No. 25

CONTEXT

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A Forum For Literary Arts And Culture

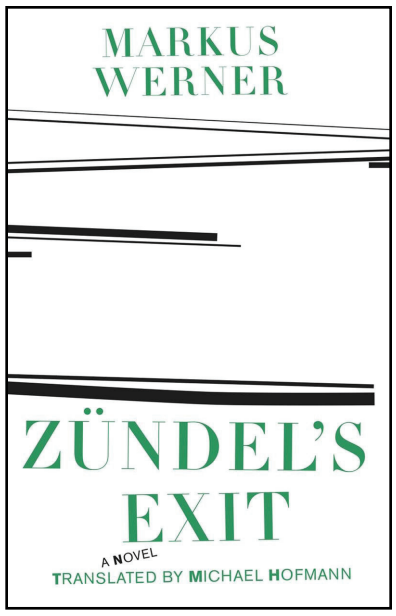
The Uncontemporary: Reading Markus Werner

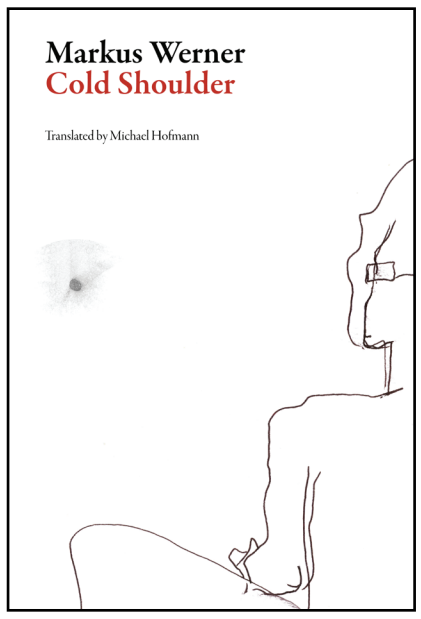
Alex Andriesse

Markus Werner
On the Edge
Haus Publishing, 2012

Zündel's Exit
Dalkey Archive Press, 2014

Cold Shoulder
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016





Contemporary literature is, whether we like it or not, firmly yoked to its market value. A new novel comes to us packaged, promoted, and prone to be read in the light of its jacket copy, its reviews, even its author photo. There's nothing inherently sinister about this state of affairs, although it does sometimes lead us to dismiss or embrace unfamiliar writing for reasons that have little to do with the writing itself. Even those who should know better sometimes treat new novels unconscionably, if unconsciously, as commodities—as the author's merchandise. Today, the majority of book reviewers have altogether dropped the genteel pretense of literature as a realm apart. Instead, they proudly speak of writers "producing" novels, and readers "consuming" them.

The writer at odds with this brave new book-world is almost guaranteed to be ignored by it. He is hard to advertise, indifferent to review, unfriendly to the reader out to consume. Until he fell silent a decade ago, the Swiss writer Markus Werner was one such writer, out of joint—though not out of touch—with the times. Werner, who was born in 1944 and died in the summer of 2016, began as an academic; his dissertation was devoted to the fiction of his fellow Switzer Max Frisch. From 1975 until 1990, he was employed as a lecturer at the Kantonsschule in Schaffhausen, and it was during this period that he began to write novels, the first, *Zündel's Exit* (Dalkey Archive, 2014), appearing in 1984, followed by six more, including *Cold Shoulder* (Dalkey Archive, 2016) and *On the Edge* (Haus Publishing, 2012).

All of Werner's fiction is characterized by an extreme, borderline deranged sensitivity to the insults of modern life above all to the modern use and misuse of language. His protagonists are for the most part educated men, given to outrage and revolted by the vulgarity that surrounds them—men whose outlook the adjective "pessimistic" doesn't begin to do justice. Also, these protagonists are funny as hell.

Here, for example, is Zündel, having just lost a tooth and discovered a severed finger in the restroom, scrutinizing his fellow train passengers:

> All this continual assertion of self. Everything is hostile, everything that happens to me exceeds my capacity to endure it. Why does God have to send me a finger? And take my tooth. Sooner or later, everyone feels unviable. Humanity is assembled from partially reformed bed-wetters who never quite shake the feeling of existential displacement. No sphincter, no melancholy. Look at them, sipping their coffee.

Obviously, it's fair to compare Werner to Frisch, as well as to Thomas Bernhard. All three of them are sublime misanthropists, capable of articulating a distaste for humanity which, fired by the humor and passion of their prose, detonates in great bursts of scathing, self-loathing soliloquy. You *could* say that a character such as Werner's Zündel gives new meaning to the phrase "painfully self-conscious," so long as you acknowledge that Herr Zündel himself would find both the phrase "gives new meaning" and "painfully self-conscious" excruciating to read.

Like many of Werner's characters, Zündel would like to be a citizen of the world, a man among men; yet he is always butting up against his own inalterable prejudices and peculiarities. Arriving in a new city, he buys a newspaper ("after all I'm not an ostrich. I know there are more current things than me"), but no sooner has he ordered a Campari and started reading than he notes that all the "sentences and terms didn't bore him so much as simply disgust him." "The words stink and the sentences stink, as if they'd slipped out of the hemorrhoid-wreathed intestines of pest-infected morons." A fairly lively definition of journalese.

> "Until he fell silent a decade ago, the Swiss writer Markus Werner was one such writer, out of joint—though not out of touch—with the times."

To say the least, Werner has a gift for the well-turned vitriolic phrase. *Zündel's Exit* abounds with examples, as does *Cold Shoulder*, in which the protagonist, Wenk, a didactic man, always lecturing, is asked why he hasn't become a teacher: "He lacked the belief, he said casually, in the educability of the species." Werner, like Bernhard before him, isn't averse to taking his characters' crankiness to extremes. The aging widower Thomas Loos, one of two main characters in *On the Edge*, launches into a particularly inspired diatribe on the state of men's underthings:

> I only wanted to say that normal briefs are being systematically squeezed out by underpants that are not fit for purpose, that have no fly and can thus hardly be distinguished from women's panties [. . .] But there it is exactly: the world is out of joint, and there is much we seek in vain therein.

Much of Werner's writing depends on just this kind of ironic rhetorical turn. The state of men's underthings becomes synecdochic for the state of the world. Righteous anger edges into ridiculous rant. Cynicism slides into self-parody.

I wouldn't want to give the impression, however, that Werner's only gift is for rancor. *Zündel's Exit* is a frank depiction of a man's descent into madness, a portrait of a person who cannot escape from his own mind and ends up absconding from his own life. The unexpectedly poignant ending of *Cold Shoulder* moved me almost to tears. And *On the Edge*, with its Conrad-like structure and submerged story of grief and love, is a masterpiece of oblique emotion—as well as a catalogue of deep-seated antipathies. Humanity, in Werner's view, is horrific, but humans, taken one by one, are not all bad. Wenk, in *Cold Shoulder*, wanders one day into a village graveyard and sees a "rather ravaged-looking" grave overgrown with ivy. On the stone he reads:

> CLUMB UP
> FELL DOON
> DONE FER

And he finds himself delighted. "Was there a swifter way of formulating a life," he wonders: "No, this was the fate not just of one individual, but of all mankind, even though the villagers might disagree and prefer their dismal 'Released.'"

Werner has so far been a slight presence in English, although he has been extraordinarily well served by his

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Franco D'Alessandro is a critic, playwright, and poet. He teaches drama in New York.

Charles La Shure has a doctorate in Classical Korean Literature, and since 2008 has been teaching Korean-English translation at Hangkuk University of Foreign Studies.

Paul Larkin is a writer and translator living in Denmark. His translations include *Johanne, Johanne...* (2016) by Lars Sidenius.

Artem Chapeye is a journalist and writer living in the Ukraine. His writing has appeared in *Best European Fiction 2016*.

Boris Novak is a Slovenian poet and dramaturge. His published work includes *The Master of Insomnia* (1995).

Alojzija Zupan Sosič is a Slovenian translator and academic. She teaches at the University of Ljubljana.

Petra Vidali is a critic/essayist from Maribor, Slovenia.

Jesse Anderson is a critic and translator. He translated *Francis Bacon's Armchair* (2016) by Sébastien Brebel.

Maya Zakrzewska-Pim is an academic and translator. Her translations include *Gestures* (2017) by Ignacy Karpowicz.

Steven G. Kellman is an academic and literary critic. His published work includes *The Plague: Fiction and Resistance* (1993).

Nick Wadley is a cartoonist and art historian. His published work includes *Man + Table* (2016).

Eric Kurtzke is an editor and translator at Dalkey Archive Press. He translated *The Irish Sea* (2017) by Carlos Maleno.

Alex Andriesse is a writer, translator, and associate editor at Dalkey Archive Press.

PUBLISHER
John O'Brien

EDITOR
Ricardo Gilb

PRODUCTION
Jeffrey Higgins
Victoria Hudgeons

COPYEDITORS
Jane Balkoski

PROOFREADER
Alex Andriesse

TEXAS LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY
Anita Noemi Garza

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translators—above all by Michael Hofmann, who has lent his hand (and inimitable ear) to both of the novels published by Dalkey Archive. Probably Werner is not destined to reach a *much* wider audience. His irony is too subtle, his humor too black to make him a writer

> "Much of Werner's writing depends on just this kind of ironic rhetorical turn. The state of men's underthings becomes synecdochic for the state of the world."

fit for mass consumption. But his books are well worth the time of any reader who harbors misgivings about the march of human progress. He is a connoisseur—to borrow a few words from Hofmann's foreword to *Zündel's Exit*—of "the highly evolved, the uncontemporary, the thoughtful, the delicate, the unlikely." A connoisseur of everything that today's reductive literary consumerism would have us pass over in silence. ■

An Interview with Carlos Maleno

Eric Kurtzke

[This interview with Carlos Maleno was conducted via e-mail in the summer of 2017.]

ERIC KURTZKE: In The Irish Sea, *you recall an anecdote about Robert Walser refusing to be an important figure like Hermann Hesse. It brought to mind the distinction in* 2666 *between major and minor works of literature. How do you interpret this passage in Bolaño's novel?*

CARLOS MALENO: Having read this question, I get up from my chair and find Bolaño's *2666* on the bookshelf. I don't have to look for the passage, because it's one of those marked out by the little bits of paper stuck between the pages. In it—and contrary to music, in which the major scale sets the stage for the complete, rounded, perfect, festive work, while only in the minor key can one delve into what's human, into pain, into doubt—Bolaño categorizes the great literary works, which are perfect, round, and closed, as nonetheless minor. For him, the imperfect, perhaps incomplete work, where the writer is in the grip of the deepest uncertainty, is the major work. In the process of writing such a work, the artistic question is secondary to the existential one—to doubt, pain, or love. Yes, they talk of love, too, as the mad Russian boy said to Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. In the major work, the reader becomes staffage, it doesn't matter who is being written for, not even literature matters, because at that moment the author is "struggling against that something, that something that terrifies us all, that something that cows us and spurs us on, amid blood and mortal wounds and stench." And there can be no doubt that *2666* is a major work. It's undeniable. Nobody can deny blood, and in saying this I have in mind Bolaño's own account of how Kafka, perhaps the greatest writer of the 20th century, understood that the dice had been rolled and that nothing could come between him and writing the day he spat blood for the first time.

EK: There is a thread of science fiction throughout The Irish Sea, *less that of Schrödinger's Cat than of Gombrowicz's Cow. I'm referring to the entry in his* Diaries *when Gombrowicz records feeling like "a phenomenon not of this world" after exchanging glances with a cow. What marks the difference between human and cow?*

CM: Humanity has been quite exalted, leading even to a humanization of certain species of mammals. Intelligence gets taken for humanity. In that exchage of glances, Gombrowicz saw the recognition of his being by the cow, the mutual recognition of two living beings that can feel, perceive the world, and suffer. This perturbed and excited him. There isn't much difference in terms of intelligence between a dog and a cow or pig, but people recognize themselves in the dog, they humanize it. But what happens when we perceive this same intelligence in animals that have been treated like mere nutritional products, that will be slaughtered, packed up, and consumed? It's a bit disturbing. Gombrowicz was deeply human to question his own humanity while looking into that cow's eyes. Along these lines, I'm very interested in books like *Under the Skin*, by Michel Faber, or from the opposite perspective, *The Restraint of Beasts*, by Magnus Mills.

EK: Toward the end of The Irish Sea, *nostalgia is said to have a transformative effect on reality. Did you personally feel such a nostalgia when writing it? If so, was it the catalyst or did it develop unexpectedly from the act of writing?*

CM: On the one hand, a nostalgia for somewhere I'd never been, for a certain imagined light, acted as the book's driving force. But it's also true that *The Irish Sea* was a kind of private investigation of what I am and what I've been, and maybe during the writing of it a nostalgia for what I could have been also began to develop. During that period, I wanted to be able to spend all my time reading, writing, and feeling, instead of spending endless workdays at a job I didn't like. Still don't. Sitting down to write after all those hours at work is almost a fight against all odds.

EK: Is The Irish Sea *a novel? Were the stories, or chapters, written according to a unifying plan?*

CM: When I started writing it, my first intention might have been to write stories. At the time, I was reading many of the great short story writers. I was spellbound by the stories of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Bolaño, and above all Enrique Vila-Matas, to whom I owe so much, and who for me is one of the greatest living writers. But little by little, unintentionally, as the writing progressed, everything started connecting, like it was a forgotten dream being suddenly remembered. My editor in Spain called it a novel, and perhaps by way of an answer I'd do better to paraphrase Salman Rushdie: "And, in the end, the only thing that's left of me are stories." There's another quote by Tim O'Brien: "But this too is true: stories can save us." And maybe this is what *The Irish Sea* is: a collection of stories that became connected while I was writing them, creating a nostalgic autobiography in which I might have found something like a salvation. ■

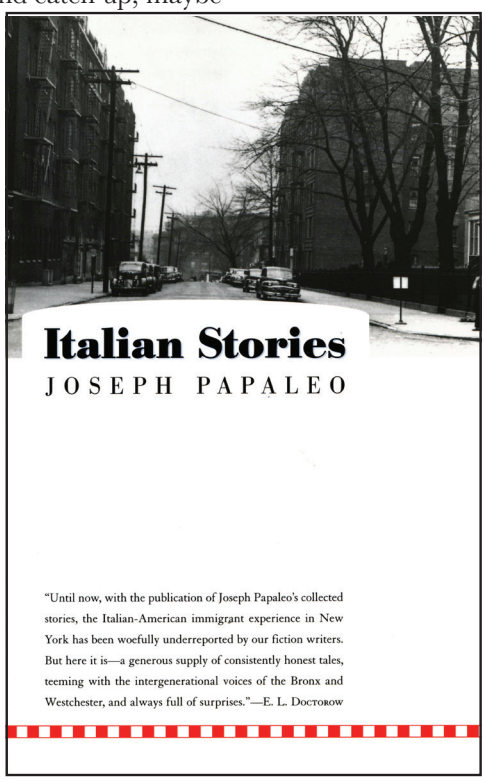
A Tribute to Joseph Papaleo

Franco D'Alessandro

Joseph Papaleo
Italian Stories
Dalkey Archive Press, 2002

Joseph Papaleo touched the lives of many people; at times he grabbed you, or even gave an occasional *schiaffo* when required. Joe did not know how to do things without passion. The most impromptu, casual meal at his house was an event that lasted six or seven hours. The care, love, detail, and soul he put into his writing, he also put into his cooking and entertaining.

A meal with Joe often started like his marvelous stories, with light food, drink and conversation, maybe a *rosato Siciliano* (Sicilian rosé) with some mozzarella di bufala, roasted peppers, olives, cheeses like caciocavallo and provolone, some salumi; prosciutto, sopressata. These were the anecdote hours, the time for small conversation and catch up, maybe even a bit of gossip. After two hours, we would be ready to eat: pasta—maybe spaghetti al foreano (anchovies, parsley, raisins, and pignoli) served with a crisp white Lachrymae Christi wine. All this would introduce the players and gear you for the payoff.



It is no secret anymore that the Italian-American ethnic experience—the real one, not the noir-ish facsimile of cinema and screen—has been grossly under-reviewed and under-promoted. Italians raced so quickly to assimilate that they left behind their sense of community when it came to the arts and letters, in particular, leaving us Italo-American writers extremely conflicted about the word "assimilation." Certainly Joe was very concerned about that subject, as his emotionally complex and moving stories demonstrate.

The heart of Italian America is New York and its surrounding areas, and it is Joseph Papaleo who put this heart on the map, creating a body of work that truly and generously gives us a variety of stories and poems treating of the Italian-American experience. Not to take away from Mario Puzo, but his too was a tragic case of stereotyping; his greatest success, *The Godfather*, is a book he had to research scrupulously for years, possessing neither Sicilian heritage, nor any kind of connection to the Mafia. For him it was as distant as for an everyday American writing about the FBI. Joe—for his part—got drowned out by the wave of hysteria and thirst for tales of "mafia culture"; Italian stories were okay, just so long as there was some mob connection, some murder and mayhem. America—not for the first time—turned its back on a treasure trove of rich storytelling, the real Italo-American experience. At the time Joe was producing magnificent novels like *Out of Place* and *All the Comforts*—both of which received critical acclaim but little public attention. Thirty years passed before he was regularly referred to as the "father of Italian-American literature."

Any decent introduction to Papaleo's work has to address this collection's brilliant prologue, "To An Ethnic Life," which draws the reader—perhaps even hurls them—into *Italian Stories*, offering a clear understanding of where this writer is coming from. Joseph Papaleo was in some respects an American Fellini; but where Fellini was never a true neo-realist, being far more concerned with fantasy and the oneiric, Papaleo drives hard into reality, finding absurdity in the quotidian, grandiosity in the mundane, epic pathos in the silent and small American pains. In that sense he evokes Arthur Miller, relentlessly showing us an America that we don't dare look at too long because the losses and sufferings we have so skillfully evaded will no doubt stir us from our materialistic, narcotized state.

As with great, memorable meals, (you know, the ones you talk about for a lifetime . . . or at least you do if you are Italian or, as Joe would say of certain honorary Italians, you have an Italian soul) Joe Papaleo's stories are unforgettable. Who can forget the eponymous character Nonna, the enigmatic, witch/grandmother/poet, spouting curious (often downright provocative) pearls of madness or wisdom or both? And can one possibly fail to enjoy the weight and whimsy of the word cherub (cherubini) in "A Wedding for Ingebordo"? Are not all of the hearths of our memories gently stoked with the snow-capped moments of heartache and sibling tenderness in "Leaving Vermont"? Who can forget Henry's complex inner journey of love and loss, of things unsaid and undone, in "You See What You Did"; or Anthony Sarfatti's ethnic odyssey of identity and success in "Friday Supper"? These stories, richly seasoned with equal parts melancholy and humor, ultimately reveal the full spectrum of the twentieth-century immigrant experience. The magic of Joe Papaleo's work is that his stories

"In Joe's work you need to pay as much attention to what is not happening, not being said, or not being done as to what is ... [p]ay attention to your thoughts as much as to the words. He wants to know what you are thinking!"

are as richly satisfying as his magnificent multi-course meals.

