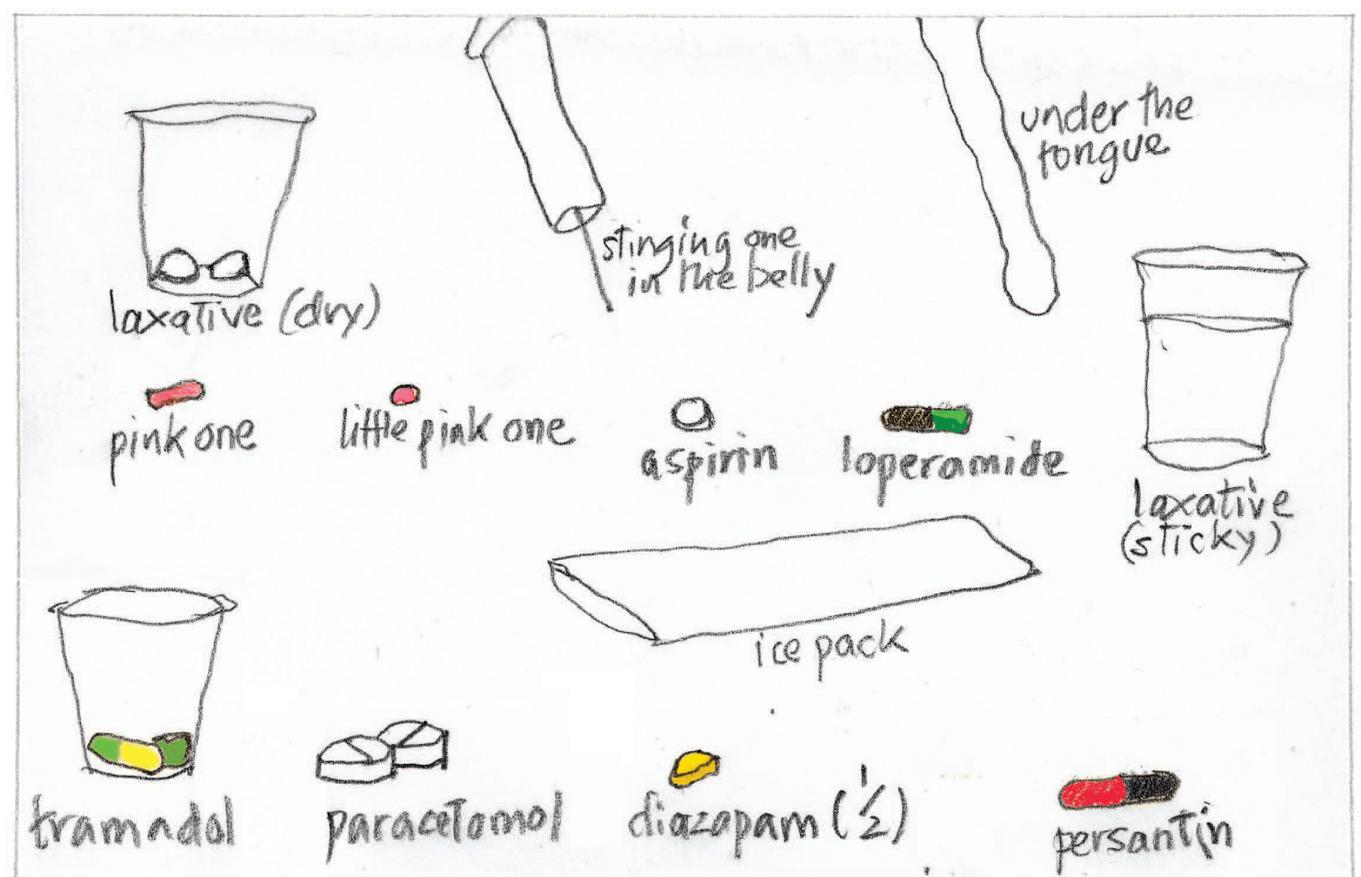
In commercial journalism, what is happening is easier to see, since it is being played out in popular culture on flat-screen televisions. The phenomenon of political consultants and operatives becoming television journalists continues unabated and the cult of celebrity dominates the news, both in its coverage and its production. The paradox of niche journalism that cable television can offer (entire shows on pet veterinarians, or people who hoard things, etc.), still thirsting after large audience numbers in order to be economically viable, thereby becoming dumber and dumber, continues. Small “journals of opinion” struggle, even when backed by families flush with excess capital. But writers still long for readers, which is a perennial reason they will work for free. These days there are fewer calls for “public intellectuals.” It is a job category I always wanted to fill, but there is not much demand at the moment, even less than there was two decades ago. Those that thrive are corporate intellectuals, hosted and promoted

by the largest media outlets (primarily television) in the land.

When I was a young writer the idea of generation had a lot of power in the literary culture, the notion of writers connected to each other, influencing one another. But the academy, for the last couple of decades, has more or less abandoned the idea of generational links, labeling such mere chronology and coincidence unfashionable. But writers still are interconnected, and in the literary world, it matters. But, along with connection there comes exclusion, and there is sufficient intellectual dishonesty afoot in the literary community to overlook other writers when so inclined.

One literary trend has definitely mirrored the political: globalization has affected everything. Examination of the recent *O. Henry* prize volumes and *The Best American* series will show almost as many stories set abroad as in the USA. We are all postcolonial writers now.

Freelancers, guilty or not, are at the mercy and good graces of editors; someone has to like what you do before it gets published. It’s a free press as long as you own one, etc. (H. L. Mencken 1880–1956). Some writers find they can’t live with editors, but no writer can live without them—except, perhaps, the writer branded with a word as ugly as freelancer: the blogger. ■



Language Is a Stretch of Land Imagined, Sometimes Snowbound

Alois Hotschnig

The following is the acceptance speech of Alois Hotschnig upon winning the inaugural Jonke Prize. A celebrated Austrian writer, Hotschnig was a great friend of Gert Jonke.