Yes, Joe Papaleo grabs you when he tells you a story. Sometimes the story is a confession, sometimes it is a plea, but a Papaleo story is always filled with wonder, pain, desire and an ache for something lost or missing or hoping to be found. Oftentimes his stories are a haunted memory. In Joe's work you need to pay as much attention to what is not happening, not being said, or not being done, as to what is. The regrets, the recriminations, the absences, the losses, the negative spaces . . . are all equally important to their respective positive counterparts. So pay attention to your thoughts as much as to the words. He wants to know what you are thinking! Just like at the great dinner parties that Joe and his force-of-nature wife, Toni, hosted, you are part of the story. And like the ubiquitous food –the various authentic Italian dishes that find their ways into each of his stories, you are part of the story.

I met Joe in 1989 as I was readying to graduate from Fordham University. I was lost. I knew a lot about a few things and was certain of nothing, except maybe that I wanted to write. Joe made that a possibility; Joe allowed that to become my reality. He was critical and supportive of my early poetry, too thickly veiled and coy, he commanded that my soul come out of its various closets: ethnic, sexual, artistic, philosophical. Who knew? Through his pushing, at times gentle, at times a shove worthy of a schoolyard fight, he shepherded me to focus more on drama. And so, at age 22, I truly started to become a playwright. The best playwrights are poets at heart; Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill certainly prove that axiom. So, after regaling Joe at several of the aforementioned *feste grandiose* (dinner extravaganzas) with stories of Tennessee Williams and inspired years in Rome and enduring friendship with his muse Anna Magnani, he made it plain that THIS was a subject for a play. I would write some eight plays in the following years, and, by 1998, the first reading of *Roman Nights* took place in New York City. In 2002 it would receive a Class-A Off-Broadway premiere production, go on to London in 2004 and eventually receive professional and academic productions in Los Angeles, Italy, France, Spain, Russia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil. It was the perfect way to talk about the American and the Italian parts of me in a completely unique way, which was the genius of Joe Papaleo. He saw things in ways few others could. It was through his writing (and now I hope through my own) that others learned how to see that way too. And in this, he did what all of us writers strive to do: help our readers to understand more and to feel more, and ultimately to understand better the experience of being . . . being what? An ethnic person. An outsider. One who doesn't have all the answers but sure as hell knows a few of them. A person who is on this earth learning more, yet knowing less each day.

That was the magic of Joe Papaleo and his writing. *Buon appetito*! ■

An Interview with Ignacy Karpowicz

Maya Zakrzewska-Pim

[The following interview accompanies Dalkey Archive's publication in translation of Ignacy Karpowicz's novel, Gestures. *Shortlisted for the Nike Literary Award,* Gestures *captivates the reader with its exquisite prose and haunting characters. An extract from the novel can be read on p. 5 of this issue.]*

MAYA ZAKRZEWSKA-PIM: What do you think is more important when it comes to reading: the author's intentions, or the reader's interpretation? Or are these equally significant?

IGNACY KARPOWICZ: I think that the book is "finished" only after it has been read. Before that, it is an outline of something, a meal which still needs to be prepared before one can eat it. The author's intentions are of course important during the book's creation, but after that the reader's interpretation is of greater import.

MZ-P: In writing Gestures, *is there something specific that you were hoping to communicate to your readers?*

IK: Every book which has had an emotional effect on me was a complete and whole world in itself, even if the fundamental building block of that world was fragmentation or even a lack of something. While writing *Gestures*, I wanted to create just such a complete and finished literary world, organized around a single hero who observes his private sphere in thirty-nine short chapters. I find it difficult to define the novel's essence, which is perhaps best read as an invitation: to make time in which to study one's reality and place in it. Maybe this approach involves a kind of corny sententiousness, but sometimes that is simply the best way to describe the world.

MZ-P: What effect were you trying to achieve with the novel's ending, an ending which gives rise to so many contrasting emotions—disappointment, bitterness, but also a sense of peace . . . ?

IK: My editors and I spent a long time thinking about the ending. Eventually we decided on the more controversial option. I think it follows naturally from the book's earlier chapters. The preceding sections, together with the ending, lead me to conclude that people have the tendency to make plans and organize their realities (internal and external ones) without taking into consideration those chance events which turn everything upside down. On the other hand, it is precisely this unplanned occurrence at the end of the novel which completes the hero's intentions and plans.

MZ-P: To what extent do you share your characters' views of the world, love, family relations, etc?

IK: While writing the novel, I probably shared the same views. Now, however, I view the world differently, with less passivity, though the essence remains the same—experience the world with sensitivity as well as ruthlessness.

MZ-P: Where did you find the ideas for Gestures; *did you have any specific inspirations?*

IK: I was writing [my previous novel] *Sonka* at the time, and I realized that I didn't understand one of the characters. I thought that I'd write about him, to learn more of him and so—unexpectedly—*Gestures* was born.

MZ-P: What words do you think are best used to describe Gestures*?*

IK: I will answer in a Borges manner—*Gestures* is best described by *Gestures*. ■

Remembering Irving Malin

by Steven G. Kellman

I first made the acquaintance of Irving Malin with a cold call from a stranger in 1996. His opening question—"You are a polymath, aren't you?"—invited a reply that was either sheepish or oafish. However, without pausing for a response, the caller proceeded to fill two hours with a dazzling disquisition on literature, film, TV, and food.

During the last three decades of his life, Malin, the most gregarious recluse in American letters, rarely ventured outside his home in Forest Hills, Queens. He was a graduate of Jamaica High School and Queens College, where, in 1954, he met Ruth Lief, whom he married in a union that lasted almost 59 years. Though Irv would venture as far as California for a doctorate from Stanford, he remained a city boy who never learned to drive and scoffed at sports. Retired from the faculty of the City University of New York, and embittered by academic politics in the age of multiculturalism, he was ceaselessly astonished that I, a native New Yorker, could survive in the Texas wilderness.

Though we collaborated on books about Don DeLillo, Leslie Fiedler, William Gass, and Vladimir Nabokov, and though we spoke regularly and for hundreds of hours by phone, he and I never met in person. Whenever I happened to be in the neighborhood, Irv found an excuse to avoid meeting. He had no qualms, however, about picking up a telephone at any hour and sharing his ideas with strangers, even figures as formidable as Harold Bloom, William Gass, and Cynthia Ozick. Telephonic communications from Irving Malin became as legendary as epistolary dispatches from Henry James.

Irv was too smitten by movies to be a thorough Luddite. He did not write with a quill pen by the flickering light of a candle, but the most advanced technological gadget that he could tolerate might have been the cathode ray tube. Just as he somehow managed to read almost everything written in English during the past hundred years, Irv was a connoisseur of even the tritest tripe available on broadcast TV. However, he stubbornly refused to send or receive email, in fact even refused to use a computer. Apple, for Irv, was the fruit of a forbidden tree. All of his written communication came in a kind of scrawl, resembling a sort of cryptic code translated from the Malinese. It is impossible to imagine Irv contorting his thoughts into PowerPoint or, certainly, contracting himself into a tweet.

Irv's dissertation on William Faulkner, *William Faulkner: An Interpretation* (1957), became the first of his many books. The list of other notable American authors he would go on to write about includes Conrad Aiken, Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, Don DeLillo, James Dickey, Joan Didion, Leslie Fiedler, F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Garrett, William Gass, Henry James, Mark Twain, Joyce Carol Oates,

The Smoker

Nicholas Wadley

Books by Nick Wadley
Drunk With Pleasure: Nick Wadley's Guide to Wine
Pomegranate Communications, 2003
Man + Dog
Dalkey Archive Press, 2009
Man + Doctor
Dalkey Archive Press, 2012
Man +Table
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016

Flannery O'Connor, John O'Hara, William Styron, and John Updike. He also wrote about Muriel Spark, Eugene Ionesco, and Angus Wilson. The earliest phase of Irv's career coincided with the emergence of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth as the unholy trinity of American Jewish literature and, with them, of American Jewish literature as a respectable category for marketing and study. *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature* (1964), which he co-edited with Irwin Stark, was itself a breakthrough, the revelation of exciting new developments in American writing. With *Jews and Americans* (1965), *Saul Bellow and the Critics* (1967), *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1978), *Saul Bellow's Fiction (*1969), *Nathanael West's Novels* (1972), *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1972), and numerous articles, he established himself as a leading interpreter of contemporary literature by Jews in the United States.

"I have resisted the 'safety' of the canon," Irv wrote in his "Anti-Introduction" to the volume of essays on William Gass's exasperating novel *The Tunnel* that he and I edited in 1998. Even when writing about canonical texts, he did so in ways that flouted convention. He begins an essay in our 1999 collection on Leslie Fiedler by proclaiming: "I want to be perverse." Malin possessed some of the qualities implied by the French noun *malin*—a trickster. In *Torpid Smoke*, our 2000 collection on Vladimir Nabokov's short fiction, he titles an essay on "Signs and Symbols," Nabokov's story about hermeneutics as derangement: "Reading Madly." Reading madly, gladly, Irv was drawn increasingly to the kind of innovative fiction usually ignored by university presses, scholarly journals, literary magazines, and most readers. In 1981, when the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* was founded, it was natural that he became one of its inaugural subscribers. Over the years, he was a frequent contributor—of articles, reviews, and donations. He was also a munificent contributor to many other literary publications and read them, ravenously. It was impossible to mention a piece in *Fiction*, *Antioch Review*, or *Georgia Review* that he was not already familiar with. He was a passionate evangelist for the challenging works of William Gaddis, William Gass, William Goyen, Richard Powers, James Purdy, and Thomas Pynchon.

> "Telephonic communications from Irving Malin became as legendary as epistolary dispatches from Henry James."

On December 3, 2014, death claimed a peerless champion of the literary life. For a few years prior, illness had prevented Irv from being Irv. He had ceased his voracious reading and prolific writing. When Ruth informed me that he no longer even wanted to come to the phone, I knew that I had lost Irving Malin as my irreplaceable phone pal. But the voice of his quickening, generous spirit has never stopped echoing. I will remember him for his infectious enthusiasms, his agile wit, and his non-Euclidean polymathematics. ■

Gestures

Ignacy Karpowicz

Ignacy Karpowicz
Gestures
Translated by Maya Zakrewska-Pim
Dalkey Archive Press, 2017

I don't remember much of my childhood. Perhaps I don't want to. Perhaps I'm still too young. Perhaps there is still too far to go before the end. But I'm getting closer. Regardless of whether or not I want to. Every day is another step. Three hundred and sixty steps is a year. Every four years, I trip over a leap day.

With every year I learn, or at least I hope I do, how to be honest with myself. Exercises in honesty are far from being one of my favorite pastimes. I'm not very studious in this subject. I have good intentions, but limited patience. I don't deserve more than a pass in honesty; and this only to encourage me to continue. I'm not sure if this is enough to go on to the next grade. Regardless of all this, though, for years now, step by step, I cover the same material.

I don't remember much of my childhood. First, I was born in winter. This is a fact: the date appears on my birth certificate, and the season—in the stories my parents tell. First, I was born, but I remember nothing. I don't remember swimming. I don't remember my mother's water breaking. How my lungs filled with air for the first time. How I began to use my mouth to eat, because earlier I ate through my belly button. How my eyes first deciphered a shape. How my brain recognized a shape for the first time. A new word: "familiar." A familiar shape.

Second, I learned to talk. I don't remember my own baby-talk. I don't remember my first words. According to my parents, it was "mama," perhaps if I asked my dad when my mother was out of earshot, he would say "dada." I don't remember my first word, my parents remember for me, but they remember in their own way, each in a different room and a different past. If I were to pick my first word, based on my life experiences so far, it would be "me." Second, I learned to talk, and my first word was "me," even though nobody remembers. Me neither.

Third, I learned to read and write. I don't remember my first sentence, I'd have to look it up in the textbook that everyone was learning from at the time. I suppose that the first sentence I read featured Alice and a cat. And between two nouns there would be a verb, which—much later—gained some meaning in my life: "to have." Alice has a cat, perhaps; I don't remember.

I remember my father. He supervised my clumsy arrangements of letters, standing over me. Or maybe he wasn't standing at all, but sitting beside me? I was only a few years old, he was a few decades older. As large as a mountain, hairy, motionless. I remember spelling out: "c-o-r-k." "So what will it be?", my father asks. I'm afraid. My tiny brain and tiny body can't cope with this fear, because there is too much fear in relation to my weight. I'm afraid of the letters, of embarrassing myself, of my father's raised voice and hand. Most of all, I am afraid of dessert—that, as punishment, it might be taken away from me. I'm afraid, but I have to answer, so I answer, before my father can repeat the question in a raised voice, his right hand above his head, fingers twisted by Poliomyelitis or some other oblique blessing. "Cap," I say.

I remember that cork and cap. Or the cap and cork, I don't remember. I remember dessert. That cork (or cap) took away two Jaffa cakes that I'd been waiting for since morning. At least, I suppose I had been waiting since morning. I suppose that the recalled scene occurred somewhere between five and six in the afternoon. That was the time my father returned home from work. But I don't remember. Perhaps he was ill and he took care of me and my future, which was at that point, according to him, doomed to be analphabetic, as soon as I came home from school and ate my soup? I don't remember, I can guess, but I can't find the event among my memories.

> "I don't remember much of my childhood. First, I was born, but I remember nothing."

I remember tomato soup. Mother made tomato soup at least twice a week. "Tomato soup is very healthy," she would say (and says still). "Tomato soup should be eaten at least twice a week," she would say (and says…). That's why I think that my mother made tomato soup at least twice a week. What she said (and says…) I consider to be a fact which sunk into my memory, though I don't remember. I hated tomato soup. In my memory, tomato soup is the soup of my childhood, eaten at least twice a day.

Tomato soup could be made in one of two ways: with rice, or with noodles. Rice and noodles taught me a certain emotional flexibility. When I sat over a cooling bowl of soup, staring at the red eye surrounded by white cream, with skinny snakes of noodles and a large amount of salt (I added the salt myself, crying over the bowl like a crocodile), I thought about rice. That really, I liked rice, because in comparison I disliked noodles so much. Sitting over a bowl of rice, I thought that I liked noodles. It's smooth and slippery. It doesn't get stuck in your throat. That's what you might call flexibility. It stayed with me for longer. For later.

Fourth, I learned that some people are forever, and some are present in my life only occasionally, and that I have no control over who falls into which category. My younger brother by four years turned out to be in the "forever" group; my grandmother was one of the "only occasionally" people. My parents remember for me, and their memories are remarkably similar, how I stole the pillow from under my brother's head. Because they remember the same, and agreeing with one another is not their strongest suit, I suppose I really did steal the pillow from under my brother's head. I was probably not one of those who was made happier by the arrival of a new being in our house. Probably, I would have picked a dog, had I been consulted on the matter. Probably, I hadn't articulated my wishes clearly enough. If I mixed up a cap and a cork, why not assume that in the more complex situations I didn't mix up more words?

So my brother forever, my grandmother only occasionally, and I—somewhere in between. Tomato soup forever, sometimes rice, sometimes noodles, and I—somewhere hovering over the plate. My grandmother only occasionally. During my childhood, I had two great love interests, which appeared simultaneously I suppose, but I don't remember exactly: my grandmother, and a bitch named Teddy. And this is my fifth. And sixth.

Fifth, I learned that you can simultaneously love more than one being. That loving one, for instance my grandmother, did not immediately exclude loving another, for instance Teddy. I also learned that those you love might have different opinions on the nature of loving. Those I loved thought I could love only one individual, or perhaps one other in addition to my parents. I could make a choice: my grandmother or the dog, and my parents.

Sixth, I learned that the answer to the question didn't depend on the nature of the question, but on who was asking it. For instance the question: "Who do you love most in the world?" left less opportunity for variation than the choice between a cork and a cap. That right answer was "you." Often, "you" wasn't enough. One had to be specific. Being specific meant: Mommy, Daddy, Granny—depending on who was asking. God forbid if one made a mistake and said "Granny" to mother or "Mommy" to grandmother, or "Teddy" to father. But I managed. I learned to supply those answers that were expected of me. Afterward, a treat awaited me, usually in the form of sweets. Later, much later, punishment awaited me. I didn't know how else to answer, the untruthful "you" became a part of me as much as my own skin. ■

What to Do

Pablo Katchadjian

Pablo Katchadjian
What to Do
Translated by Priscilla Posada
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016

1

Alberto and I are giving a lecture at an English university when a student, in an aggressive tone, asks: "When philosophers speak, is what they say true or is it a *double*?" Alberto and I look at each other, somewhat anxious for not having understood the question. Alberto reacts first; he steps forward and responds that it's impossible to know. The student, dissatisfied with this response, stands up (he's eight feet tall), approaches Alberto, grabs him, and stuffs him into his mouth. But although this looks dangerous, not only do the students and I laugh, but Alberto, with half his body inside the student's mouth, also laughs and says: It's fine, it's fine. Then, Alberto and I are suddenly in a plaza. An old man is feeding a flock of pigeons. Alberto approaches the old man and I get a bad feeling and want to stop him, but for some reason I can't. Before Alberto reaches him, the old man somehow becomes a pigeon and tries to fly, but can't. Alberto splints his wings and tells him that he'll get better soon, that his problem is very normal. The old man looks happy. Then we're suddenly in a restroom in a nightclub. For some reason, we're in the women's restroom. Five very pretty, well-dressed girls enter, sweaty from dancing so much. Alberto, up to something, approaches one of them, who seems to be very drunk or on drugs, and throws himself on top of her; from what I can see, she lets him do what he wants, although it's not exactly clear what it is that he wants to do, because he only rubs himself against her as if his body itches; she responds in the same manner, and so it looks like they're mutually scratching themselves. The other four approach me and suddenly the five of us are doing something that doesn't make sense. It's as if the scene were censored. Then I notice that the girls are old women; simultaneously, I hear Alberto talking to the drunk girl about Léon Bloy. He tells her that he wanted to be a saint and suffered because he couldn't. He goes over the part where Véronique has all of her teeth pulled out and, although he remains still, it looks as if he wants to pull this girl's teeth out. I grab him by the hood of his jacket and drag him outside of the restroom. It seems like Alberto is made of rags, he's very light.