I believe that at this point I'm supposed to, what did they tell me earlier—I can't remember if you told me or if someone else did—I'm supposed to say something though I don't know to whom, much less what. But I see you're really listening to me. I appreciate that. So it would be best if I finally just said what should have been said a long time ago.

These are lines from Gert Jonke's play *Speakers Round the Clock* in which a speaker and his mouth talk to an audience but can't agree on whose turn it is to speak, because the mouth is always rebelling against its supposed master. "He talks, I don't," the speaker says, "that should be made clear once and for all. Then more and more often the mouth starts telling everyone the opposite of what I suggested he say, or would have preferred or might prefer he say, always giving an opinion completely different from what I had asked be said," the speaker says, describing an experience Jonke often wrote about and one that I know well.

At one point in my childhood, I had the habit of repeating words or sentences to myself over and over again until they lost all meaning or took on new meanings, until they turned into free rhythms, into sounds and tones, into music. I couldn't

SELECTED WORKS BY GERT JONKE

Geometric Regional Novel. Dalkey Archive Press, 2000.

Homage to Czerny: Studies in Virtuoso Technique. Dalkey Archive Press, 2008.

The System of Vienna: From Heaven Street to Earth Mound Square. Dalkey Archive Press, 2009.

The Distant Sound. Dalkey Archive Press, 2010.

Awakening to the Great Sleep War. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

name this music, but I could sense it and feel it. *Red, green, yellow, blue*, again and again from the top. When my mother sent me out on errands, I repeated the list of things I was meant to buy so often to myself and I so thoroughly internalized the words, that by the time I got to the store and stood in front of the counter, I no longer had the slightest idea what it was I was supposed to bring home.

Each fear, each anxiety, each desire, whatever it might be—I was convinced I only had to name it and to repeat it often enough to myself for it to weaken, lose all meaning, and finally disappear. This *game* fascinated and frightened me and gave me the same pleasure I still get from writing today.

I believe I can recognize such incantatory formulas and rituals in Gert Jonke's texts too, and they have an irresistible hold on me because I know from my childhood experience that something *new* can emerge from this loss of control.

"I have the sense that I'm a child growing up in some other, inaccessible place while I stand here as an adult. I feel how I, as a child, deaf and dumb, grow towards myself and I experience this other childhood even though I'm not there." This state, which Jonke describes in *Speakers Round the Clock*, could just as well be a description of my early years and of the exploratory process that writing has been always been for me.

"We long for something incomprehensible / in which we feel secure until / it, too, impertinently explains itself," Jonke writes. I agree. We long for the *incomprehensible*, and we make ourselves a

nest in it so that we can hatch something *intelligible* from it.

If you look at something long enough, what you see will become blurred. Or comical. Or bizarre. Perhaps this is because everything is distorted and comical and bizarre. And yet we only recognize this when we can step outside a particular situation long enough for it to reveal itself to us in all its *disjointedness* and then become familiar by *blurring into recognizability*, so to speak.

Distorted perception makes you dizzy. And this dizziness forces us to explore the newly uncertain territory and to develop new techniques when the old ones, for whatever reason, no longer fit. The *methods* Jonke used are as multifarious as what he portrays. His portrayals can be classified as poetry, as fiction, as drama, or as all of these at once: quiet and loud at the same time, as a flood of words and, in counterpoint, the silence between the lines.

His texts are sensory organs as well as digestive organs that can help us get rid of anything indigestible or stomach-churning we might have consumed. The *Jonkian language enzyme* breaks down the inassimilable into its elemental *pre-conceptual substances*, which are often recognizable only after the *enzyme* has done its work.

Gert Jonke's explorations also consisted of surveying a new linguistic landscape rendered vague and arbitrary through overuse. The disintegrating language in *Scattered Fugitive Words* is one illustration of how crucial this *renaming* is. In this story, two people in conversa-

tion lose hold of the language they supposedly share as the very words in their mouths get up and leave. More and more words then join the fugitive words, becoming unpronounceable and finally inconceivable.

Jonke here depicts how words can melt in one's mouth, yet in another story he posits that "we also need a new language so that we can inhabit mysterious realms as comfortably as we do our familiar environments. We need a new language we can eventually make our own even though its words still stick in our throats . . . We need a new language that can resist our influence."

The search for a language still to be discovered binds us, I believe, even though he and I try to reach it through different approaches.

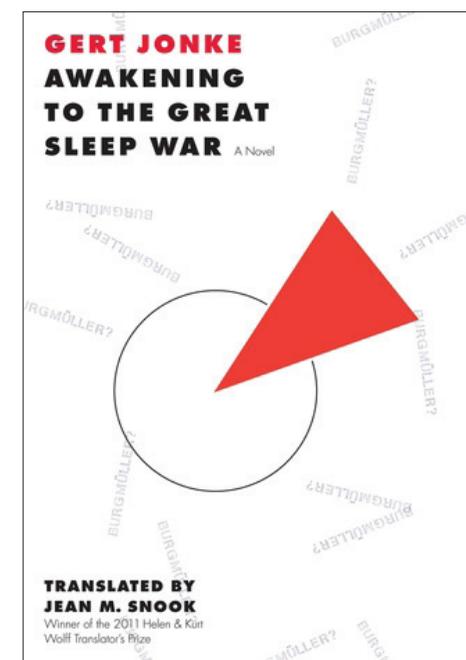
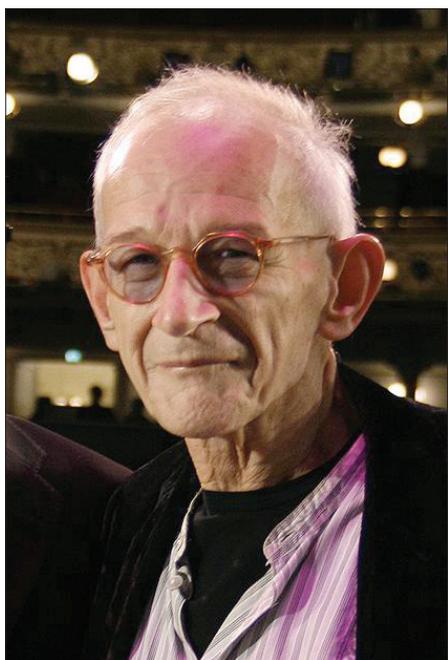
For some time now I'd be hard put to say who's actually saying everything that has been said up to now.

Is what I'm saying now alright with you? Or would you rather hear something else? You must let me know if I should be saying something other than what I'm saying right now.

I very much want to tell you what you'd like to hear. You just have to tell me what that is.

The *Speakers Round the Clock* who people his texts also speak to reassure themselves that they are alive and so ensure their hold on life. Gert Jonke was no *speaker*, but a *Listener Round the Clock*. The few times I met with him alone, he always asked for news of others, of

photograph by Manfred Werner



panded, linked to a fourth or fifth idea in a tangle of sentences and thoughts which I find overwhelming at first but then becomes an irresistible invitation to play along. I'm then immersed in constellations of thought and feeling that, for me at least, had previously been unthinkable and imperceptible; yet nonetheless retain some of their strangeness.

If you want to hear something other than what I'm telling you now, you must tell me exactly what I should say instead, as long, that is, as you don't want to hear what I'm now saying to you!

Oh, I see. You just wanted to tell me that you'd simply like to keep on listening to me as you have been. Now that is wonderful.

I had the good fortune of reading publicly with Gert Jonke on several occasions, without having to follow him immediately. Usually anyone who read right after him suffered a literary *incineration* in the linguistic inferno he unleashed.

"The name of your valley is . . . no, that's your home valley . . . How does it go again? . . . The word is gone. Vanished. It's a mystery to me. As if I never knew it. Odd." These lines are from *Scattered Fugitive Words*, which I heard him read more than once. I remember the audience's uncertain laughter. Some sat with their mouths gaping in astonishment, others traded reassuring glances.

And I remember how he used humor in his delivery to free his audience from the story's stranglehold without softening its perceptual and communicative despair.

While listening to him, I had the opportunity to reflect on my own writing. In fact, his stories demanded it and time and again they made me aware of the *weight* I carried in myself and in my writing. And they also showed me how writing could work *differently*, how *my writing, too*, could be lighter, looser, clearer and reach towards *other effects* both possible and impossible.

"This summer / when you left / it was so cold / the garden caught a chill," he writes, "the tulips coughed at me / the trees and bushes kept sneezing / the meadow had hay fever." Again and again these *tulips* have coughed along with me when I've had to say goodbye, not at the actual partings, but in my depictions of them, whenever, that is, my depictions were only worth sneezing at.

Gert Jonke doesn't do away with gravity, he overcomes it when he starts to play around and engages a difficulty, a failure, an insufficiency of whatever kind as a partner in a game or in conversation. This ludic approach alone changes the terms of debate. It reminds me of the blind Croatian translator Sead Muhamedagić, my and Gert Jonke's shared translator and friend. His mother always sent him out to play tag with the other children in the apartment building. After a while Sead was no longer con-

tent catching his *sighted* friends, as he says, and so he began to play *with the wind*. "Back then in the courtyard," he told me, "I realized that the wind was as blind as I was and that the wind also had no prospects. I had some paper toys, which I threw into the wind and was always happy when I discovered where the wind had hidden them."

I am reminded that Sead's story and Gert Jonke's writing were both occasioned by grappling with obstacles. This, too, binds us, as do the long pauses between our books, the periods of recovery that have little to do with rest. The spring-times of writing that always eventually follow the recovery periods bind us as well, as do all the writing seasons, along with the creative doubts that bloomed in every color imaginable and doubt in general.

"I write very happily when I can, when the page doesn't remain blank, but I'm happier still when I've finished writing something than when I'm actually writing it," he says. So am I. And yet there is pleasure that comes solely from the process of writing.

Hesitation. The reluctance to begin even though you know you must begin at some point and the sense of being unable to stop. "Perhaps I write because I'm always trying to understand the world, because I have the feeling I know nothing about it," Jonke says. "The experience of discovering things while writing, things that you didn't know before,"—that has always kept me writing, too. ■

Translated by Tess Lewis.

"The Jonkian language enzyme breaks down the inassimilable into its elemental preconceptual substances . . ."