4

Suddenly Alberto is there, accompanied by three others. These people, he tells me, are our English students. I listen to them talk and something catches my attention; I realize that they're speaking in English but I'm understanding them in Spanish; then I find out that they're speaking in Portuguese, but I hear them speaking in English and find myself understanding them in Spanish. I ask Alberto if the same is happening to him but he scowls and motions for me to keep quiet. Angry, I grab him by the elbow and this enrages one of the students. When I look at the student, I notice he's ten feet tall. I realize then that we're simultaneously on a bridge and on a ship. And yet, it all feels very natural. I ask Alberto what he thinks of this and he responds that it's all very natural. In that moment, the ship (which is just a ship now) begins to sink, and Alberto tells me: This will sink. We get on a raft that Alberto had and along with us, four

women also get on: one young, three old. The young one is pretty and she's naked; the old women are very ugly and they're also naked, but they don't interest us. The young one approaches Alberto and when he rejects her, I realize she's simultaneously young and old. This feels terrible,

> "It's because this place seems to be made for us, for us to be fine in, but doesn't seem to take account of what we need."

and luckily we're suddenly on a bridge (not the same one as before). There are three Spanish students and they ask if we know why Bloy suffered so much. Alberto and I talk simultaneously. This works out perfectly because not only do we understand each other and they understand us, but they're also getting double the information. Still, it doesn't make sense why we talk about Balzac instead of Bloy: I refer to *Cousin Pons* and Alberto to *A Woman of Thirty*. But Alberto hasn't read *A Woman of Thirty* and the students catch on and start getting restless. Perhaps because of this, one of them, who is eight feet tall, grabs Alberto and stuffs him into his mouth. Alberto doesn't seem surprised and says everything's fine. Regardless, I grab him by the hood of his jacket and take him out of the student's mouth. Alberto thanks me while wiping off the student's saliva, which he says will ruin his boots, with a rag.

39

We're in an English university giving a lecture on constellations, but not on constellations that actually exist, but rather on the concept of constellation. Alberto says: We connect these points and the result is ours, but the points were already there. The students don't understand. I insist: The points couldn't have been connected without our intervention and we decide which point to connect with another; because of this, the result, that's to say, the constellation, is a creation of ours built upon something previously present; it can even be said that one found a constellation. But the students still don't understand anything. One of them stands up: he's eight feet tall. He wants to ask a question; a little scared, we tell him to go ahead. He tells us: You both talk garbage, you lie, you don't know what you're saying, you treat us like idiots, you think you're ... We're in a spring; Alberto, as he cleans his black boots, says: I feel as though this place is truly pleasant. I tell him that I feel the same way, and to confirm this I bend down and drink a little water. The water is tasty and that makes me hesitate and ask: Why does the water have a flavor, of what? Alberto tastes the water and tells me: It tastes like old rags. I taste it again and tell him he's right. And yet, this time the taste of old rags isn't unpleasant and remains as a background while we pass from one place to another without being able to stop.

42

We try to give a lecture in an English university, but the only thing we manage to do is repeat: It's that we're fascinated with the quartets by Shost ... , Shost ... But we can never remember his name. A student stands up and asks us to explain what is so fascinating about the quartets by Shost ... We don't know; or we do, because we're certain that we know why they're fascinating, but we can't explain it; and the second certainty is that if we could remember his name we could explain this fascination. The student, impatient, shouts: You aren't professors! In that moment, all of a sudden we're in a very pleasant place, full of plants, with mountains in the background and a stream. Alberto says: This is what is commonly called beautiful scenery. The place is made to be enjoyed, but I don't feel comfortable. I ask Alberto if he feels the same way and he says yes; and adds: It's because this place seems to be made for us, for us to be fine in, but it doesn't take into account what we need. I look at the place closely and think Alberto is right, although I tell him: And yet, it produces happiness to think that someone made this for and because of us. Alberto agrees and admits that our feeling uncomfortable is irrational. Some time passes and Alberto says to me: I feel that we could be destroyed by this scenery. Afterward, as an irrational consequence of our irrational feelings, we break everything around us so that we don't end up destroyed ourselves. Upon destroying everything, we regret it and don't understand what we did. Alberto tells me: We didn't plan this destruction so we shouldn't even be capable of regret. Then suddenly we're on a ship; in the distance there's an island. ■

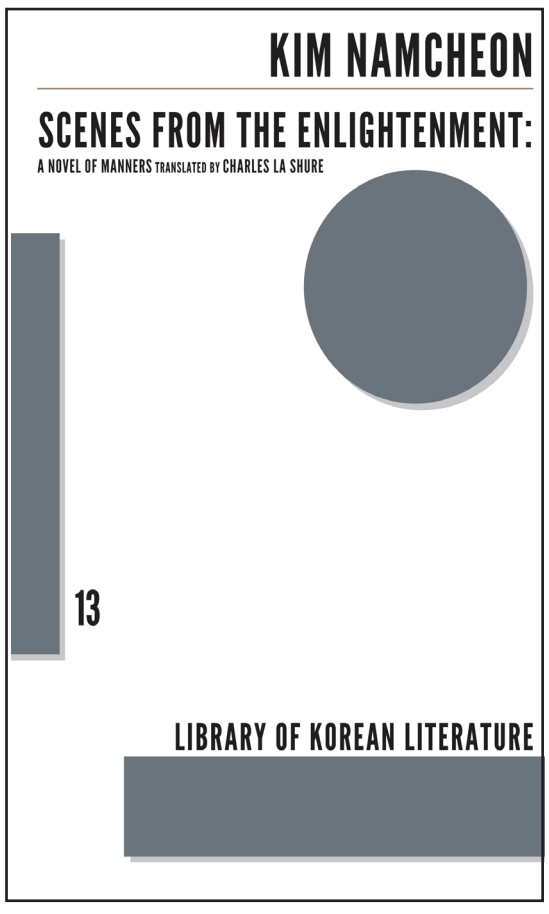
Introducing Kim Namcheon

Charles La Shure

Kim Namcheon
Scenes from the Enlightenment: A Novel of Manners
Translated by Charles La Shure
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

Kim Namcheon was born Kim Hyosik on March 6th, 1911, in Seongcheon, South Pyongyan Province, northeast of Pyongyang in modern-day North Korea. As Korea had just been annexed by Japan the previous year, Kim spent most of his life a citizen of the Japanese Empire, a native of a land that no longer existed.

He was an active writer from a young age, founding a literary magazine with a small group of his high school classmates. Later, as a student at Hosei University in Japan, he joined the Tokyo branch of the Korean Artists Proletarian Federation (KAPF), an organization that had been founded to "work toward the establishment of the culture of the dawning proletariat." His socialist ideology informed not only his writing but his actions as well; in 1930 he participated directly in the proletarian movement by joining a strike of workers in a Pyongyang rubber factory, writing and distributing a manifesto supporting their cause. In the fall of 1931, he was one of many KAPF members arrested by Japanese authorities. In the spring of 1935, the Japanese once again arrested, en masse, the members of KAPF, ultimately eradicating the group for good.



After the dismantling of KAPF, Kim went to work for the *Korea Central Daily* newspaper, and for several years stopped publishing fiction. In addition to being a writer, however, he was also a literary critic, and continued to publicize his theories in an attempt to blaze a new trail for fiction beyond the proletarian movement. The years from 1937 to 1943 were prolific years for Kim, and it was during this time that he wrote and published *Scenes from the Enlightenment*. Then, in 1945, Japan was defeated and Korea at last liberated. Sometime in late 1947, Kim decided to return to his home in the north of the peninsula, where he served as a delegate to the Supreme People's Assembly, and as secretary-general of the General Federation of the Unions of Literature and Art. In 1953, upon the conclusion of the Korean War, the political tide turned once again, and Kim—along with some other former KAPF members—was "purged" (that is, executed) by his government.

Scenes from the Enlightenment was published by the Inmunsa publishing company in 1939, under the title *Taeha*, meaning "great river"—likely a dual reference to the Biryu River, which features prominently in the work, and to the author's desire to produce a family chronicle of grand scope; a Korean *roman-fleuve*. In fact, this novel was intended to be only the first half of a two-part work. Kim did later write two short stories that depicted events after the end of this novel—one of which was the inspiration for the title of the English translation—but the second part ultimately remained unfinished.

The convention at the time was to first serialize full-length novels, publishing periodic episodes in newspapers, and then later publish the book as a whole if it managed to garner a sufficient measure of commercial success. *Enlightenment*, however, was a bolder enterprise, and Choe Jaeseo (the head of Inmunsa), elected to publish it immediately as a complete volume. This was a conscious effort to overcome what they saw as the limitations of serialized novels—specifically that they were beholden to the tastes of the public, and had thus become "popularized" and "commercialized" at the expense of their artistry—and restore the novel to its original position as Literature, not Commodity.

In the spring of 1938, Kim had traveled to his hometown of Seongcheon (the "certain village" mentioned in the *Enlightenment*'s opening line), where he spent one month researching and gathering materials for the new novel, which he began writing on June 13th, 1938. Korea had been under Japanese colonial rule for 28 years at that point, and hostilities in Asia were well underway. Though in the West, World War II is generally said to have begun in September 1939, Japanese aggression toward its neighbors began on September 18th, 1931, when the Japanese detonated an explosion on their own railway in Manchuria as pretext for invading this region of China. The summer of 1937 marked the beginning of open war between the Japanese Empire, and Japan's shift to an outlook of "total war." This included measures to help mobilize Koreans in the fight for Japanese Empire; the National Mobilization Law was passed in 1938, and Koreans were allowed to "volunteer" for the Japanese army. This same period also saw a clamp-down on expressions of traditional Korean culture, and the national folk games and pastimes so ably depicted in *Enlightenment* would have been forbidden by Japanese authorities.

The novel itself, however, was set nearly thirty years earlier, at the beginning of the Japanese colonial period. Bak Seonggwon—one of the book's principal characters—is first introduced to us having just turned forty; once a "hot-blooded youth of twenty-three or twenty-four" during the Revolt of 1894, this places us firmly in the period between 1910 and 1911, a critical time in Korean history. Japan had long had its eye on the Korean peninsula, and after victories over China (1895) and Russia (1905), the Japanese Empire coerced Korea into signing the Protectorate Treaty in 1905. This allowed Korea to ostensibly maintain internal autonomy, while handing the nation's diplomatic sovereignty over to Japan, who established a resident-general on the peninsula. A subsequent treaty was signed in 1907 that abolished even internal autonomy, subordinating the government of Korea to the Japanese Resident-General. The final insult came in 1910, when Japan annexed the country altogether, and Korea ceased to exist as a sovereign and independent state.

Thus the transitional character of the time in which *Enlightenment* takes place; an instability that extends beyond the geopolitical transition of Korea from sovereign state to protectorate to colony. This was a period of great social and ideological change, when the old feudal system was being challenged—and slowly but inexorably defeated—by the new modern order. As the strict Confucian hierarchy collapsed, the promise (if not yet the full reality) of equality was rising from the rubble. While lineage and status had once been the ruling principle, now it was economic might that ruled. Those who had no place in the traditional hierarchy began to push back, with varying degrees of success.

Not only the novel's place in time, but also its geographical backdrop, serve as an almost tangible manifestation of the many changes Korea was undergoing at the time. Kim's hometown of Seongcheon—despite its relatively small size—was an important location in contemporary Korean geopolitics. It was a gateway to Pyongyang, and a place where significant Protestant activity led to a clash between old and new ideologies. In *Enlightenment* it functions as a metaphor for this same conflict and transition. Bak Rigyun and his brother—representatives of the old guard—live just inside Visiting Immortal Gate, outside of which lies the monument that is their family's one proud possession:

> The monument erected in [their ancestors'] memory was just outside Visiting Immortal Gate, on the left-hand side, beneath the shabbiest in the long row of monument pavilions. When weeds grew in the furrows between the roof tiles and sparrows nested in the corners of the eaves, the Bak brothers would uproot the weeds and clear away the nests with their own hands. But the roof began to sag and the pavilion began to lean to the right. It would take no small amount of money to repair or rebuild it. They propped it up by putting a single pillar on the right side and, although it was

> still an eyesore, they managed to keep it standing. It was a forlorn sight as it stood there awaiting its own demise—just like their hollow boasting that they were yangban [a ruling class of civil servants and military officers].

As though the imagery itself were not hint enough, Kim spells out the connection at the end of this paragraph. Bak Rigyun and his brother, though of aristocratic lineage, have accomplished nothing on their own, and so cling desperately to the achievements of their ancestors.

Bak Seonggwon, who stands in sharp contrast to Bak Rigyun and his brother, makes his home "at the highest point in the village," near Nine Dragons Bridge. This is the beating heart of commerce in Seongcheon, where merchants like Nakanishi, Yi Chilseong, and Kim Yonggu sell their wares. Nakanishi is a Japanese merchant who runs a general store where the most wondrous of items are introduced to the people of Seongcheon. Chilseong travels regularly to Pyongyang to buy produce for his grocery, and Yonggu runs a smaller operation selling candy and cookies, taking to the streets as a peddler during the Dano Festival to earn even more money. The residents of the neighborhood of Nine Dragons Bridge all share the desire to turn a profit; they have embraced the new ideology of capitalism and are determined to be at the forefront of the social changes it will bring. In this respect the neighborhoods of Visiting Immortal Gate and Nine Dragons Bridge become a microcosm of the transformations that were taking place in Korean society at the time.

One of Kim Namcheon's theories of fiction from his younger days saw folk-practices not simply as interesting customs and pastimes, but also as a means through which to understand history; *Enlightenment* is Kim's attempt to put this theory into practice. The lengthy description of Hyeongseon's wedding in the second chapter is fascinating for what it tells us about Korean customs, but Bak Seonggwon's decision in particular, to have the traditional Schoolmaster Gu lead the groom's procession and the "enlightened" Choe Gwansul serve as the groom's escort, can also be seen as an attempt to achieve legitimacy by bringing together the old traditions and the new culture. The sight generates more mirth than respect among the onlookers, and can be considered a failure. But Bak Seonggwon later obtains this long-desired legitimacy thanks to another folk element in the text: his appointment as vice-president of the athletics meet held during the Dano Festival period.

History is again reflected in this Dano Festival; first and foremost in the contrast between the Dano Festival and the accompanying school athletics meet:

> The games played by the women who went up into the hills . . . were held separately from the men's wrestling, but an order was issued that no other meetings were to be held on the day the athletics meet began. Wrestling was the men's sport, and there were no women spectators, but the athletics meet was an enlightened gathering and thought to be different from something like wrestling, so even if young girls, maidens, and newly married women could not attend, the day was chosen and widely advertised so that at least married women over the age of thirty in their hooded coats, as well as old women and gisaeng [Korean geisha], could attend.

The Dano Festival, which represents the traditions of Korea handed down from generation to generation, remains steeped in Confucian ideology, specifically the principle of the separation of men and women. The athletics meet, though, is a product of the new culture, and of civilization from without. Although it is not possible to do away entirely with the separation of men and women, this enlightened space does allow some limited mingling of the sexes. It is in this space that Hyeonggeol competes in both the footrace and the mock cavalry battle. Though his various quests for women are all ultimately frustrated, first by his step-brothers and later by his father, here in the athletics meet he is able to shine. Despite his heroic performances, though, he does not win either event; in the footrace he places second behind a student from Pyongyang. Although his decision to leave Seongcheon at the end of the story is a direct result of his frustrations in love, we can perhaps see in his heroic athletic losses, the seeds of the realization that Seongcheon is too poor a stage for the triumph he hopes his life will one day become.

Critics have pointed out that Kim's understanding of history is rather narrow in its scope. For example, Seongcheon is primarily a farming village, but little mention is made of the lives and hardships of the farmers who live there. On a larger scale, there is little overt mention made of the loss of sovereignty and the difficulties of life under Japanese colonial rule; though it could be said that the "strange and wondrous" goods Nakanishi introduces to the village at the beginning of the twelfth chapter are a symptom and symbol of the Japanese role as lone conduit for the transmission of Western civilization into Korea. This, however, even if true, is merely dispassionate commentary on reality, and not the criticism of Japanese colonialism that some would expect. This criticism, albeit subtle, may be found in Kim's treatment of the surveyors who appear in the following chapter, beating up a helpless villager before being vanquished by Hyeonggeol. These are not simply uncouth and domineering outsiders; they traveled around from village to village, drawing lines on maps. Korean farmers, who rarely farmed land with officially defined borders, generally found themselves on the short end of these land distribution policies. In a word, surveyors were a mechanism of oppression by the Japanese, and it is unlikely that Kim Namcheon chose this occupation for these two despicable villains by chance.

That said, it is true that very little criticism of the harsh colonial reality can be found in *Enlightenment*. Overt criticism would have been impossible due to censorship, but many scholars have found fault with Kim for completely abandoning his proletarian ideology and not offering a critical view of history. It is only natural that such a prominent literary critic should be held to the high standards that he had established; Kim himself admitted that *Enlightenment* did not live up to the lofty goals of his theories, so it is no surprise that his critics should feel the same.

Yet this does not diminish the importance of the work. As both a literary work and a glimpse into Korean life and traditions, what it achieves is considerable. The care and detail that Kim puts into his descriptions of everyday things and events bring to life a Korea that has not existed for over a century, and the fluid prose draws the reader into the story of one family in one village during a critical time in Korea's history. Although its original title, as mentioned above, would seem to indicate the author's desire to present the sweeping flow of history, *Enlightenment* is probably better understood as a fine-grained depiction of a narrower slice of life—a detail drawing rather than a panoramic landscape. In that regard, *Enlightenment* plays an important role in the history of Korean literature. I hope that this English translation will play an equally important role in fostering understanding of this critical time in Korea's history and culture. ■

"The care and detail that Kim puts into his descriptions of everyday things and events bring to life a Korea that has not existed for over a century."