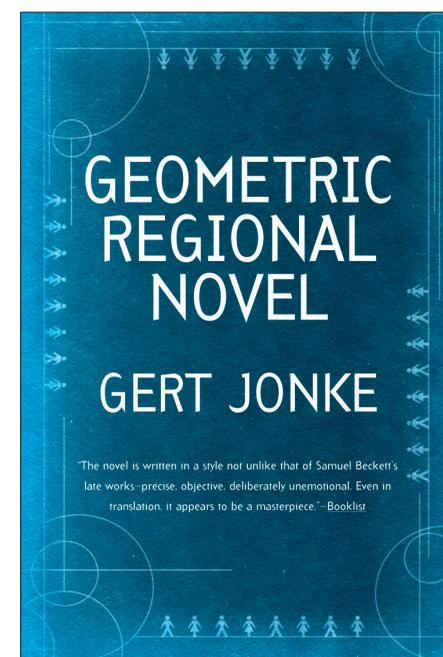
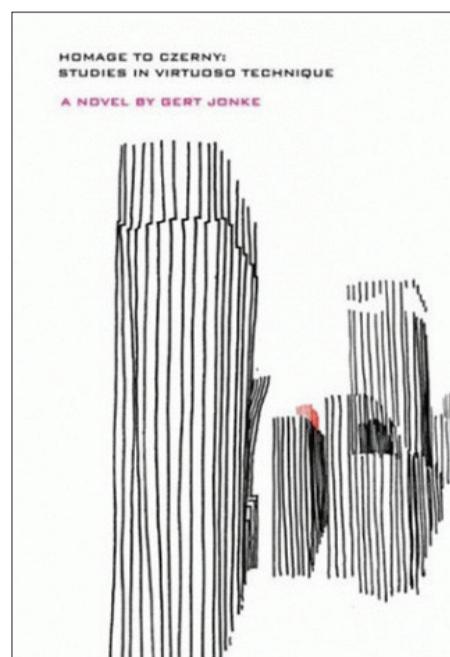
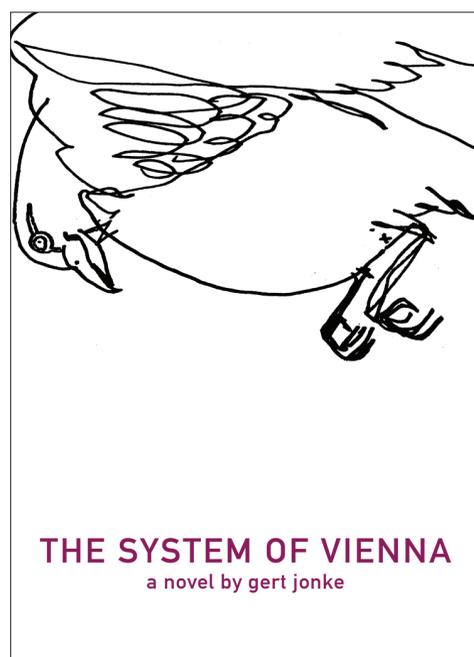
friends and acquaintances. He wanted to hear about their wellbeing in minute detail. That's who he was. His essential qualities were his *insistence*, his sense of *urgency*, his *intractability*, too. The utter *ruthlessness* of his observation often seemed like *childlike truthfulness*.

Jonke's world is *charged*, even in the quietest passages. It shimmers with attentiveness, just as he himself was always in motion, never completely at rest, constantly *tensed to leap*.

In the quietest stretches of the Jonkian linguistic landscapes, at the headwaters, so to speak, you can feel the pull of the current below the stillness, the undertow that drags one sentence after another or seems to chase this sentence with that. This *tug of desire* is as characteristic of the most intimate parts of his sentences as it is of the narrative flow, of the quietest solo arias as of the chorus into which the solo then dissolves for a choral fantasy.

"I moved so slowly / I went over the speed limit," he wrote.

Indeed, in Jonke even slowness is in a rush. His typical *high-velocity slowness*, his *desire* or *need to escape* from anywhere, the way he finds a particular word or thought that must be expressed, and his restlessness, are all, for me, elements of an acute perceptiveness that seems to be directed everywhere at once. This perceptiveness is so highly tuned and comprehensive that, when on Jonkian terrain, I can often barely follow a specific idea because it is immediately tied to the next idea or set in opposition to it or to the subsequent one, and is soon ex-



Rereading David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress*; Revisiting David Foster Wallace

Philip Coleman

Wittgenstein's Mistress

In the
beginning,
sometimes
I left
messages
in the
street.

David Markson

"As precise and dazzling as Joyce. . . .
Original, beautiful, and an absolute masterpiece."
—Ann Beattie

First published in 1988—after fifty-four rejections, famously—and described by David Foster Wallace, in 1999, as one of the five most “direly underappreciated US novels >1960”—David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* has, for all that, had a remarkable first quarter-century in print. Indeed, when Wallace made his claim regarding the book’s apparent lack of an appreciative audience it had already been reprinted at least seven times. Its initial publication in May 1988 was followed by a second printing two months later, and the first paperback edition of 1990 was printed three times before a second paperback edition, with an afterword by Steven Moore, appeared in 1995. That edition was itself reprinted six times in the subsequent half-decade. Now reissued with a “new” afterword by Wallace—the piece was originally published in a 1990 issue of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* that included an interview with Markson together with an essay on his work by Joseph Tabbi—*Wittgenstein’s Mistress* must stand as one of the most widely read works of “experimental fiction” ever published in the United States or anywhere else, though of course there’s no telling how many purchased books of any kind are ever *actually* read.

Markson would have appreciated the point. While he bemoans the fact that his works have “sold so little” in the Tabbi interview, *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* troubles the idea of reading on every level—

in historical/cultural and intellectual/cognitive terms, most urgently, but also with regard to the fundamental physical/material place of books in our lives. Twenty-one pages into *WM* (Wallace’s abbreviation), the book’s protagonist Kate comments on “[t]he queer selection” of books she had read in a certain period of her life. Markson’s own interviews are fascinating for what they reveal about his reading habits—habits that are also the subject of a blog entitled *Reading Markson Reading*, where annotated pages of books from the author’s personal library are scanned and made available for anyone with an Internet connection to view, free of charge. However, the bibliophilic/bibliographical compulsions of the author himself and his most adoring readers are less interesting, ultimately, than the profound meditations on what might be termed the phenomenology of the Book towards which *WM* moves in at least one strand of its complex and at times confusing narrative development.

“pretty much
the high point
of experimental
fiction in this
country.”

Kate—described by Wallace as “the monadic narrator” of the novel—admits early on that she “frequently” makes up her own “fanciful private improvisations” of the works she has read. This interior (creative) rearrangement of books is mirrored, however, in her sense of the physical environment within which she dwells, her very living space:

I have more than once wondered why the books in the basement are not upstairs with the others, actually. There is space. Many of the shelves up

SELECTED WORKS BY DAVID MARKSON

Springer’s Progress. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1977 / Dalkey Archive Press 1990.

Wittgenstein’s Mistress. Dalkey Archive Press, 1988.

Collected Poems. Dalkey Archive Press, 1993.

Reader’s Block. Dalkey Archive Press, 1996.

This is not a Novel. Counterpoint, 2001.

Vanishing Point. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004.

The Last Novel. Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007.

here are half empty. Although doubtless when I say they are half empty I should really be saying half filled, since presumably they were totally empty before somebody half filled them. Then again it is not impossible that they were once filled completely, becoming half empty only when somebody removed half of the books to the basement. I find this second possibility less likely than the first, although it is not utterly beyond consideration. In either event the present state of the shelves is an explanation for why so many of the books in the house are tilted, or standing askew. And thus have become permanently misshapen.

In this passage Markson urges the reader to consider not just the ways that books inform the minds of those who read them, but how they form a permanently movable part of the material world within which we exist. In the same way, then, that Markson’s bequest of his own library to the open shelves of the Strand Bookstore in New York City in 2010 represented a curious kind of challenge to the conventional idea of the literary archive and the process of bibliographically ordering and storing an author’s books after her/his death, so *WM* might be read as a text that seeks to interrogate the phenomenon of the Book

in human history in terms of its manifold meanings and uses. The use of books, indeed, and the question concerning not just their utility but their possible futility is bound up with Markson’s interrogation of art more generally in *WM*, and what Moore, in his afterword, describes as the novel’s simultaneously “funny” but “profound” unsettling of “traditional notions of influence and the transmission of culture . . .”

First published in the year when Barbara Kingsolver and Jonathan Franzen published their debut novels—the year also of *The Satanic Verses*, *Libra*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*—Markson’s seventh novel marked what Wallace called “pretty much the high point of experimental fiction in this country.” This was quite a claim, given the various and varied experiments in narrative published in the same year. As he later explained in great analytical and critical detail, however, *WM* is a novel that serves:

the vital & vanishing function of reminding us of fiction’s limitless possibilities for reach & grasp, for making heads throb heartlike, & for sanctifying the marriages of cerebration & emotion, abstraction & lived life, transcendent truth-seeking & daily schlepping, marriages that in our happy epoch of technical occlusion & entertainment-marketing seem increasingly consummable only in the imagination.

It is wonderful to have the full text of Wallace’s essay “The Empty Plenum: David Markson’s *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*” available alongside *WM* itself, but it is important to note too, the ways in which Wallace’s essay signals interests and concerns that were as important to his own development as they were to his sense of Markson’s achievement. Moreover, it should be acknowledged that, while it is certainly a work of extremely well-informed and passionate advocacy, “The Empty Plenum” does much more than praise Markson’s novel. Wallace’s description of the “Wittgensteinian” parallels in *WM* are indispensable, but his essay also expresses some unease about what he calls “[q]uestions of voice, over-

allusion, & ‘explanation.’”

Minor imperfections aside—and Wallace goes so far as to describe *WM* as “an imperfect book”—he nonetheless insists that it is important because of its “terrific emotional & political/fictional & theoretical achievement: it evokes a truth a whole lot of books & essays before it have fumbled around.” Wallace’s sense of the originality and value of *WM* was of course based on close engagement and comparison with a vast array of other novels, from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) to Rebecca Goldstein’s (“really terrible”) *The Mind-Body Problem* (1983). Most importantly, from the point of view of Wallace’s development, *WM* appeared the year after he published his own first novel, *The Broom of the System* (1987). It must have struck the younger author (then 25, just out of the University of Arizona’s Creative Writing Program with an MFA, for what it was worth), as a profound, and uncanny, coincidence. Wittgenstein haunts both texts, formally and thematically, and in an interview also published in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993, Wallace described *Broom* as:

the sensitive tale of a sensitive young WASP who’s just had this mid-life crisis that’s moved him from coldly cerebral analytic math to a coldly cerebral take on fiction and Austin-Wittgenstein-Derridean literary theory, which also shifted his existential dread from a fear that he was just a 98.6 calculating machine to a fear that he was nothing but a linguistic construct.

It is intriguing that neither Markson nor *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* are mentioned in the interview, as if Wallace had completely repressed the older author’s influence on his work, even if he could not have read *WM* at the time of *Broom’s* composition (unless he was friendly with one of the fifty-four editors who rejected it, which is unlikely).

Reading “The Empty Plenum,” however, one finds echoes of Wallace’s own work everywhere in his description of Markson’s text, and not just in the ways that *The Broom of the System* and *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* engage with the ideas of the Austrian philosopher. Consider, for example, his description (in footnote 18) of the “continual reference to bunches of tennis balls bouncing all over the place,” which, he says, “made me realize tennis balls are about the best macroscopic symbol there is for the flux of atomistic fact . . .”—a note that is of profound importance in relation to *Infinite Jest* (1996). Or the fact that “The Empty Plenum” begins with a quotation from Stanley Cavell that refers to “looking philosophically as it were beneath our feet rather than over our heads” which might be said to echo the opening image

of *Broom* (“Most really pretty girls have pretty ugly feet . . .”).

All of this is to say that in “The Empty Plenum,” Wallace provides a number of clues that are useful to understanding his own work’s development, both at the time that the essay was written and in his later fictions. His extended discussion of Markson’s constructions of gender, for example, are valuable in relation to *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), while his closing insistence that *WM* is “really about the plenitude of emptiness” resonates with almost all of the work produced by Wallace throughout his tragically curtailed career. Wallace’s work, of course, was also known by Markson, and a reference to James O. Incandenza towards the end of *Reader’s Block*—first published in the same year as *Infinite Jest*—is just as intriguing as Wallace’s allusions and cross-references.