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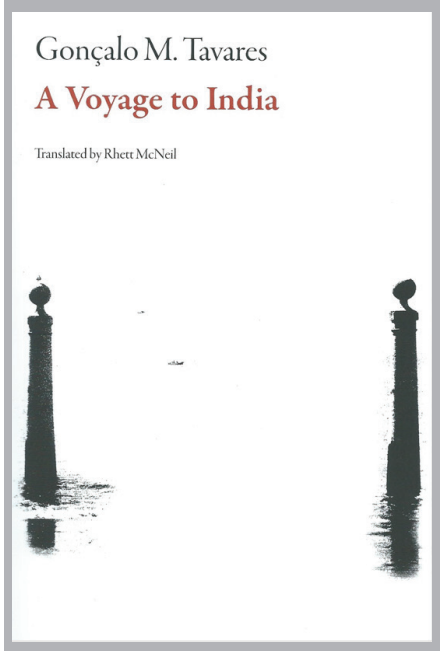

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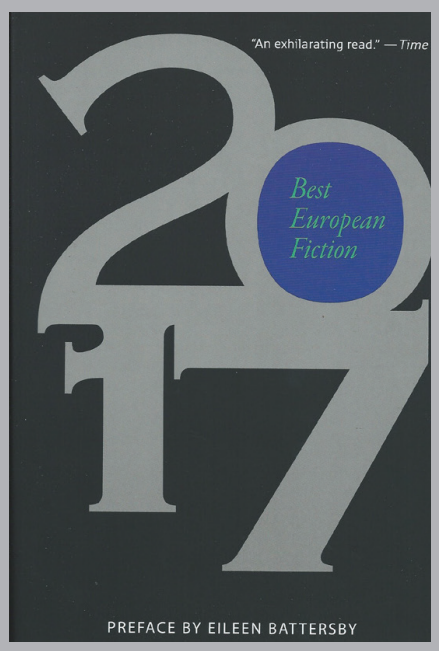

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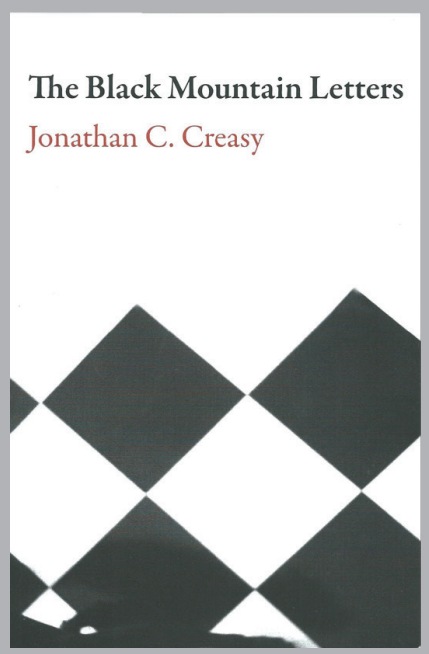

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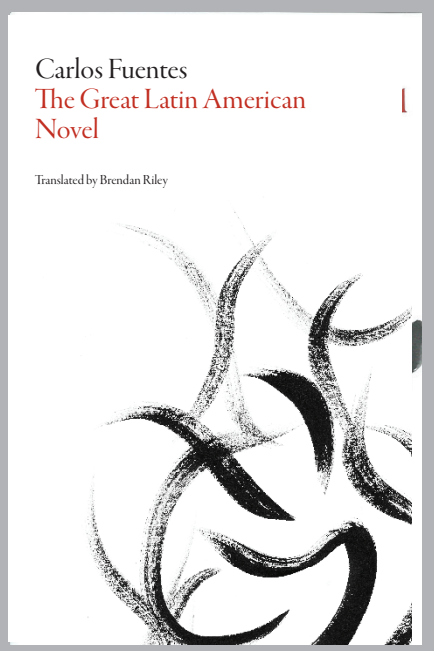

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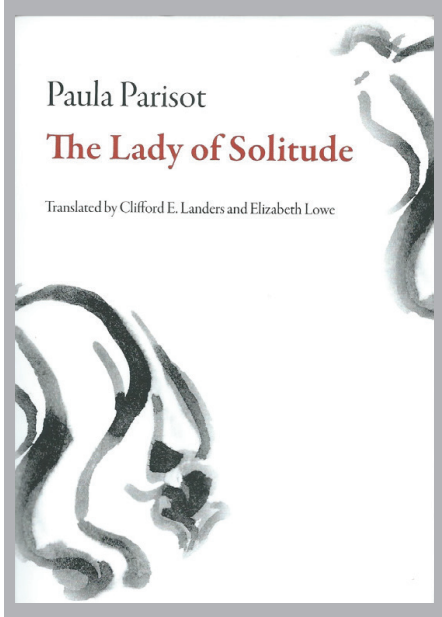

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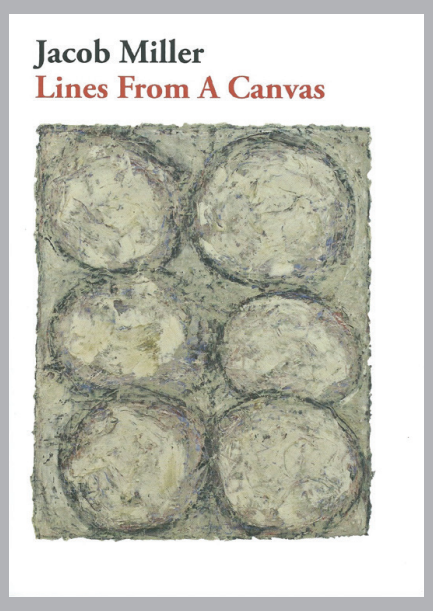

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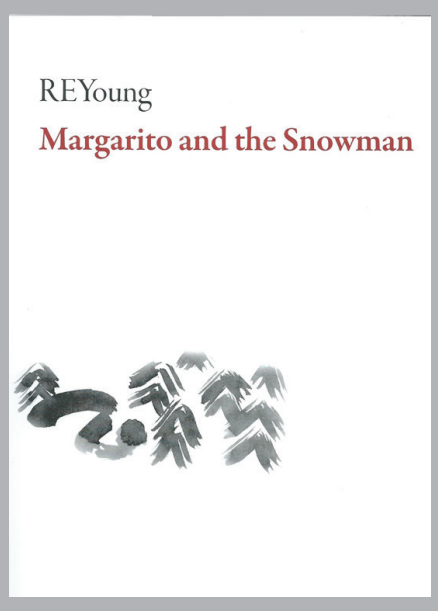

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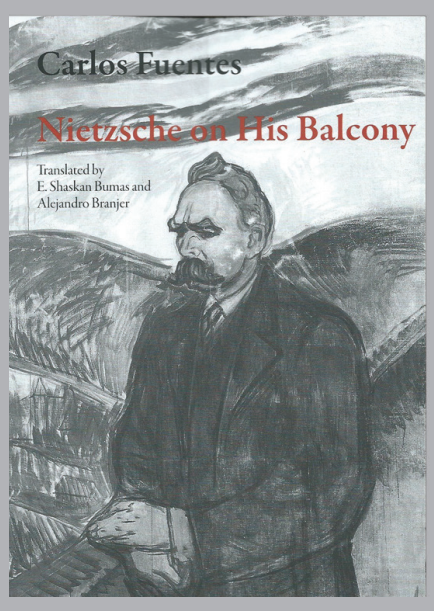

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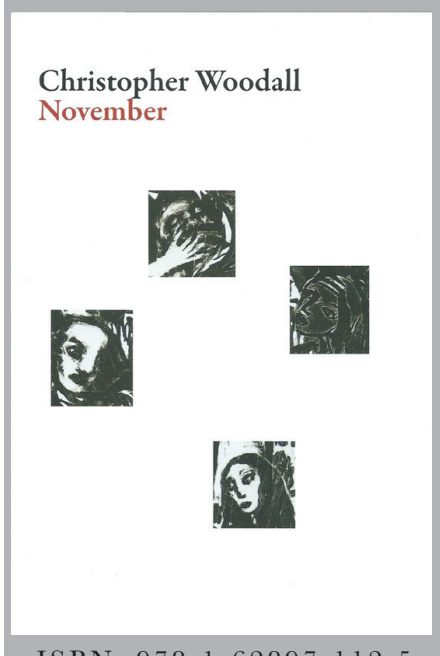

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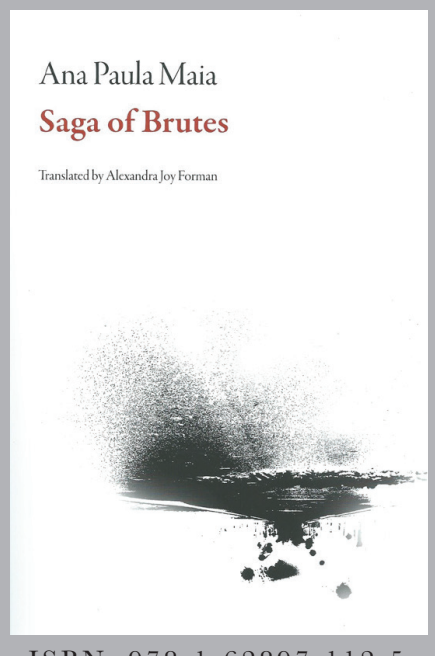

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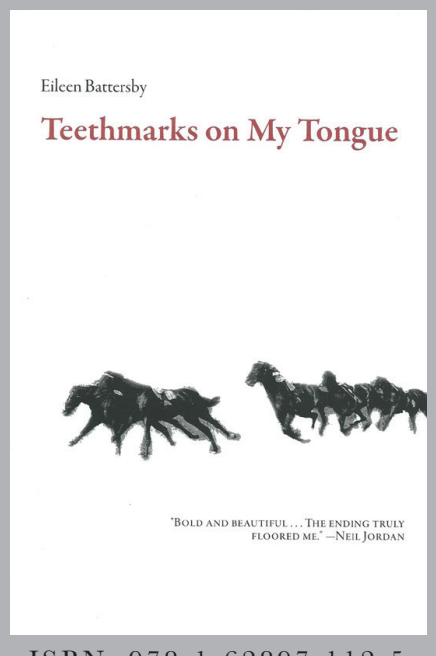

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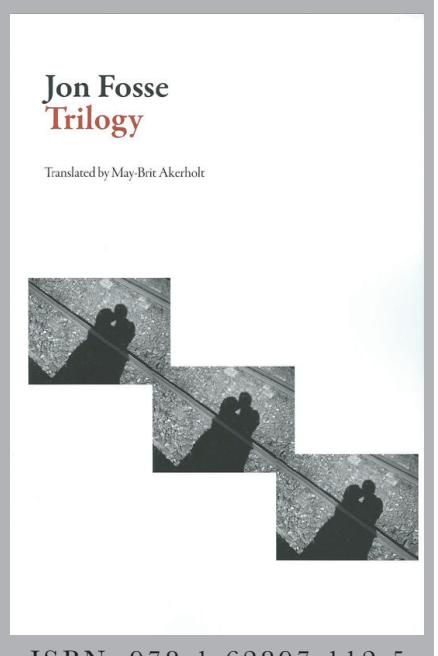


ISBN: 978-1-62897-112-5

Tales from Hidden Denmark

Paul Larkin

Many people across the globe seem to feel they know Scandinavia pretty well. They have gleaned this knowledge, they feel, from the impressive wave of noir, political thrillers, and detective films/TV-series that have been broadcast worldwide in the last decade or so. And then of course there's the detective or "social noir" fiction, which has been a launching pad for so many of these shows and movies.

These "Scandiwegian" works do indeed reveal some truths about Scandinavia. For example, the TV series *Borgen* (translated as *The Castle* in English) is a fair depiction of modern Danish parliamentary democracy, with some good storylines and even one or two outstanding actors in it. But I've long argued that the Vikings, or the hobbits and elves of *Lord of the Rings*—sniffed at and pooh-poohed by the experts and avoided by Scandinavians themselves—actually reveal more about the depths of the Scandinavian psyche than any contemporary stories. To put this another way, an autistic-seeming figure like Sarah Lund in *The Killing* carries far more ancient Scandinavia inside her than we realize.

This Scandinavian stubbornness is often inexplicable. It's Hamlet, with his staggering, his madness, his sudden rush of bravery. It's Kierkegaard, not Don Quixote.

We may forget that *Hamlet* comes from an ancient Danish tale, and that outlaws and transgressive figures, anti-social types and anti-heroes, abound in Scandinavian culture and its sagas. Beowulf is a Danish legend about a Swedish hero who wanted neither wealth nor resplendent kingship. The most important thing for him was his good name and his bravery. Ditto Sigurd—the ur-Siegfried that inspired Wagner—and his myth with its warning of the dangers of hoarding ring-gold: if you hoard treasure you become consumed with avarice and turn into a Dragon, Balrog, or one badass wicked wizard.

The Danish painter Asger Jorn, and one of the authors (Martin A. Hansen) in the list of works below, both try to remind people that the original concept of "Gothic" was far removed from Teutonic turrets, jagged lettering, leather jackets and blood-drinking humans. These latter motifs are in fact neo-Italianate. Wagner proved this by being much closer to Mussolini and Hitler than to Sigurd and the Nibelungen (Niflungar in Old Norse: "Mist Children," who were from the Scandinavian island of Bornholm anyway).

At the heart of Scandinavian culture—what we somehow intuit though it's never been explained to most of us—is the concept of *Holmgang*. For *Holmgang* to happen you need at least one human being who's not only prepared to fight to the death for a principle by physically or metaphorically going on to a holm (a sandbar or islet) to face an opponent with axe or sword, but who is also well-versed in matters of law, sword-, and axe-play. The same person must also be slightly eccentric, not in the English "wearing odd socks" way, but by way of personality and obsession. Sarah Lund actually fits the bill quite well. More Outlaw (another Scandinavian word) than Crusader, this type of eccentric has a kind of stubbornness that goes beyond mere fierce determination (like the kind that Irish people can possess). This Scandinavian stubbornness is often inexplicable. It's Hamlet, with his staggering, his madness, his sudden rush of bravery. It's Kierkegaard, not Don Quixote. From an early age, Kierkegaard sought a truth upon which he could stake his life. He played a clown, wrote path-breaking treatises on existence—to be or not to be—and then began to fall, physically and mentally exhausted, after trying to single-handedly defeat State Lutheranism.

Another key aspect of the Scandinavian psyche reflected in the works below, is the awareness that life can be profoundly gruesome, that there's an axe waiting to fall on you around every bend in life's road. Or perhaps rather that humans can be both highly honorable, and evil bastards, without contradiction. Again, this is not gallows-Gothicism; it's simply staring life in the face. Edvard Munch captured it perfectly; there is horror in our midst. Look at Hans Christian Andersen's "The Shadow" ("Skyggen") for example: a truly revelatory and disturbing fairy tale.

Below I present a short list of works that I feel very strongly should see the bright light of day in English, and in the present age. Some of them are old, others are recent. But they all carry a deep sense of Scandinavia, and the world is a lesser place because these works have not been translated and explained in a major world language like English. For there's just a chance that by reading them we will discover what makes Scandinavia really sick, and extremely healthy.

Welcome to the real Denmark.

***

Steen Steensen Blicher
The Hosier and His Daughter
orig. *Hosekræmmeren* (1829)

Steen Steensen Blicher's *The Hosier and his Daughter* is the central, and magnificent, story in a series of short tales set amongst the peasantry that lived on what was once the huge and remote mid-Jutland heath. *The Hosier* tells the story of the tragic Cecilia who is thwarted in love. This work is usually, and wrongly, interpreted as a sort of Danish *Romeo and Juliet*. And whilst there is an element of the Bard's eternal love tragedy here, it also contains a scathing indictment of class privilege.

***

Georg Brandes
On the Eternally Great and Small in Poetic Writing
orig. *Det uendeligt Smaa og Det u ndeligt Store i Poesien* (1870)

Shakespeare features far more deliberately in Georg Brandes's coruscating essay on the essence of poetic writing, *On the Infinitely Small and Infinitely Great in Poetic Writing*, which looks closely at the play *Henry IV* and its graphic realism, all of which is condensed into the snapping of bone in a little finger. Brandes's output was vast, and his influence (particularly in France and Germany) enormous. For decades, he was consistently brilliant, and had a huge influence on "New Breakthrough" writers like Ibsen and J.P. Jacobsen. That said, I believe Brandes should be celebrated anew for his critical work, including his fascinating treatise on the art and discipline of reading.

***

Henrik Pontoppidan
The Great White Bear/Nightwatch
orig. *Isbjørnen/Nattevagt* (1887/1894)

Sandinge Congregation
orig. *Sandinge Menighed* (1903)

Nobel Prize-winner Henrik Pontoppidan wrote two profound novellas, *The Great White Bear* (*Isbjørnen*) and *Nightwatch* (*Nattevagt*), which would constitute an ideal pairing in English. I prefer translating "Isbjørn" as "Great White Bear," rather than (the more cuddly) "Polar Bear," for reasons that will be apparent to any reader, the "Bear" of the story being a formidable and wayward priest, an Outlaw, if you like. In *Nightwatch* we find another hulking Outlaw type, but this time Pontoppidan puts a wholly different, and brutally shocking, spin on the portrayal of the tortured artist. Georg Brandes also appreciated Henrik Pontoppidan's *Sandinge Congregation* (*Sandinge Menighed*), which quivers with social indignation. A novel about a young girl who comes from a rural proletarian background but is enticed, and ultimately forced, to work in an upper bourgeois home in Copenhagen. The denouement of this work is something to behold, as is the demolition of upper-middle-class hypocrisy.

***

Martin A. Hansen
Now He'll Give Up!
orig. *Nu Opgiver Han* (1935)

In *Now He'll Give Up!,* Martin A. Hansen finds an intriguing way to tell a rural story, depicting a farming district on the cusp of great changes. Machines, cars, and motorbikes storm into the scene and with them the type of self-willed entrepreneur capitalist—or at least a prototype thereof—who will supplant the authentic, but strangely enfeebled, noble peasant. The use of a deliberately terse and staccato writing style evokes the Icelandic Sagas, and has the interesting effect of slowing the pace of dialogue and plot as the narrative races ahead. The drowning scene is one of the most devastating and poignant I have ever read.

***

Klaus Rifbjerg
Spanish Motifs
orig. *Spansk Motiv* (1981)

Mojácar (2004)

Nansen and Johansen
orig. *Nansen og Johansen* (2002)

Denmark produced some very good poets after the Second World War; perhaps especially noteworthy are the 1970s jazz poets, who experimented with form and language. One of the greatest was Klaus Rifbjerg whose *Spanish Motifs* (*Spansk Motiv*) is breathtaking, both in its confidence and its audacity, its evocation of place (the dust and heat of 1970s Spain), and the infinite time that can lie in a given moment. Rifbjerg emigrated to Andalucía in theatrical protest at the mediocrity of Danish society and letters. In fact, Mojácar, the whitewashed Moorish village perched high on a cliff escarpment where Rifbjerg settled, lends its name to his 2004 essay collection, which is part fiction and part graphic reality (so real that your sphincter tightens as the shoplady decapitates and quarters the flopping chicken on the counter and sweeps the jellied giblets to the floor). Looking back now, after having translated Rifbjerg's early masterpiece *Terminal Innocence* (Norvik Press, 2015), I think my championing of Rifbjerg lies on solid ground, and his late homoerotic tour de force, *Nansen and Johansen* (*Nansen og Johansen*), really brings home my point about the Scandinavian worldview and attitude to life—though Klaus himself would have hated this argument.

"*Spanish Motifs* ... is breathtaking, both in its confidence and its audacity, its evocation of place (the dust and heat of 1970s Spain), and the infinite time that can lie in a given moment."