“one finds echoes of Wallace’s own work everywhere in his description of Markson’s text”

Rereading *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* in this new edition is then an experience that challenges one to engage not just with the genius of David Markson but with perhaps one of his most astute acolytes and advocates, David Foster Wallace. While Wallace says at one point that he had “never heard of this guy Markson, before, in ‘88,” one cannot ignore the profound affinities between the two authors. In his piece “Reading David Markson,” published in the first issue of *CONTEXT*, Joseph Tabbi (taking his cue from Wallace) insisted that *WM* “appears not as an illustration of a set of philosophical ideas or even a novelization of the philosopher’s life and thought, but as an original reading of Wittgenstein.” Readers interested in this interpretation of the novel should chase up Tabbi’s piece, but new readers and rereaders of *WM* in this edition might also do well to explore some of the many other sources and allusions that inform the text. Markson himself suggests as much in his interview with Tabbi in his description of important engagements with a wide range of other artists and thinkers—philosophers and writers: Roland Barthes and Claude Levi Strauss but also Herman Melville, John Barth, J. P. Donleavy, Raymond Chandler, among others. They may not all have “influenced” the writing of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*, but in the same way that it would be wrong to describe Kate solely in terms of a relationship she may or may not have had with Wittgenstein,

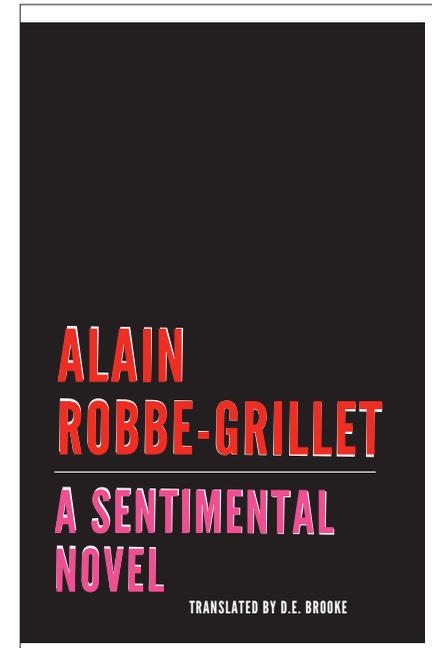
it is misleading to suggest that *WM’s* sole preoccupation is with the nature or function of the linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy.

In the same interview Markson says that the “central concept” of the book was in fact “the idea of aloneness,” and it is probably true to say that it was this, even more than its ostensible engagements with linguistic theory, that attracted Wallace to *Wittgenstein’s Mistress*. Wallace describes *WM* at one point in his essay as “an immediate study of depression & loneliness [that] is far too moving to be the object of either exercise or exorcism.” This, he says, means that for him the book “transcends [...] its review-enforced status of ‘intellectual tour de force’ or ‘experimental achievement.’” It is easy to lose sight of these crucially important clarifications, not just in relation to Wallace’s sense of the book but of *WM’s* own primary motivations, as far as Markson himself saw them. Indeed it is important too to recognize the roles played by many other figures in the formation of Markson’s aesthetic, and especially poets such as Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot, both of whom Markson recognised as important influences. (He actually hung out with Thomas towards the end of the poet’s life, as he also explains in his interview with Tabbi.) Markson’s own poems, it has to be said, are generally awful, but if the opening sentence of *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* calls the Book of Genesis to mind (as Wallace acknowledges), it might also allude to the opening of Eliot’s “East Coker” (“In my beginning is my end”) or to Thomas’s early poem “In the beginning,” which includes the following verse:

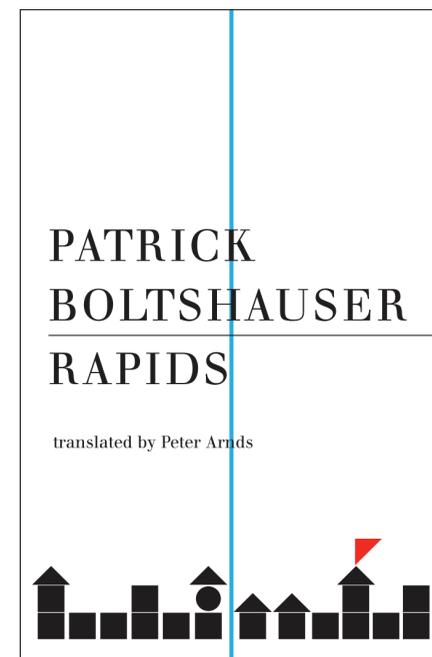
*In the beginning was the word,
the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void;
And from the cloudy bases
of the breath
The word flowed up, translating
to the heart
First characters of birth and death.*

Wittgenstein’s Mistress challenges our sense of what the novel can be today as much as it did when it was first published in 1988. The poet John Berryman, who also knew Thomas when Markson knew him, claimed in an essay first published in 1940 that the Welsh poet’s work “extended the language and to a lesser degree the methods of lyric poetry.” The same might be said of Markson, especially in *Wittgenstein’s Mistress* and in the works that followed it. *WM* is also a book in which words are presented in such a way that one is left, in Thomas’s phrase, “translating to the heart / First characters of birth and death.” In this lies the true character of Markson’s genius as well as the significance of his inheritance for those who come after him. ■

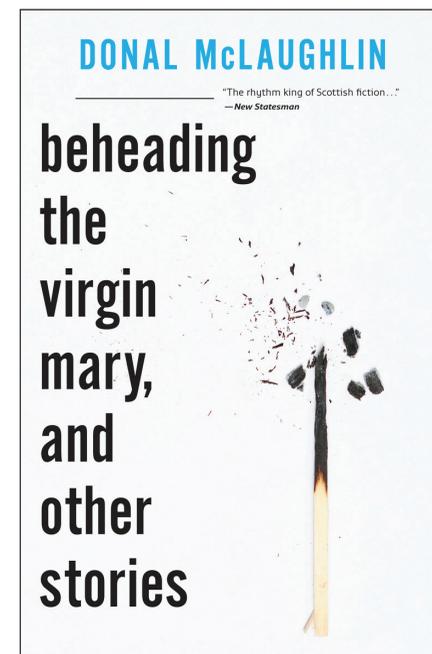
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Monument to a Scientific Error (1930)

Viktor Shklovsky

In 1930 Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky was finally persuaded, or induced, to reject his theories—long criticized for their disregard for the impact of economic and social forces on literature. Oft-cited, and controversial, his apparent recantation appears here in a translation by Shushan Avagyan.

I.

The recurrent problems facing linguistic science demand a precise theoretical platform and a firm dissociation from the increasing mechanistic tendency to patch the new methodology with the old obsolete methods. They require a firm refusal of the contraband offerings of naïve psychologism and other methodological hand-me-downs in the guise of new methodology.

Furthermore, academic eclecticism (promoted by Zhirmunsky and others) and scholastic “Formalism,” which substitutes analysis for terminology and classification of phenomena, and the repeated attempts to turn literary and linguistic studies from a systematic science into episodic and anecdotal subjects must be rejected.¹

The heightened attention now directed at the so-called “Formal” method and the hostility of this attention can be easily explained.

Anyone who claims or has claimed that class struggle does not affect literature thereby neutralizes certain sectors of the front.

It is impossible to talk about a lack of direction in art produced today. And it seems that interest in the study of the history of literature is moving toward the more directional, so to speak, publicistic epochs.

At the same time, it turns out that directionlessness in art—its dislodging from places where it once existed—has also pursued its own rather real and directed aims.

In addition, the so-called “Formal” method cannot be viewed as a reaction to the Revolution. The Formalists’ first works appeared in the interval between 1914 and 1917.

Our first studies aimed to create a typology and morphology of the literary work.

This type of work was necessary in the initial stages of the scientific study of literature, but it was not sufficient, as it was not even the anatomizing of literary works, rather the protocol of their disclosure.

The abstraction of the literary system from other social systems was a working hypothesis that was useful for the initial accumulation and systematization of facts.

Friedrich Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring* that when we consider and reflect upon nature at large or upon the history of mankind or even our own intellectual activity, at first we see the picture of an endless entanglement of relations and reactions:

But this conception, correctly as it expresses the general character of the picture of appearances as a whole, does not suffice to explain the details of which this picture is made up, and so long as we do not understand these, we do not have a clear idea of the whole picture. In order to understand these details we must detach them from their natural or historical connection and examine each one separately, its nature, special causes, effects, etc.

The error was not in the division of the system, but the crystallization of the division. My error was that I took distant examples of literature from different epochs and nationalities and proved their aesthetical single-valuedness, i.e., I tried to study literary works as an isolated system, without investigating its interrelationship with the whole system of literature and the economic base that shapes culture.

The empirical study of literary phenomena showed that every literary work exists only against the background of another work, that it is perceptible only within the literary system.

I inserted this observation into my construction without making any substantial deductions.

The emergence of literary forms is a mass social process. After *Amusing Evenings*, *Melancholic Evenings*, *Bucolic Evenings*, *Evening Hours* come Nar-ezhny’s *Slavonic Evenings* and Gogol’s *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*.

We can also compare the accumulation of nearly identical pseudonyms in the poetry of the 1860s: “the Exposing Poet,” “the Mournful Poet,” “the Obscure Poet,” “the New Poet,” and even “the New Poet II.”

Boris Eichenbaum tried to revise the formal method. His very first act being to replace the term “formal” with “mor-

phological.” This revision eliminated the ambiguity of the term “formal” and simultaneously pointed at the mode of analysis.

A turning point in the evolution of the method were the extremely important works of Yuri Tynjanov, who introduced into literary studies the concept of the literary function of polysemy in literary elements of different epochs.

Very little was left of the first, rather naïve, definition that a literary work equals the sum of its devices. The parts of a literary work are not summed up, but interrelated. Literary form in its ostensible single-valuedness appears to be uniform, but not monosemantic.

It became clear that it is impossible to study the devices in isolation, as they are all correlated with one another and with the literary system, which in turn is shaped by the base.

This transition was not easy and the old construction recurred in a variety of ways.

The main difficulty was to determine the correlation between the literary system—or between all the systems of so-called “culture”—and the base.

II.

The history of literature (and art), being simultaneous with other historical systems, is characterized, as any other system, by a complex network of specific structural laws. It is impossible to determine in a scientific manner the correlation between the literary system and other historical systems without an elucidation of these laws.²

In a novel by Jules Romains called *Donogoo Tonka*, the residents of a city built as a result of a geographer’s mistake erect a monument to scientific error.

I do not wish to stand as a monument to my own error.

My first historical book was *Material and Style in Lev Tolstoy’s War and Peace*.

What interested me in this book was how the author’s social class influenced the laws by which he deformed the historical material. The target Tolstoy set himself led to the creation of a piece of agitprop for the nobility, representing a pre-reform Russia that was victorious

through pre-reform means.

Tolstoy’s war of 1812 was countered by the Crimean campaign. His was not a proposal for reform, but for reinstatement. Tolstoy’s contemporaries understood this tendency in the novel. It is interesting to note that in a caricature that appeared in the satirical journal *Iskra* (1868, Issue 16), Tolstoy was depicted writing in front of a fireplace with a statue of Napoleon III (not Napoleon I) on the mantel.

In my study I then focused on the important question of the novel’s appropriation of forms of inertia. I didn’t really demonstrate in my book (I will do so now) how the belletristic arsenal that Tolstoy used, the situations he depicted in the novel, were already seen the works of Ushakov (*The Last of the Korsunsky Princes*), Zagoskin (*Roslavlev*), Bulgarin (*Pyotr Vyzhigin*), Veltman (*The Lunatic*), and Sumarokov (*The Ring and the Note*).