With *Nansen and Johansen* we are back to terse but lyrical prose depicting heroic figures; now examining the famous Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen's unsuccessful but incredibly brave search for the epicenter of the North Pole, and focused on Nansen's relationship with his colleague Hjalmar Johansen who accompanied him for months across the frozen wastes. Rifbjerg's assertion, that the two men may have been sexually and romantically involved, caused uproar in Norway. Leaving the veracity of this claim aside, it is delightful and surprising to find a book that celebrates male camaraderie, feats of strength, the smell and feel of men, despite its tragic end.

***

Dy Plambeck
Mikael (2014)

Olga Ravn
Celestine (2015)

Finally I propose two very recent novels by young female writers. *Mikael,* by Dy Plambeck, sticks with the theme of masculinity; the eponymous Mikael is a Danish soldier serving in volatile, highly dangerous Afghanistan. But he loves soldiering, and loves being a man among other male soldiers. His place in the World—we may come to feel—is almost a secondary issue; perhaps our protagonist even favors his murderous posting in Helmand province. He is, after all, a singular man, a warrior, a man of few words, with an instinctive craving for action and adrenaline; with pride in his profession, and a drive to flee the confines of more "ordinary" society.

With Olga Ravn's *Celestine,* then, we find ourselves in a medieval walled-in ghost story, one with a number of remarkable twists up its sleeve. It might be interesting to note that modern-day Denmark has only recently been obsessing about the wisdom of its "multiple-divorce society"; unsurprising then, that is now being expressed in literature by the children coming of age in that same culture. Olga Ravn succeeds in an amazing feat, portraying a young modern woman who not only embraces (literally inhabits) the incarcerated Celestine of gruesome yore, but also describes this modern girl's own divorce dungeon and the multiple sibling inmates with whom she's been forced to live and associate. A postmodern ghost story whose fractured pieces hang together perfectly. ■

Letter from Ukraine

Artem Chapeye

Artem Chapeye and
Ekaterina Sergatskova
The F War
Translated by Artem Chapeye
Folio, 2015

The following extract is taken from the non-fiction book The F War *("*Voina na tri bukvy*") by Artem Chapeye and Ekaterina Sergatskova, which was originally published in the Ukrainian and Russian languages. It is published here for the first time in English by kind permission of the publisher.*

The Time Of Troubles
(To Understand Donbass)

"Not against Ukraine! Not against Ukraine!" Forty-three-year-old Lena from the bombed neighborhood Semenovka in Slaviansk thumps her chest. "Against this government we stand! I'm not talking only of myself. I'm telling you what people are saying. This is the voice of Donbass!"

We know each other well enough and feel enough sympathy for each other that I trust her. This is the second time Lena is leading me all over Semenovka (in the city of Slaviansk) for a whole day to talk to all its residents. Semenovka was a major base for the separatists. For that reason it was bombed by the Ukrainian forces. After several months Slaviansk was "liberated"—the word used by the Ukrainian government.

When you come to the "liberated territory" again and again, you are convinced again and again that words like "pro-Ukrainian" or "anti-Ukrainian" are, as far as civilians are concerned, no more than ideological cliches, of the same type that "builder of communism" or "anti-Soviet" used to be.

There are nuances. Always. Take Lena's family. She voted for the Opposition Bloc (considered "pro-Russian" by many), yet she and her girl friend give money to help the Ukrainian army. Lena had a separatist lover who fled to Russia from the law enforcement, yet Lena herself escaped to Ukrainian-controlled territories and only returned home after the shooting stopped. Lena's father, born in Semenovka, voted for communists because he "felt good when they were in power," yet he is the most anti-DPR (Donetsk People's Republic, a separatist group) member of the family, and he despises "these thugs." Lena's father speaks Ukrainian, and her Russian-speaking mother (from the Poltava region) used to be the most "pro-Russian" and pro-DPR person in the family, yet she has recently voted for the—anti-Russian—Radical Party.

Getting into the nuts and bolts? "We can't get into the nuts and bolts even within our family," Lena laughs.

"May Plague Ruin Both of Your Houses"

"I never wanted Russia. I lived in my Druzhkovka and I want to go on living there," an old lady says to the other women travelers on a train.

The women nod in agreement. One is from Konstantinovka, the other from Avdeevka. They haven't noticed me on the upper bunk of the train compartment.

My fellow passengers' position can best be described by the line we once had in the ballots: "I vote against all of them."

"Separatists are jerks because they're based in our cities. The army are jerks because they are bombing our cities," say the women in the train.

The same public sentiment prevails in the "liberated" cities. There's a Ukrainian proverb my friend (from once "separatist," now "liberated") Kramatorsk uses: "May plague ruin both of your houses."

"We're All Afraid of The DPR's Return"

There's no animosity directed toward Ukraine itself, but there is animosity toward the authorities and the army.

"The DPR robbed people of their cars. We were so expecting the army … And now … ?" my fellow travelers complain to each other.

The locals divide the Ukrainian army into "the ones in the wind-break woods" and "the ones that bounce around." The former are, in the public mind, the poor draftees. The latter are often considered "mercenaries." The first ones are "hungry boys" and people feed them; the second ones "come to discos in armored military vehicles" and they've caused prostitution to bloom.

During the time I spent in "liberated" cities, I personally didn't see soldiers' improper behavior. Yet the locals speak of various incidents.

A saleslady in Semenovka once got

scared when a drunk soldier, out of bravado, started shooting into the air. Now half of Semenovka knows about this, and has one more motive to dislike the army.

In Kramatorsk, I witnessed a massive Armored Vanguard Vehicle stall in the street. A crowd formed at a distance. Many people expressed malicious glee. A soldier began stopping cheap Lada cars with darkened windshields, searching the trunks, purely to keep his face.

At the same time, practically everyone I talked to was glad that "Ukraine is back. Salaries and pensions are now paid again. And the shelling has stopped."

"We're all afraid of the DPR's return," an Armenian named Marina tells me.

I'll hear the same thing many more times over.

"People aren't afraid of the DPR as such. They are afraid the shooting will resume," Nikolai elaborates. Nikolai is an engineer at the NKMZ, the Novo-Kramatorsk Machine-building Plant, which is the main employer of the entire city. "There are probably some freaks who want the return of the DPR but they aren't representative," the engineer adds.

I heard rumors of the "return of the DPR" many times in Slaviansk, in Kramatorsk, and Nikolaevka.

The Armenian woman Marina lived through the Nagorno-Karabakh War when she was young, yet at least there "everything was understandable, Christians against Muslims; and here you don't understand anything." And in Karabakh, Marina says, "at least one wasn't shooting in the cities."

"Who Was Shooting?"

The essential question of this war, ("Who was shooting? Who was shelling the cities?") almost always answered the same way by the locals: "The Ukrainian army." In Nikolaevka, where a whole bloc of a five-story building was destroyed by bombing, the people who live there are sure that it was "Ukraine" who bombed them.

Of course, there is no investigation, and should there be one, no one will believe it.

This frequently became abusrd.

"I'm going to Debaltsevo, to the scariest zone. There's no choice, my mother's eighty-six years old," a woman at a bus stop tells me.

"Who's controlling Debaltsevo now?"

"The National Guard of Ukraine. Even the city centre is being hammered. My acquaintance was killed. The funeral is tomorrow."

"Who's doing the shelling?"

"Well, who do you think?" the woman asks rhetorically, like there can be no question.

I pause and the woman reads the doubt in my face.

"The Natguard, of course!"

"You mean they are in the city and they bomb it themselves?"

The woman immediately quietens; she feels insulted.

It's only the intelligentsia who reflect. The aforementioned engineer Nikolai leads me all over Kramatorsk. He shows me a brand-new building of the public prosecutor. It features a characteristic chapel in the style of Pshonka (the General Prosecutor of the Yanukovich epoch). The building was the headquarters of the DPR back when triggerman "Babay" controlled Kramatorsk.

"There were bombings all around, and at exactly the time when people are going to work. Here, a bus was bombed. A woman's headless body was lying there the whole day. So many bombs all around, and not one hitting the building? I think it was theater."

Yet Nikolai himself says he witnessed flashes from the Karachun mountain where the Ukrainian army was based, and heard explosions in the city around the same time.

"The Ukrainian media also lies. Are they trying to tell us that the Ukrainian army never missed a shot in all the time? Not a single stray missile?"

"Who Do They Fight For?"

People in the "liberated territories" often mock the phrase "liberated territories."

"Who did the liberating? The others left by themselves."

I heard this opinion many times, even from the most "pro-Ukrainian" citizens. So it was interesting to hear it from foreigners as well as the comparatively unbiased local residents.

"The most disappointing thing is that no one bombed 'the other ones' when they were leaving," Muhammad tells me. Muhammad is a Syrian refugee. He escaped from the war in Syria and came to his compatriot friends in Kramatorsk, then was forced to flee again from Kramatorsk to Kharkov for some time because of the war there. "Why not bomb the [Strelkov's separatist] convoy when it was driving to Donetsk? The army had several hours to do it."

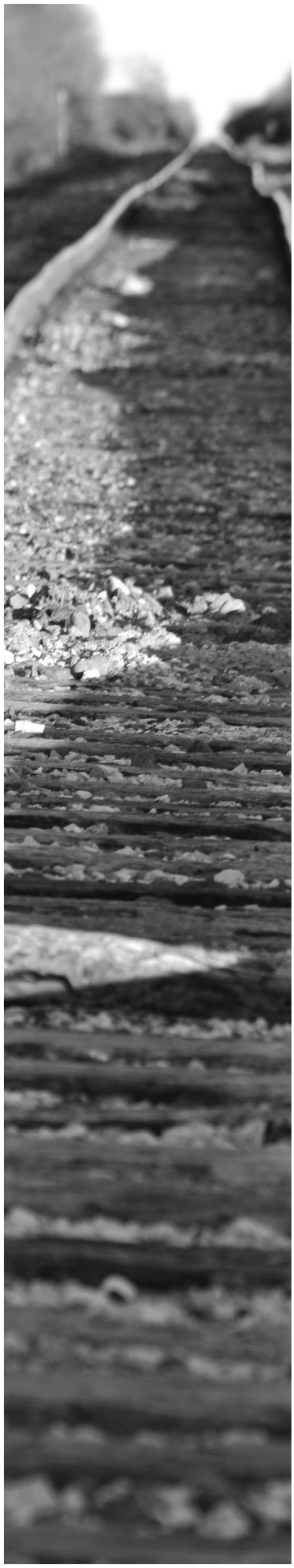
I heard the same thing a dozen times from Ukrainians too. There's a widespread opinion in the "liberated territories" that the current war is a "rigged game," set up with the aim of dividing people.

Whenever I managed to overhear conversations between people from the "DPR territories" and people from the "liberated territories," the speakers always agreed.

"Who are they fighting for?" a bus taxi from Gorlovka says at a stop in Semenovka when a convoy of Ukrainian Armored Vanguard Vehicles pass by. "Yatseniuk and Kolomoisky are splitting up billions and these boys are dying."

Locals from Slaviansk agree with their countryman from Gorlovka. ■

"Now, even the city center is being hammered. My acquaintance was killed. The funeral is tomorrow."



Letter from Slovenia

Boris Novak

[This essay was written by Boris Novak in response to an inquiry from John O'Brien about his trilogy of novels. It has been condensed.]

I cannot accept the accusation—made by one of my dear colleagues—that my epic is not worth translating because it is so local. Of course it is anchored in the real landscapes and in the bloody history of Central Europe and the Balkans, but the message is universal. I believe that it can be read and understood anywhere in the world.

The first book of my epic was accepted very well by the reading public and by critics; it is praised as one of the great texts of Slovenian literature. It has already been reprinted. Up to now, approximately 2000 copies have been sold, and it seems that interest is still growing—not bad for a small country like Slovenia. I received the Župančič Award (named after one of the great Slovenian poets of the 20th century) from the city of Ljubljana for my achievement. Books containing huge parts of my epic will soon be published in Spain and Montenegro, and excellent translators are working hard in order to bring it into German, Swedish, Russian, and still other languages.

I started writing the epic *The Doors of No Return* (*Vrata nepovrata*) in 1992, but I wrote the majority of the 30,000 verses from 2009 onward. The first book, *Maps of Forsaken Homes* (*Zemljevidi domotožja*), was published in 2014 by the publishing house Goga. The second, *The Times of Fathers* (*Čas očetov*), followed in 2015, and the third, *Residences of Souls* (*Bivališča duš*), in 2016. The trilogy starts in the Pinnacle Desert in Western Australia, among ancient stones that aboriginals worship as a temple of the dead. As with *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey,* or *The Divine Comedy,* my epic is a dialogue with the dead. It is also a gigantic geography of the places that I have touched, that I have lost, and that I long for, spreading from the Balkans and Central Europe to France, Australia, and the Americas. At the same time, it is a painful history of the twentieth century, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, through both world wars and the Communist era, up to today, with a lot of tragedy and—I hope—some humor and beauty.

As with all epic poetry, my books contain stories of battle, heroism, and tragic deaths. But I want to show this history through the eyes of its victims: women, children, elderly people. I want to lend my voice to history by telling stories of little things, not through the celebration of arms.

The poem "Tidying Up the Dead" [printed on the following page], for instance, is very concrete and detailed in its description of small things, but is it local? Aren't we all, regardless of our origin, culture, and race, confronted sooner or later in our lives with a heap of little things left behind by our parents, lovers, friends; human beings we loved and whom we mourn for, leaving those little objects as painful testimonies of their presence, forever lost?

I have taken many stories from the real destinies of my ancestors and relatives. Let me give you an example. One of my uncles, Leo Novak, was a composer who faced a tragic destiny: being caught as an organizer of the Resistance in Maribor, the second largest city in Slovenia, he was tortured by Gestapo for two months (since they knew that he was a musician, they had a special pleasure with his fingers). A German officer who had promised my uncle's mother to bring him back, kept his promise, giving her a green can containing the ashes of her son (he was cremated in order to hide the evidence of his torture). With almost stereotypical German pedantry, the officer returned to Leo's family all the possessions he'd had at the time of his death—here is the list:

1 watch (Tulla Silver)
1 box with dirty underwear
and toiletries
1 score (Beethoven: Symphony V
for Symphony Orchestra)
Money: 29.46 Reich Marks

Leo Novak to
the family of Anton Novak
Maribor, Perko Street 29/II

This story terrified me as a child. But the tragedy did not end with his death. Before going to the anti-Nazi underground, Leo had asked one of his fellow musicians to hide his entire musical oeuvre. All his compositions safely survived the occupation of Ljubljana, hidden in a piano in an old house—until March 1945, when R.A.F. planes dropped a bomb on it by mistake. It demolished the house and the piano where all my uncle's notes were hidden. His whole life, all of his beautiful music, everything turned to ashes. When my father marched with his fellow partisans into liberated Ljubljana two months later, he was able to gather together, in the garden of that house, just a few burnt pieces of paper. I have dealt with this subject several times in my work: in the play *Soldiers of History* (1988), in a volume of poems, *LPM: Little Personal Mythology* (2007), and in my trilogy of novels. My main artistic problem has been how to find a verse rhythm suited to expressing Leo's destiny. Because my first child was named after my Uncle Leo, my father Ante gave me his silver pocket watch—the only material relic of his brother Leo—asking me to pass it to my son, his grandson, when he reached the age of 18. I often listened to the clicking of the watch mechanism, until one day it suddenly struck me: this was the rhythmic key to the poem I wanted—that I needed—to write.

One of the central symbols in my epic is a coat, like Uncle Leo's or my father's coat. Leo had a beautiful fiancée, Milena, who was a great actress. In the late Thirties they lived for a while in Skopje, Macedonia, where she fell in love with another man. When Leo saw her for the last time, she was trembling without a coat in the cold November air; he covered her with his own, and kissed her for the last time. He came back to Ljubljana, Slovenia, with pneumonia, so my father Ante gave him *his* coat. My father was one of the organizers of the Resistance against Nazi and Fascist occupation. When he trembled during that first post-war winter, without a coat, after being discharged from military service, he went to the "people's magazine" where he was offered one which suited him perfectly. After finding secret pockets in the lining, my father realized that it was precisely his own coat, the very same one he had given to his brother Leo before the war. He asked how it had come to be there, and was devastated by the answer: it had come from the Gestapo torture jail in Maribor. In 1988 the old actress Milena Godina wrote me a beautiful letter, to say that she had been carrying Leo's coat all her life as a memory of her first love.

So, what is so "local" about these stories and about these poems, which hope to convey a universal message about the human destiny, about the destiny of artists and art, about love and death?

[On the following page is one of Boris Novak's poems, taken from The Master of Insomnia, *published by Dalkey in 2012.]*

Tidying Up the Dead

Even now, as I write this, the taste of ash
fills my mouth and it is hard to breathe. Because
tidying up after the dead is a horror. To pass

a whole life through a sieve, to choose among
the unfortunate things destined for the hell of oblivion,
and the more happy ones, for the paradise of memory.

To find in this legacy gold used for fillings
and for wedding rings, bracelets and pocket
watches with broken hands, the old detritus

of souvenirs and letters, visiting cards and
post cards, important documents and photographs,
a sewing kit, a box of buttons, a broken necklace

and rusted keys, fruit rotting in the refrigerator,
someone's first tooth, primary school textbooks,
a dozen glasses with different lenses and frames,

two dozen identification cards and passports,
paintings and prints, and shelves filled to overflowing
with dusty books, books, books, books…

A last glance at a life, amazement, what a beauty
my mother was when she was young, the scent
in her skirts, her rounded soul hovering in the pleats,

so lovely. – My memory of her will live until her scent
abandons the empty clothes. – Tidying up after the dead
is a bittersweet ritual that revives for the last time

everything that she once was and had, before the death
shroud erased all traces. It's a terrible dilemma,
what to keep and what to throw away. Discarded

memories roam in boxes closed forever.
Two evening dresses with matching silk scarves,
which pair should I save from oblivion? …

The zeal of the living continues relentlessly, the force
of the present pushing aside the weight of the past.
All those closets filled with junk would suffocate us,

we must make room, cleanse our memory,
lest it collapse under the weight of the burning
cargo it carries…
It burns for so long,

that statuette from the Horn of Africa –
who brought it so far, to this Alpine land –
and a faded letter, a passionate appeal,

from my father to my mother, just before they
became father and mother, dated 1953, April 9,
that father wanted to destroy but mother saved

after his death for future eyes, and now
I also save because I, who my mother – so feminine,
so mild – carried then, am mentioned in it.

I am tormented by the question: what will be the fate
of this letter when my time comes – the next tidying-up
by the living of the traces left behind by the dead?
Will another face

lean over this letter and dream of lives lived
and lives ended? Will my parents' love be tossed
in the garbage bin
or in the box of memory?

Silence descends …

(translated by Erica Johnson Debeljakk) ■

An Interview with Susana Medina

by John O'Brien

Susana Medina
Philosophical Toys
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

[This informal interview with Susana Medina was conducted in the summer of 2015.]