But these traditional situations have a new function in Tolstoy. Along with the reactions to them, they use the poetics of the Natural School, juxtaposing conventional novels in new ways and setting them against a different lexical background. However, the author’s intent was not completely successful. Readers from different social classes are unique resonators of literary works. But the author’s intent to write a novel against the *raznochintny*, or persons of lower status, to write an anti-reform novel, as it were, failed. He didn’t achieve his objective.

The study of literary evolution must consider the social context; it must be informed by the examination of the literary movements that disproportionately infiltrate and are variously reproduced by different classes

These preconditions defined my recent work, *Matvei Komarov, Inhabitant of the City of Moscow*.

It seemed to me that the question of the sudden emergence of Russian prose in the 1830s had not been sufficiently examined.

Searching for its origins, I traced it back to the prose fiction of the eighteenth century. From Veltman’s *Koshchei the Deathless* and from Dal’s fairy tale “About the Thief and the Brown Cow” I came to Chulkov. From Tolstoy’s folk tales and his attempt to champion the peasant I then came to Komarov.

Eighteenth-century prose was characterized by mass production. Many books had a large circulation and were often reprinted. This type of literature was mainly consumed by the lower layers of nobility, by merchants, and by peasants who moved to the city.

The elevation of Russian prose is therefore probably explained by the elevation of the social classes for which it catered. Russian prose of the 1730s didn’t re-emerge, rather, it changed its function.

1. From the declaration by Roman Jakobson and Yuri Tynjanov in *New LEF*, 1929.

2. Ibid.

III.

The concept of a synchronic literary system does not coincide with the naively envisaged concept of a chronological epoch, as it includes not only works of art that are close to each other in time, but also works that are drawn into the orbit of the system from foreign literatures and older epochs. It is not enough to randomly catalog coexisting phenomena; what is important is their hierarchical significance for the given epoch.³

One should remember in the study of these questions that the evolutionary pace of the various ideological superstructures does not necessarily coincide with the pace of development of the base.

Marx noted these inconsistencies in his unfinished introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

6) *Unequal relation of the development of material production to, for example, that of art.* The concept of progress is generally not to be grasped in the usual abstractness ... However, the really difficult point to discuss here is how the relations of production develop unevenly as legal relations. Thus, for example, the relation of Roman civil law (less so for criminal and public law) to modern production.

So it is that, for example, various forms of feudal legislature were fully preserved in bourgeois England. And in France, after the revolution, old Roman laws were adapted to new capitalist relations.

Similarly, Pushkin's and Lermontov's verse was adapted and the forms parodied by Nekrasov and the *Iskra* poets (Minaev, Kurochkin, and others) in order to create expositional civic poetry.

So it can be said that works that have lost their original intent and have become inert blocks are often called Classical.

The censors from the past understood this very well. The censor, Oldekop (1841) preferred tragedy. He wrote: "Tragedy, like opera or ballet, can be seen as the most benign branch of the performing arts... If we give tragedy a bigger place, the influence of comedy will lessen. The public that has seen *King Lear* will be less partial to *The Inspector General*. Having found pure literary and artistic pleasure in tragedy, people will not so readily look for suggestions in comedy."

We know that tragedy, particularly Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, was radical in its own time. But later (in Oldekop's era), tragedy became a "literary pleasure."

So, when studying the significance of Classicism, one must necessarily account for the fact that it is now linked with "literary pleasure."

IV.

A disclosure of the immanent laws of the history of literature (and language) allows the character of each specific change in literary (and linguistic) systems to be determined; however, it does not allow us to explain the pace or the chosen path of evolution when several theoretically possible evolutionary paths are given... The question of a specific choice of path, or at least the dominant one, can be solved only through an analysis of the correlation between the literary system and other historical systems.⁴

The appearance of a new form is preceded by a process of agglomeration in the inert form (in its noncritical areas, so to speak) of elements that filter in from adjacent social systems.

The processes take place through leaps, by turning deviation into a quality of the new genre. The old form, which exists and does not change formally, changes functionally.

The "tolstovka" was originally a nobleman's garb for hunting. It was worn by both Tolstoy and Turgenev. In his later years, when, instead of a frock coat, Tolstoy started wearing this long-belted shirt in public, it became known as the "tolstovka." And although it was the same shirt, it was different. The "tolstovka" worn by a Soviet official is its third form, the final change in function. Things are further complicated by the fact that the "tolstovka" is influenced by

the "French" jacket⁵ and the suit jacket. And based on the history of this garment we could elucidate a very complex social process.

The discovery of the new form does not destroy the inert form, but rather changes (usually restricts) the sphere of its application. Thus, the genres of the fairy tale and chivalric romance have become obsolete in high literature and have moved into the lower spheres of children's literature and mass culture.

Literary evolution must be understood, not as a continuous flow, or as an inheritance of some property, but rather as a process with leaps and ruptures, in which alternating forms compete with one another and are ascribed new meanings.

Literature must study the continuity of the changing system of modes of social impact.

The general perception of the Formal method has remained in its initial stage, when we were defining the elementary concepts, selecting the material, and establishing the terminology.

Formalism is a trodden path for me, a path along which I have already passed and left several stages behind. The most important stage was the shift to the consideration of the function of literary form. What is left of the Formal method is the terminology, which is now being used by everyone.

To study literary evolution in the context of functionality, one must, in my opinion, become familiar with the Marxist method in its entirety.

Of course, I am not declaring myself a Marxist, because one doesn't adhere to scientific methods. One masters them and one creates them. ■



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3, 4. Ibid.

5. Named after the Anglo-Irish Field Marshal John French.

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