JOHN O'BRIEN: I don't quite know how to ask you this. I've told you that your novel reads as though it could be a memoir, but you have said that it is largely not autobiographical. Did you have the memoir genre in mind? Did you want it to read as memoir? I will point to just one scene in particular: when your character is stopped at Customs because of the collection of her mother's shoes. That reads like memoir, to my mind at least.

SUSANA MEDINA: No, I didn't have the memoir genre in mind. I rarely read memoirs, although, of course, there are plenty of first-person narratives out there. All fiction contains inevitably autobiographical material. Anecdotes, experiences, anxieties, something you once heard suddenly crops up in the narrative, because that's how memory works. It's interesting how memory unearths things through context, place, word-association, emotional resonance … The permutations the creative mind tends to perform make the end result unrecognizable as autobiography. Emotional memory is interesting. Someone says something and if it makes an imprint in your memory, it's because it was emotionally loaded. A character is a composite, or might develop into an extension of what someone you know could have been (or done) in your mind. Most of the ingredients that make up a character might not be real, but the flavor is.

As I wasn't writing in my native language, I thought the narrator had to be non-English. Thus, Nina, the Spanish narrator was created as an alibi, and it gave the narrative another layer, which was to do with language. All this is pretty autobiographical, I'd say, and might give it the flavor of a memoir, but it's blended with sheer fiction … I tend to write about places I haven't been to … it's more exciting … except for London.

That scene at the airport is fictional. I thought of the shoe collection as a metaphor for the baggage we inherit from our parents and how it affects our lives. The shoe collection becomes baggage straightaway and starts traveling. It becomes a bother straightaway, as it takes up a lot of space and she's besieged by it in her small flat … I think that the baggage that we inherit we first experience as obstacles, until you learn to be your own person … Of course, over the years, I've had to move around different flats and countries with boxes full of books … So, in a way, the experience with all these boxes full of shoes, it's the experience I've had with boxes full of books… Shoes are leather-bound stories…

JOB: Why are women philosophers so rare? You opened the gate to this question, and so I am walking through it.

SM: History cannot be undone in just one century. As everyone very well knows, social order is not founded on reason, but on a series of interests, and gender inequality is still a problem worldwide. Anyone with a modicum of intelligence cannot but be perplexed at how history has excluded women from so many fields. The western canon echoes this exclusion, in some fields more acutely than others. It's interesting philosophy should be one of those fields. Any thinker could have written at length about the absence of women from history, but it is, of course, women who have found that absence most bewildering. Female thinkers, artists, writers, scientists have to deal with this absence, something most male thinkers are not overly concerned with. Mary Wollstonecraft's writings took over two centuries to be digested. Our women philosophers are mostly of the 20th century: Weil, Arendt, Luxemburg, de Beauvoir, Zambrano, Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray, Sontag … Most female thinkers have tended to veer toward feminism and social activism, because that's the area where work was most needed, and many put their thought into practice by trying to improve the social condition of women—and men, because we are all in it—and thus social actors or commentators above all else—like Greer, Paglia, Klein. Another reason might be that as there is such an emphasis on what women look like, women have felt pressed to articulate their views on their sexuality and bodies from their own perspective. This is by no means the only subject women thinkers write about, but sadly, whereas female readers read independently of gender, most male readers tend to only read pieces written by men. This is still a problem, not only for female philosophers, but for female writers too.

> "I think female philosophers have migrated to other fields where they can be more hybrid … more concrete."

Another issue is that many female thinkers are interdisciplinary, or hard to categorize, often not limiting themselves to one genre. As new disciplines like psychoanalysis, anthropology, semiotics began to be incorporated into intellectual inquiry about reality, perhaps the word "philosopher" wasn't applicable anymore. It depends on your definition of it, but female thinkers feel more comfortable in this new soup.

Recently, there was this article in *The Guardian*: "Philosophy is for posh, white boys with trust funds"— why are there so few women?… Over 70% of philosophers in UK universities are men. So, it's still perceived as a problem … Though I think female philosophers have migrated to other fields where they can be more hybrid … more concrete … Of course, money, and trust funds, enable all genders to do all sorts of things … It's just so wonderful when they're used for utopian purposes, to help others.

JOB: How long did the novel take you to write?

SM: The first draft took me over two years and I was already working on a pre-existing outline. Luckily, when I did my M.A. in Hispanic Studies, I was "allowed" to do a creative project, so that was the very first sketchy outline for my novel. I worked on fetishism and Buñuel. I had lost all my hearing (I struggled with sudden hearing loss for three years) and had a cochlear implant operation. I was so excited about hearing again, about being a bionic woman. I wanted to ration solitary work. I started a Ph.D. on Borges. It was kind of therapy, so I'd have some social interaction, and went out a lot. I worked on the novel on and off for five years, adding layers of thought and changing a word here and there, with lots of things and projects happening between one draft and the next. I made two short films: *Buñuel's Philosophical Toys* and *Leather-Bound Stories* (co-directed with Derek Ogbourne). As I wrote the script for the latter and we made the film, I added fragments to the novel, as well as an extra frame that became a structural device in the film: the red notebook.

JOB: What were the biggest challenges for you in writing this?

SM: The biggest challenge was to switch from writing in Spanish to writing in English. Writing in English was an experiment. I had to work with linguistic limitations. Rather than working on the language itself, I thought I had to make good use of other devices such as rhythm, ideas, plot and structure.

Another big challenge was that after I finished the first drafts, my dad was diagnosed with vascular dementia, echoing the ill father I had written about in *Philosophical Toys* … So every time I went back to the manuscript to edit, I became more and more conscious of what was happening to him. Obviously, editing became very painful, because it would always bring back to me the reality of my father's illness, which was different, but very real … It was like, in some ways, I was re-enacting my novel … going back to Spain to look after him … and that helped me take better care of him, and we became closer for it, which was good. I suppose the ill father and the trips in the novel were there as a manifestation of a fear I didn't know I had. It foretold the future.

JOB: There are several references to her sexual experiences, but these are only references. But there is little in the book about them. Reason?

SM: I thought it was more interesting that way, as it's up to the reader to imagine. Nina, who's rather bashful here and there, is mainly dealing with ideas, and the references to her own sexuality are deliberately vague, funny, and revealing. Somewhere she says she's a knowledge fetishist. What if her own sexuality is inextricably linked with exploring all these ideas? Knowledge and learning are intimately linked to pleasure, our libidinal energies aren't limited to physical acts. Her voyeuristic imagination makes her wonder about her parents sexuality. I thought there was something naughty and humorous in this, and saw it as kind of part of her own sexuality … Also, *Red Tales*, my previous book, contained explicit sex … so, I didn't feel the urge to write about it in an explicit way. In *Philosophical Toys*, many things are intentionally second-hand … at one remove ... ■

Reading Andrej Blatnik

by Petra Vidali

Andrej Blatnik
Law of Desire
Translated by Tamara Soban
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

[This essay was translated by Tamara Soban.]

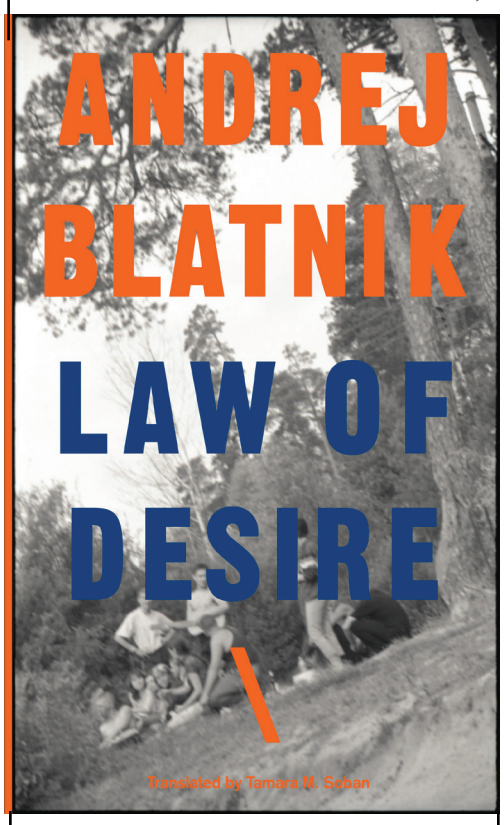
"A presentation of a successful literary development is necessarily always also a simultaneous presentation of continuity and discontinuity," writes Tomo Virk in the opening of his essay accompanying Andrej Blatnik's *Biographies of the Nameless* from 1989. Though *Biographies* was only Blatnik's third book, after the 1983 short-story collection, *Bouquets for Adam Fade,* and the 1987 novel, *Torches and Tears*, there were already grounds for talking of continuity and discontinuity. Virk's study "How Big Stories Got Short" delineates the postmodernist paradigm of exhausted literature and the metafictional and minimalist reversals. And in 1996 Virk wrote a study of Blatnik's novel *Closer to Love*, brilliantly registering the shifts in Blatnik's prose: the formal exhaustion of literature followed by the visibly deeper, existential exhaustion of the character.

The world of literature itself seems to revolve faster and faster: in the few decades of the last century it turned more times than in its entire history. The Slovene reaction time got shorter too, to a great extent thanks to authors of Blatnik's generation, and Blatnik himself. Highly sensitive to new trends from other countries, they tried them out as soon as they emerged, shedding old skin for new even more and more quickly. That, however, is not to say that the works were "slapdash" or lacking in maturity; the fact they still ring true is proof to the contrary. But it also seems that the current generation has lost its turbulence, that it has abandoned temporary shelters, and that those who remain are now turning to more stable literary essences.

Law of Desire certainly seems a product of such a maturing process. This is a book that displays authority about its subject matter, and perfection in its formal style. The author has been justly recognized as a master stylist before, in *Torches* and in *Biographies*, but he honed his skill even further in *Law of Desire*. It is probably not as pivotal a work as *Torches* was, or *Biographies*, or *Skinswaps* either for that matter. No injustice is done to the stories in *Law of Desire* if the *Skinswaps* paradigm is ascribed to them—that is, if we read them as accounts of exhausted existence. The designation seems universal, the state of affairs definite. How could this exhausted existence not be continued? How could it be transcended?

What then am I talking about?

When *Skinswaps* first appeared (quickly followed by the publication in magazine of individual stories from *Law of Desire*), Andrej Blatnik's name was becoming more and more closely associated with that of Raymond Carver. Which is not odd at all. In his preface to the Slovene translation of Carver's selected stories,



Aleš Debeljak wrote: "While it cannot be claimed that American literature as such can be divided into pre- and post-Carver literature, it is certainly true that the art ofthe short story will never be what it was before Raymond Carver came along."

In Blatnik's story "What We Talk About," literary reference is part of literature, and not in the choice of title alone; the second sentence is "I was returning Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, which I'd been reading longer than I should have …" Tomo Virk writes that the narrator's Carver reference shows "that, following the death of the acting protagonist, there appeared on the horizon of this existential position a conversing protagonist."

But the principal character of this most explicitly Carver-related story differs considerably from the one in Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The protagonist of "What We Talk About" is not a lower-middle-class American, but a Slovenian intellectual of cosmopolitan background, a person who understands the gist of the problem—that Carver's heroes, and perhaps all other present-day heroes as well, can no longer do anything but talk—and confronts it head-on. Talking itself becomes the subject of the story. Carver's heroes talked about kissing; Blatnik's protagonists talk about how kissing is nowadays only talked about. Does their knowledge, their awareness of the problem do them any good? Does it help them avoid talking, like Carver's characters, past each other? "She said it [Carver's book] was too sad, that all the characters talked past one another," Blatnik's narrator says. "I could not tell her my story. The one that weighed on my chest. So, then, I thought, what on earth can we talk about then? About everything, okay, but—does that have any sense at all now?"

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Music vs. Words

"What puzzles me is this incessant originating of music from every single pore of existence." "I hope you live to see the day when you play a melody of your own." "You don't know yourself, you think 'I love music' is too simple as an excuse, and that there has to be something else behind it." What a pre-postmodernist, naive, slightly pathetic ring these sentences have—all of them taken from "Bouquets for Adam Fade." "Electric Guitar," written in 1999, conveys a similar message. In that story, a child's naiveté is a perfectly camouflaged thing. (Incidentally, childlike innocence and phantasmagoria here again lead to the murder of a parent, as they did in the story "His Mother's Voice," from *Biographies*. Evil, born of ignorance, and from good intentions, has its allure for storytellers.) The boy from "Electric Guitar" still simply loves music: "The worst part of it is that he loves music."

"Electric Guitar" is possibly the only story in *Law of Desire* in which it does not matter who says what. The boy believes in the magical power of the guitar and is convinced that this power can save him: "If I had an electric guitar, a real one, then I could do it. He would be the right person for it and he could play it without a hitch, and his father would not take the belt out of his pants but would open his arms and lift him up and tell him how proud he was of him." And so on and on, a real phantasmagoria. The boy knows it is all just a dream, but his fascination also affects his reality. The "electric accordion," a combination of what he has got and what he wishes he had, makes his fantasy come partly true; his father will never again take the belt out of his pants. Thus music, unlike language, still seems capable of changing things.

***

Women vs. Men

In an interview for the magazine *Literatura* in 1995, the author answered a question posed by Ženja Leiler: "The most frequently recounted story is itself as old as the first couple evicted from paradise, a man and a woman. Is their relationship, which seems to be in a perpetual state of break-up/make-up, the eternal 'little-great story'?" "Yes," Blatnik answered. "I'd say this is the fundamental story of all stories."

There is nothing to add. This, even more than the story about the impossibility of a story and the unreliability of words, is what is at the heart of *Law of Desire*, just as it was the foundation of all Blatnik's previous work, regardless of style or spiritual-historical orientation. But in *Law of Desire* it has gained several new dimensions. In addition to "Official Version," in which the clash between the sexes is essentially socially institutionalized, "No" depicts a relationship that comes to a head in a radically physical way, beyond the possibility of appeal. These stories are the oldest two in the book, dating back to 1991. After bringing things to such a culmination, it was necessary to head off in a new direction (the first time a tragedy, the second a farce, isn't that the saying?) Blatnik followed up in 1992, with "Just As Well." Already in *Skinswaps*, in the story "Damp Walls," adultery resulted not in action, but in talk, and the absurdity of that situation contained a certain amount of humor. Not as much as in "Just As Well," however, the heroine of which provides her own story with as comprehensive a genre-classification as it's likely to get, when she says: "You know, life really is like a comic opera." And as such, it ends with reconciliation.

These deviations are followed by a return to the more typical, deadlocked type of relationship, and to stories in which the relationship is defined by absence, or impossibility. The couples in "What We Talk About," in "Closer," and in "Too Close Together" all talk past each other and remain, despite their desire for closeness, isolated from each other.

***

In the end, a universe of possibilities

The sequence of stories in *Law of Desire* is carefully considered. The book opens with a crucial story, and equally significant are the stories at all the other strategic points. The stories are arranged by theme and/or subject matter (not chronologically): "Closer" and "Too Close Together" describe different aspects of intimacy; "Too Close Together" and "A Thin Red Line" share a line-motif (lines being metaphors for fate in both cases); "Electric Guitar" and "Letter to Father" both feature problematic relationships between a father and his son; "Letter to Father" and "Nora's Face" share some sort of omnipotent authorial voice; "No" and "Official Version" have in common a perilously strained relationship between man and woman. The book may also be divided into segments according to their various moods. Beginning with a sort of mellow anxiety (stories about exhausted lives, no better or worse off at the end of their stories than at the beginning) the book's arc tends toward the blackly comic; later sections ("No" and "Official Version") give in to a newfound fatalism, a chorus of otherwise desperate attempts at intimacy (as in "Letter to Father"), only to end on a more conciliatory note with "The Day of Independence" and "Just As Well." Given all this, the placement of "Surface" at the very end of the book seems pregnant with meaning. An event that rocks the very foundations of the hero's existence is followed by a radical change (or at least a prediction of it); a traditional action-packed story, as it were, of a variety not often associated with the short story. Its open-ended quality may well be a characteristic trait of this genre, but usually we talk about an "openness" of a different kind; the story remains open-ended because a solution is not possible. At the end of "Surface," on the other hand, there are (literally) whole galaxies of possibilities to consider.

We witness a truce between man and woman, and the hero's realization that the two sides fight because they are both vulnerable. Will the hero then end up telling his story?

Sure—in the next book.■

Reading Marko Sosič

Alojzija Zupan Sosič

Marko Sosič
Ballerina, Ballerina
Translated by Maja Visenjak Limon
Dalkey Archive Press, 2014

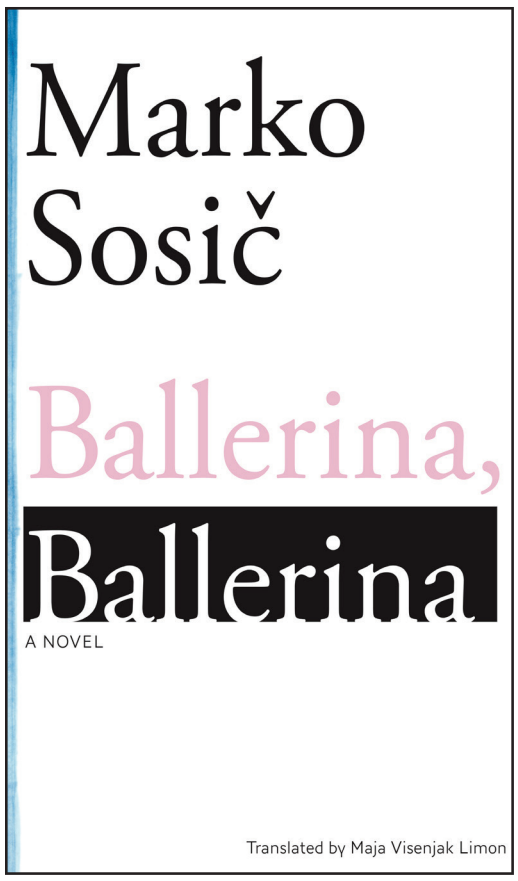
[This essay was translated by Nada Grošelj.]

From his first book, the short fiction collection *Dew on Glass* (*Rosa na steklu*, 1990), to his latest novel, *Who Are Nearing Me from Far Away* (*Ki od daleč prihajaš v mojo bližino*, 2012), Marko Sosič has distinguished himself within contemporary Slovenian literature. His realism and lyricism, along with his extraordinary protagonists, create an instantly recognizable narrative style that diverges from the so-called transrealism dominating much prose of the last two decades. Rather than the mimetic style of transrealism, Sosič gives us detailed yet highly lyrical descriptions of the daily habits and rhythms and unusual events of the lives of the Slovenian minority in Trieste, moving beyond the scope of verifiability or objectivity. Typification, a feature of realism, diversifies the extraordinary characters still further, and the choice of such strange protagonists shapes a world alienated through various sources of unreliability. The focus on an unusual character puts a veil of lyricism over real ethical questions.

Sosič's short fiction (*Dew on Glass* and *Out of Earth and Dreams*; *Iz zemlje in sanj*) and his three novels (*Ballerina, Ballerina*; *Tito, amor mijo*; *Who Are Nearing Me from Far Away*) are all set in Trieste or in the Karst villages scattered around Trieste, populated by Slovenians living beyond the state border. This setting does more than mirror the author's regional affiliation. The symbolic layers transform the simple sketches of the multicultural Trieste environment into universal pictures of individual fates, crafted with a subtle sensitivity to the disparities between majority and minority, normal and abnormal, commonplace and original.

In *Ballerina, Ballerina*, the poignant story of an average Slovenian family from a village above Trieste is told by an adult woman with an intellectual impairment, her mental and emotional horizons limited by her disability. "Ballerina" became her nickname after she began to lag behind in her development and respond oddly to certain stimuli: excitement makes her rise on tiptoe like a ballet dancer. Unable to understand the world outside her home kitchen, she is afraid of it, and her communicative limitations make her cling to her mother. Her total inability to respond to her surroundings suggests deeper existential issues, such as powerlessness caused by the (hierarchical) differences between people, transience and fatalism, the chasm between "us" and "you," the search for happiness.

The opening of the novel immediately reveals a different kind of literary tale. The interjection *aieee* introduces a dream in which the narrator, Ballerina, is flying and then falling. A lyrical portrayal of a small village is shattered by the banal observation of her need to pee. Thus, from the very first paragraph, the border between the world of dreams and the world of reality is seen to be a porous one. Her uneasiness affects the reader both emotionally and rationally. Even at this early stage, the reader will pause for a moment to wonder: "What extraordinary character has just been introduced to me? Why is she only narrating in the present tense? Will I understand her narrative?"



A quirky character is nothing new in Slovenian literature; indeed one can be found in the very first Slovenian novel, *The Tenth Brother* (*Deseti brat*, 1866). Sosič's narratives bring to life such time-honored tropes of unreliable narration as the mental patient or madman, and the child (or character arrested at a child's developmental level). Unreliability is attributable to the narrator's limited knowledge, his or her personal involvement with the story, or to troubling priorities that prompt unavoidable questions: Why did the author entrust the narration to an unreliable narrator? How accurate are the facts cited by the narrator? How far are we to trust the narrator's interpretation and judgment? The effectiveness of unreliable narration comes from its ability to divert the reader's attention from the level of plot, focusing it instead on his or her authorial peculiarities.

Ballerina belongs to the exemplary tradition of Ciril Kosmač, whose unusual characters not only represent a minor community but also point to a special reality, to universal truths, to a fine sensitivity to the plight of helpless or marginalized persons. Ballerina's development was arrested at a child's level, a fact sublimated into poetry and nostalgia by her peculiar sweetness and her remoteness in time from the events of the story (set in the 1960s). Her limited perspective adds aesthetic and emotional complexity, while the skillful crossing of boundaries between the average and above-average, the commonplace and the exceptional, gives the reader an ethical susceptibility, widening his or her concept of otherness. Ballerina's ignorance—like Bakhtin's "mask" which confers on the "fool" the right not to understand, to misjudge, to hyperbolize, to parody—lends itself to unmasking harmful conventionality. Since Ballerina is a spectator rather than an active participant, her first-person narration is sometimes enriched by the distance of the third-person: she even hears herself as if from a distance: "I think I can hear the sound of me setting down the plates."

Ballerina's multi-layered personality and narrative refinement make her unique in the broader context of world literature. While her mental impairment, affectionate character, and moral substance recall Benjy from William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), the two differ significantly in the extent of their mediation of reality. Benjy reports on the external events exhaustively and precisely like an audiotape, reproducing entire dialogues, ever on the edge of conflict, and his story is merely one out of four versions recounting his sister's unfortunate fate. Ballerina's narrative is sparer but more convincingly adapted to her mental age, and far more open and polyvalent (in aesthetic terms).

In the gallery of Slovenian literature, Ballerina's narration stands out. It is simple, with short sentences and repetitions of words and sentence patterns. They are saved from monotony through an enlivening blend of fantasy and realism, as well as through repeated images of yearning that revolve around the symbolism of the color blue, a bird, and the sung refrains of *volare* and *cantare*. Next to the dialectical words and the peculiar syntax of the story's dialogue, it is precisely the words *volare* and *cantare*, from the Italian song "Nel blu dipinto di blu" (made famous by Domenico Modugno in 1958), that carry great weight, adding a hint of bilingualism, multiculturalism, and the 1960s Trieste spirit. Moreover, flying and singing are the central motifs of the novel: flying appears at the book's very beginning, signaling transition to the surreal, to a different reality, a transcendence of the banal and commonplace, while singing—presented by the heroine as a therapeutic activity—is similarly endowed with well-nigh metaphysical qualities.

> "If the novel begins with an interjection introducing the fear of flying, it concludes with a funeral song: a promise of dead Ballerina's reunion with her mother and her song."

The transition from one world to another is the driving force of the novel, operating on several narrative and thematic levels. It is reflected in the shifts from a Slovenian to an Italian environment, from literary to colloquial language, from direct to reported speech, and in the interweaving of ordinary and extraordinary characters. At the ethical level, transition means progression from ignorance to moral responsibility, while the aesthetic level is kept stable by the permeability of physics and metaphysics, where transitions from the verifiable reality to the fantastic and surreal are confirmed by classic symbols of transition: the bird and the color blue.

One of the most elaborate transitions in the novel is from flying to singing. It is continually repeated in the refrain of *volare-cantare*; at a structural level, it is found in the balancing of the two symbols through various narrative elements, most conspicuously through the relationship between the beginning and conclusion of the novel. If the novel begins with an interjection introducing the fear of flying, it concludes with a funeral song: a promise of dead Ballerina's reunion with her mother and her song. The device of a dead narrator is, next to the innovative casting of a cognitively impaired person as an unreliable narrator, a major novelty in Slovenian storytelling, which, coupled with the rest of its qualities, makes *Ballerina, Ballerina* an outstanding novel even on a global scale. The beauty of music, cognate with the beauty of a child's soul, represents a special value in the novel, closely intertwined with lyrical passages on maternal goodness. All this, as well as love shining through as the central vital force, suggests answers to the questions, literary and non-literary, which come to haunt us long after we have already laid *Ballerina, Ballerina* aside.

The uncontrollably fluid line between fantasy and reality, a source of unease for *Ballerina, Ballerina*, was identified as a distinguishing narrative feature as early as Sosič's first book, *Dew on Glass*, in which the main characters strive to transcend their commonplace circumstances in a variety of ways. It similarly marks the ten-year-old male protagonist of *Tito, Amor Mijo*, Sosič's second novel, also set in Trieste in the 1960s. Trieste also provides the setting for his latest novel, *Who Are Nearing Me from Far Away*. However, the portrayal of Ivan Slokar, a Slovenian living in Trieste and teaching natural history at the *liceo*, is different in that the readers have to unravel the sources of his unreliability on their own. The perspective of an adult unreliable narrator gives shape to the introvert world of the silent—a world recorded in *Ballerina, Ballerina* by a mute film camera—identifying it with the ethical problem of collective and individual guilt, linked to Ballerina's symbolically loaded relatives from Bosnia. Compared to Sosič's latest novel, it is precisely the dumb materiality of his first that allows the reader to engage in greater associative creativity, especially in the presentation of the characters. Their characterization is accomplished through their movements and actions as perceived by Ballerina, who provides no tangible picture, external or internal. If the characters seem unhappy because of their imperfections and frustrated desires, the implied author suggests that this is what life is like: unhappy rather than happy. ■

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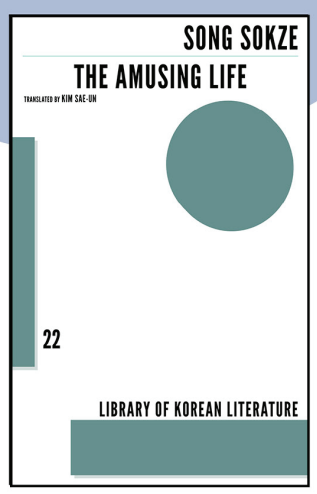

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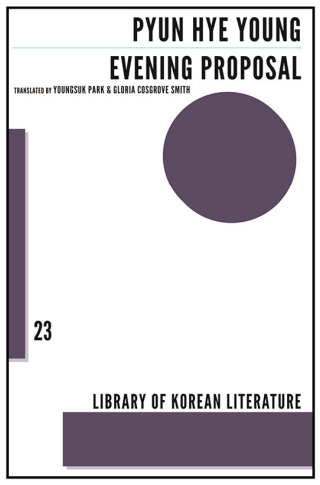

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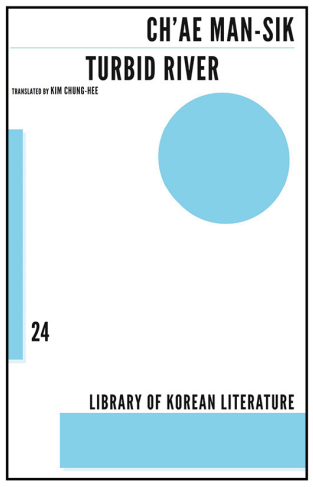

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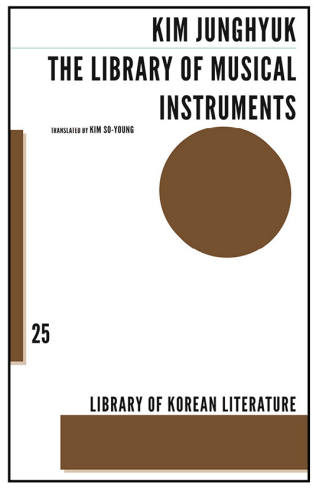

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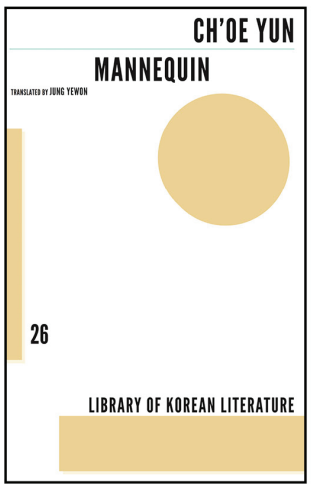

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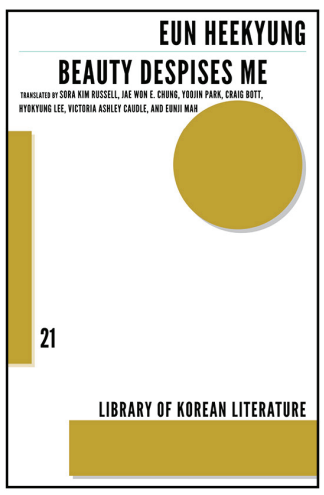

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Reading Sébastien Brebel

Jesse Anderson

Sébastien Brebel
Villa Bunker
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

Francis Bacon's Armchair
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016

A Perfect Disharmony
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016

The world Sébastien Brebel presents in his fiction is a bleak one. Most of his characters have come to a point in their lives where existence has begun to seem either meaningless or overwhelming, and so, in a desperate attempt to make life bearable again, they find themselves obsessively engaged in some time-consuming endeavor. They tend to be isolated—physically, emotionally, or both—and their isolation is often crucially tied to the pursuit of their obsession. For Brebel, life is impossible without self-deception, and the most effective way to deceive oneself about the emptiness of life is to let consciousness be completely overtaken by some self-obliterating task.

This take on life can be seen in the opening pages of Brebel's first book, *Place forte*, in the thoughts of a jaded notary driving aimlessly along a country road in western France:

> Everyone's life is comic, not vaguely or partially comic, but completely and radically comic, a hopeless comedy devoid of nuance.

And on the next page:

> Because it's not enough to simply act in the comedy, it's also necessary to hide from ourselves that we're acting, it's necessary to render ourselves indifferent and perfectly ignorant, necessary to employ exorbitant intellectual and moral powers to hide our very own game from ourselves.

In *Place forte*, a nameless notary (unless there's some humor or irony to be extracted, Brebel rarely reveals the names of his characters) accidentally hits a dog with his car. The injured dog gives the notary an opportunity to focus on something other than the morbid cycle of his thoughts; it offers temporary relief from the onslaught of existence, and the notary soon becomes obsessed with finding treatment for the animal. He finds a vet's office in a small town, but the veterinarian's wife is there alone: the veterinarian, she explains, has become obsessed with the mass extermination of cows in the region, where they're currently in the midst of a bovine epidemic. He leaves the house each morning in a state of euphoria and returns home late each night delighted, looking forward to the next day's slaughter. She can't understand his change of mood, but in Brebel's world there is nothing surprising about the veterinarian's obsession. He has his cows, the notary has his injured dog; both have found respite from the vacuity of life.

The search for a veterinarian then leads to an isolated farm, where the notary finds himself at the scene of a suicide. Without a word of introduction, the farmer's wife insists on recounting her story, which is, as one might expect, a story of obsession. What the notary and the vet have only dabbled in, the farmer perfected, living inside his dual obsession with farming and German literature. There are rarely permanent solutions in Brebel, and after several decades the veil the farmer had thrown over reality began to tear. Suicide was his last available option.

"Everyone's life is comic, not vaguely or partially comic, but completely and radically comic, a hopeless comedy devoid of nuance."

Brebel's second book, *Francis Bacon's Armchair*, is his most elusive. While the familiar elements of obsession and isolation can be found throughout the novel, they serve as a backdrop rather than as the driving force of the story.

The book's unnamed narrator has recently been released from an insane asylum and has decided to isolate himself in an eleventh-floor apartment in order to meditate and decide what to do next with his life. After several days of self-imposed isolation, the narrator becomes restless and rushes out of his apartment. He knocks on a door he feels instinctively drawn to, two floors down, where he has his first encounter with Sauvage, a morbidly obese translator who seems never to leave his armchair. Sauvage is in the process of translating *The Dictionary of Rare and Incurable Diseases*—he and the narrator share a preoccupation with illness—and through his work he has developed some discouraging opinions regarding language:

> So many times, he says, he has felt the hopeless insufficiency of language, so many times he has described the terrible illness that hides behind each definition. Whether or not language is the bastardization of thought, he says, he is its first witness, the pure witness.

The limitations of language and the effects of language on reality are ideas that come up repeatedly throughout *Francis Bacon's Armchair.* The narrator worries that "I might be misinterpreting the meaning of my own words, that what I think I'm saying is not what I'm saying in reality." Later, while reflecting on Sauvage's persistent silence, he thinks "it's in silence that one must confide the secrets of one's actions, whereas words can do only one thing: throw doubt upon the mind, corrupt the impact of our decisions."

The narrator has the same relationship with reality as the reader does with the story. Both are mediated through language, but language is unreliable, unstable; both the reader's experience and the narrator's could ultimately be a delusion. It is significant that the narrator goes unnamed and that Sauvage's name is so unfitting that he might as well be nameless. A name, after all, is how we are represented through language, and naming characters in a story about the futility of language would be hypocritical. By finishing his translation of the dictionary, the narrator says, "Sauvage had been cured of the word *illness*," because to know something is "to no longer fear it." To be cured of a word, at least in some limited way, get a hold of language and, in turn, of reality—these are the ideas at the core of *Francis Bacon's Armchair.*

Villa Bunker, Brebel's third book, is narrated by an unnamed philosophy student whose parents have recently moved into an isolated seaside villa. He reconstructs their experiences in the house through letters sent to him by his mother.

For most of the book, there are only three characters in play. The plot unfolds almost entirely within the villa, giving the story a claustrophobic and constrained atmosphere. The villa's interior is extremely complex and seems to change daily; rooms the couple is sure they'd been in one day appear to have completely transformed the next. As the weeks pass, the nature of the villa—and of reality—becomes increasingly difficult for the narrator's mother and father to grasp. Communication between them breaks down and the mother, already isolated with her husband in the villa, begins to feel her solitude even more acutely. But her take on isolation is complicated. Writing to her son about the terrifying sound made by waves crashing below the villa, a sound which seems to disappear when she wakes up, she says:

> … I feel much better in fact, almost relieved, writes my mother, I can imagine the villa is located in the middle of the desert, in the midst of a desolate landscape, out of reach, I can convince myself that the villa is in no way threatened by the waves; we're in the middle of nowhere, a barren expanse, sand stretches as far as the eye can see, and the silence is total; for days on end, the crashing sound disappears and a worrying silence, perhaps just as terribly heavy and oppressive, pervades the place in its absence.

The relief the mother feels by imagining the villa even more isolated than it already is, "in the midst of a desolate landscape, out of reach," quickly morphs into another source of anxiety, one that may be "just as terribly heavy and oppressive" as the waves. An initially comforting thought has been turned inside out and revealed to be as frightening as what prompted it. Similar types of inversion occur frequently throughout Brebel's fiction.

As the story proceeds, the narrator's father becomes increasingly obsessed with the villa's renovation and ends up locking himself away, in a room at the top of one of the villa's towers. The mother, left on her own in the immense structure, pursues her own obsession. Gardening starts out well but, like the

comforting thought of the villa in the desert, soon turns on her:

> She'd developed a hypersensitivity to smells, and she'd begun to fear that each plant's fragrance was delivering a coded message, the toxicity of which was growing by the day, or perhaps hour. It wasn't long before the sight of the lush indoor plants had become a negative influence…

The narrator himself has his own obsession, a dissertation on Foucault, "an *idée fixe* that had wound up killing any sympathy I might've had for the world, and which in the end had cut me off from the world."

Toward the end of the book, the house finally offers the mother a potential distraction (and obsession) in the form of an unexpected visitor, and the mother soon succeeds in drawing consolation from her discovery. But, of course, she should be wary of her own motivations. As the narrator reminds us early on in the novel, and as Sébastien Brebel makes clear throughout his fiction: "Self-deception is the goal of every undertaking."

Brebel's most recent book, *A Perfect Disharmony*, is a collection of stories, but the book maintains a fluidity of mood and atmosphere that at times makes it feel more like a novel. Every story centers on either a woman or a man's obsession with a woman, and certain details are repeated throughout the book, adding to the collection's sense of unity. As in Brebel's earlier books, isolation and obsession propel most of the stories, but what is most worthy of attention in *A Perfect Disharmony* isn't its themes but its experimentations with form—indeed, the book serves as a healthy reminder to Anglophone readers of the versatility of the short story.

The stories in *A Perfect Disharmony* contain only limited amounts of action. Brebel fills his stories with details, returning only sporadically to the situation presented at the beginning of the story. At first glance, many of the details could be considered superfluous to the story, but it is through the accumulation of these details that the character's limited action in the story takes on great significance for the reader. Here's a passage typical of *A Perfect Disharmony*:

> She's lost her interest in the seasons, in trees and in rainbows, she doesn't think about how old she is. She remembers that when she arrived here there were other houses in the area, but she doesn't wonder what's become of their occupants. For the most part, she's uninterested in her past. She experiences no desire to express her thoughts or to be listened to. When she talks in her sleep she says words whose strange beauty would astonish her.

Brebel's details tend to have an unforced quality about them that, in turn, gives his stories a strong sense of naturalism; they feel like random thoughts crossing a character's mind or the disinterested observations of a third party, not the contrived details of a writer trying to push forward a plot. Brebel also gives a great deal of attention to his characters' imaginations, to their dreams, daydreams, and fantasies—things that many writers would dismiss as aimless digressions. By allowing these detours into his characters' minds to take over the narration, Brebel gives his characters a dimension of complexity absent from most fiction. ■

An Interview with John O'Brien

Ricardo Gilb

[This interview was conducted with John O'Brien via e-mail, in November 2015. Below is the first of two parts.]

RICARDO GILB:I'll start with the latest news: Dalkey has opened offices in Victoria, Texas. What new opportunities does the move present?

JOHN O'BRIEN: Jeffrey Di Leo has created an interesting mix of things at the University of Houston-Victoria. He's brought together a number of literary presses, magazines, and journals, something that wouldn't be possible at a larger university, or one with its feet stuck in the cement of bureaucracy and lacking any imagination (which is the case with most universities). The University has taken on a degree course in applied literary translation, a program that gives emerging translators the opportunity to publish their first book-length work with Dalkey Archive, something no other university has or is able to offer.

RG: What was your original vision for the press? Has that changed or evolved over the course of thirty years?

JOB: The original mission was that of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, which I started in 1980. I wanted to give critical attention to the contemporary writers I thought were most important. Almost all were being ignored, and many of their books were out of print. I planned on it lasting for five years, at which time I'd be out of money and too exhausted to continue. Five years seemed a long enough time to make my point. I wanted it to be international in scope because I believe that this is how literature must be read, and in my selection process I wanted to show that the academics were wrong about contemporary literature, and that the reviewers were no better.

RG: But somewhere in there you decided to keep going past the five-year mark?

JOB: Writers and critics approached me with other writers who they thought deserved attention, and I couldn't disagree. Why end the *Review* when it was financially stable and clearly serving a need? The moment of insanity came when I thought I could start a press, but I told myself that I would publish only one book, a reprint of a Gilbert Sorrentino novel that New Directions had let go out of print—or had at least returned the rights to the author. That book was *Splendide-Hôtel*. But then there were many other out-of-print books by the writers I had been featuring in the *Review*, and what was the point of creating interest in their work when people couldn't easily find the books? The next year I think I reprinted two or three books, but still without admitting what I was doing. And then it was time to stop or get serious and begin planning. So there I was; without any intention of starting a publishing house, I had gone ahead and started one. Then one day a beautifully translated French novel arrived, and that was the first original work of fiction I published. It was *Our Share of Time* by Yves Navarre. Ah, it comes back to me now, how I deluded myself about starting Dalkey. My thinking was this: I do three issues of the *Review*, so doing a few books will be adding on just a bit more work. Of course, there is little similarity between doing a magazine/journal and publishing books, but that was the only way I could justify what I was getting into. Delusional thinking can sometimes be useful.

RG: What do you see as some of the high points—or lows—of your career with Dalkey?

JOB: The real high points for me come when new books arrive from the printer. After everything it takes to create these remarkable objects, there they are! And ready to go out into the world. Second on the list are the friendships I've had with writers, beginning with Gilbert Sorrentino, whom I consider to be the greatest American fiction writer post-1950. He was both a dear friend and a mentor.

RG: What influence did Gil have on you?

JOB: I met Gil when I was in the second year of my doctoral studies. I had started reading more seriously when I was a freshman in high school, and by the time college came around I had read almost everything that would be assigned for courses, which is one reason I cut so many classes and then suffered the consequences. I was interviewing Gil for a project, and within minutes of starting he began mentioning names of writers I had never heard of: American, British, Irish, French, Spanish; on and on. I thrive on being around people who know more than I do. At some point I asked him to write the names down. I hate to admit it but Flann O'Brien was on the list, a writer whose name was never mentioned in the University's hallowed halls. That's how, midway through my doctoral studies I entered "The School of Gilbert Sorrentino." This led to a friendship lasting many years, during which time we exchanged a letter every week.

RG: Are there certain books you're particularly proud to have published?

JOB: I started to make a list, and after going through about 40 of the 700+ titles we have in print, I had chosen about 25. As you can see, this is a rather hopeless task.

RG: You started out with an interest in writers like Sorrentino, as well as Douglas Woolf, and Paul Metcalf—writers that could be termed "experimental." Has this kind of fiction fared well over the years, in terms of popularity and reputation?

JOB: I wanted to find more readers for their work, in part by keeping their books in print and slowly reaching

new generations of readers. I think we are the only publisher in America with that distinctly un-business-like policy. But the audiences do develop, and not just in the United States. It's rewarding to travel in another country and meet people who will cite some of the poorest-selling books as their favorites. But to try to answer your question, I have never thought in terms of popularity or even reputation. I started Dalkey to reprint novels that the commercial world had already given up on. Popularity has little to do with quality, except in the minds of people for whom the marketplace is everything. Dalkey has a few times been compared to a museum, a comparison I rather like, though it was not meant as a compliment. From the start, I wanted to create a space within the culture where the highest forms of literary art would be available and protected, and not reduce these works to mere commercial value.

RG: Are you surprised by Dalkey's level of success, or its reputation?

JOB: Again, I don't think in these terms. In most respects, I don't think of Dalkey as being part of the "publishing world." I wanted to change the values in America, and challenge the whole idea of success and what it means to be successful. This battle is ongoing.

RG: I want to close with a couple of questions about the future. First: Has the rise of the eBook and the Kindle—and Amazon, of course—affected the way Dalkey operates? Are you an e-book reader yourself?

JOB: I have never read an e-book; I'm too old to change how I read. But I believe that e-books will be the future and am excited about the possibilities, as well as the convenience. There is so much more that can be done with a book once it is available as an e-book, including adding materials after the book is published: interviews with the writer, book reviews, critical essays. But what will ultimately make readers turn to e-books will be cost. This will also mean that no books need ever be "out of print" again.

RG: Are there young writers that you're particularly excited about?

JOB: I'd point to two writers we will be publishing in the near future. Ignacy Karpowicz, a Polish writer, and Pablo Katchadjian, an Argentinian writer. Keep your eye on these two.

[Excerpts of forthcoming books by Ignacy Karpowicz and Pablo Katchadjian can be found on pages 7 and 8 of this issue.] ■

THE CRITICS

excerpts from Dalkey Archive titles

Jean-Phillipe Touissant
Urgency and Patience
Translated by Edward Gauvin
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

I like the idea that a book can be defined as a "dream in stone" (the words are Baudelaire's). "Dream" because of the freedom it demands—daring, risk, fantasy, the unknown; "stone" because of the consistency—firm, solid, mineral—obtained through sheer, unrelenting work on language, words, and grammar. When you've got your nose too deep in a manuscript, your eyes in the gears and grease of sentences, sometimes you lose sight of the line of a book. Now, I like picturing a book as a line. I like the abstraction of it, where literature meets music, and the line of a book rises, falls, billows at the pure whim of rhythm. Sometimes a contradiction arises between my desire to write lasting sentences, akin to aphorisms, and the need for such sentences not to interrupt reading, not even to slow it down. These sentences must be swept up in the course of the novel without disturbing its flow, must burrow into the text, almost camouflaged, so that they sparkle without drawing too much attention. When, at the end of a climactic scene, the book soars and reaches a summit, how to continue the narration, how to come back down, without losing one's grip on the reader? Must the line of a book always be a constant crescendo from first to last? No, one can install accelerandos inside individual parts, play with breaks in rhythm, make the last line of a paragraph resound. All these things can be calculated, meted out, and measured. These are technical questions, matters of craft. A book must seem self-evident to a reader, and not something premeditated or constructed. But this self-evidence is something the writer himself must construct.

Urgency is not, as I conceive it, inspiration. What distinguishes the two is that inspiration is received and urgency acquired. In the myth of inspiration—that great romantic myth—is a passivity I find displeasing, wherein the writer—the inspired poet—is the plaything of some grace outside himself, God or Nature, who comes and lays a finger on his innocent brow. No. Urgency is no gift, but a quest. It is arrived at only through effort, built only through work; one must go to meet it, venture into its realm. For urgency indeed has a realm, an abstract, metaphorical place in those inner regions reached only after a long journey. Urgency must be attained through immersion. You must take the plunge, fill your lungs with air and then descend, leave the everyday world behind and dive into the book underway, as if to the bottom of the ocean. You don't reach the bottom right away; there are steps, stages of decompression. In the early phases of the descent, you can still feel the visible world above, still see it even, still draw inspiration from it. That means you haven't gone deep enough. You have to keep going, persevere. At 450 feet, you can barely see anything anymore, you start to make out new shadows; memories of real people fade away while fictive creatures appear and surround us, a swarm of living micro-organisms of various shapes and sizes. We are in a shadowy world between reality and fiction. We keep going down and, past 650 feet, not a single ray of sunlight reaches us now. We have come at last to the realm of urgency, the world of abyss, more than 75 trillion acres of darkness and silence where crushing pressure reigns and endless blind presences proliferate, infinitesimal potential lives in motion. Here we are, the right depth: now we have the necessary distance, the ideal detachment with which to reconstruct the world, to retranscribe, the depths of writing itself, everything we have taken in on the surface. Here, at the very heart of urgency, everything comes easily, floats free and lets go; actual sight is of no more use to us, but the inner eye widens, and a fictive, fabulous world appears in our minds. Our senses are alert, our perceptions heightened, our sensitivity intensified; a tipping takes place, a gushing, and out it all comes, sentences are born, flow, fall over each other, and everything is right, everything works out, everything flee us at any moment. Urgency is a state of writing that can only be arrived at after infinite patience. It is the reward for that patience, its miraculous denouement. All the efforts we made in the name of our book were, in reality, only straining toward this singular moment when urgency bursts forth, when it all tips over, when it comes by itself, when the string keeps endlessly unwinding from the ball. As in tennis, after hours of practice in which every movement has been analyzed, broken down, and put back together ad infinitum, but remains stiff, rigid, and soulless, there comes a moment, in the heat of a match, when you start letting your strokes go and pull off some things that would've been unimaginable before you'd warmed up, and were only made possible by the rigor and persistence of the practice that preceded it. At moments like these, in the heat of writing, there's nothing we can't try, everything works; we graze the net, we hit it just inside the lines, we find everything instinctively, every bodily posture, the ideal bend to the knee, the way to wind up and swing—everything is right, every image, every word, every adjective is a volley intercepted and returned—everything finds its exact place in the book.

William Gass
Life Sentences
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

The poem is thus a paradox. It is made of air. It vanishes as the things it speaks about vanish. It is made of music, like us, "the most fleeting of all," yet it is also made of meaning that's as immortal as immortal gets on our mortal earth; because the poem will return, will begin again, as spring returns: it can be said again, sung again, is our only answered prayer; the poem can be carried about more easily than a purse, and I don't have to wait, when I want it, for a violinist to get in key, it can come immediately to mind—to my mind because it is my poem as much as it is yours—because, like a song, it can be sung in many places at

"… because the poem becomes a condition of the body, it enlivens our bones, and they dance the orange, they dance the Hardy, the Hopkins, the Valéry, the Yeats[.]"

gathers and fits together in this intimate darkness that is the inside of our very minds. But the tiniest thing—a speck of dust, a snag—and the whole process breaks down, bringing us back up to the surface, for urgency is fragile, and can

once—and danced as well, because the poem becomes a condition of the body, it enlivens our bones, and they dance the orange, they dance the Hardy, the Hopkins, the Valéry, the Yeats; because the poem is a state of the soul, too (the soul we once had), and these states change as all else does, and these states mingle and conflict and grow weak or strong, ad even if these verbalized moments of consciousness suggest things which are unjust or untrue when mistaken for statements, when rightly written they are real; they themselves are as absolutely as we achieve the Real in this unrealized life—are—are with a vengeance; because, oddly enough, though what has been celebrated is over, and one's own life, the life of the celebrant, may be over, the celebration is not over. The celebration goes on.

Jon Fosse
An Angel Walks Through the Stage
Translated by May-Brit Akerholt
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

As I gradually and in different ways have had considerable contact with literature, I become more and more convinced that there is, quite clearly, in a kind of inter-subjective yet in its own way objective sense, something called literary quality, there is good literature and there is bad literature, and thus there are also good authors, just as there are bad ones.

> "… neither Freud nor Marx … can get away from the fact that a person can do good or evil."

But surely this is obvious? Yes, you would believe and hope so, but in a society such as the Norwegian one, you may just barely allow yourself to entertain the presumptuous notion that some literature is good, other literature is bad.

It is almost just as presumptuous as to say that there are actions which are good and there are actions which are evil. Or to say that evil also exists.

But evil does exist, neither Freud nor Marx nor the Norwegian social democracy with its economists, social scientists, social workers, and psychologists, can get away from the fact that a person can do good or evil.

Victor Shklovsky
Theory of Prose
Translated by Benjamin Sher
Dalkey Archive Press, 1991

A poet removes all signs from their places. An artist always incites insurrections among things.

Things are always in a state of revolt with poets, casting off their old names and adopting new names and new faces. A poet employs images as figures of speech by comparing them with each other. For instance, he may call fire a red flower or he may attach a new epithet to an old word, or else, like Baudelaire, he may say that a carcass lifts its legs like a woman with lascivious intent. In this way he brings about a semantic shift. He wrests the concept from the semantic cluster in which it is embedded and reassigns it with the help of the word (figure of speech) to another semantic cluster. We, the readers, sense the presence of something new, the presence of an object in a new cluster. The new word envelops the object, as new clothes envelop a man. The sign has been taken down. This is one of the ways in which an object can be transformed into something sensuous, into something capable of becoming an artifact.

Bruce Kawin
Telling It Again and Again
Dalkey Archive Press, 2015

The present does not remember the past. By beginning again, our art-time is always present. By repeating a sound until we see past it—whether that sound is a syllable, a religious formula, or our name—we may come not to have to apprehend the present by instants, but may find the continuum of our self in the continuum of the true, and so live in eternity. It is not doing things over that is the key to life in the present, but abandoning the illusions of past and future: attention to that timelessness which is the time of our consciousness and of reality. The sun comes up every day (and we receive it) in perfect attention; it does not fear that it is being repetitious, nor presumably does it remember what it has done before or consider what it will do in the future. It is the strength of assertion, the assurance of identity, that is the force of repetition; it is the apologetic consciousness squeezed between past and future, unsure of itself and its intentions, wavering, faltering, that gives the sense of the repetitious to recurrence. The present is eternal, and eternity is repetition. ■

The CONTEXT Playlist

Ricardo Gilb

[CONTEXT aims to introduce readers to what's new and interesting not only in literature, but in film and music and other arts. To that end, the CONTEXT Playlist will introduce music that is loosely suggested by the books and essays in this issue. A few are mentioned directly, a few are related, and most are the result of free association based on themes and geographies in the issue.]

Dmitri Shostakovich
String Quartet No. 3

"It's that we're fascinated with the quartets by Shost..., Shost... But we can never remember his name. A student stands up and asks us to explain what is so fascinating about the quartets by Shost... We don't know; or we do, because we're certain that we know why they're fascinating, but we can't explain it; and the second certainty is that if we could remember his name we could explain this fascination." So says the narrator of Pablo Katchadjian's *What to Do*, and he is right, as Shostakovich (1906-1975) was a fascinating composer, perhaps the greatest of his century. He walked a fine line between dissident and collaborator with his Soviet masters, and in his music—like Katchadjian in his writing—he often wavers between darkness, humor, and sheer oddity. There's no better example than this quartet, with its distinctive Shostakovich-ian waltzes, filled with lightness and suspense.

Ivan Karabits
Concerto for Orchestra No. 3:
"Lamentations"

If Kirill Karabits has become one of Ukraine's best-known musicians, it is partly because he learned from his father Ivan (1945-2002). "Lamentations" premiered in the United States in 1989 and was dedicated to the victims of two great tragedies that befell twentieth-century Ukraine: the Stalin-induced famine of the 1930s and the 1986 disaster at Chernobyl. The music, dark but never still, is a fitting accompaniment to Artem Chapeye's essay about the country's still-vexed relationship with Russia and to Svetlana Alexievich's great *Voices from Chernobyl*.

Valentin Silvestrov
The Messenger

Silvestrov (b. 1937) was a contemporary and friend of his compatriot Ivan Karabits, but Silvestrov has lived long enough to achieve wider renown outside his native Ukraine. He's been helped by the likes of the great violinist Gidon Kremer, who included an arrangement of his piece *The Messenger* on his album *After Mozart*. Silvestrov's career—like that of many of his contemporaries—has been marked by a gradual shift away from the tonal-dissonance favored by mid-century serialists and atonalists, moving instead toward simpler melodies and harmonies, treated with an almost religious reverence.

Arvo Pärt
Fratres, arr. for guitar

If anyone typifies the "holy minimalism" of the last few decades, it is the Estonian Arvo Pärt (b. 1935), who fled the Soviet Union for the West in 1980. A collection of essays by, and interviews with, Pärt was recently published by Dalkey, displaying his deep artistic and spiritual engagement with his work. *Fratres* has been arranged and re-arranged for just about every set of instruments imaginable. I've chosen this version because it highlights the young guitarist Mak, who, like a number of people featured in this issue, is from Slovenia. (And, I might as well admit, because I love the guitar.)

Marij Kogoj
Portret, for violin and piano

Only when I read Alojzija Zupan Sosič's essay in this issue did I learn that there is (and has long been) a substantial Slovenian community in Trieste. Some digging led me to Marij Kogoj (1892-1956), who was born in Trieste, studied briefly with Arnold Schönberg and was later a leading member of the Ljubljana avant-garde. There aren't a lot of recordings of his work available (at least not for an English speaker) but there is at least one album of "L'Opera Completa per Violino e Pianoforte" from 2011, where I found this piece, in which a bit of lyrical pleasantness emerges from the angular, fragmented melodic style of the early twentieth century.

Nino Rota
Piano Concerto in C Major

From Trieste to Milan, birthplace of the great film score composer Nino Rota (1911-1979). Franco D'Alessandro calls Italian-American author Joseph Papaleo an American Fellini, so who better to represent him musically than Rota, who scored so many of Fellini's films? Rota studied for a few years in Philadelphia, likely enjoying Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm," which appeared during his time there. Rota must have learned something in those classes, as this concerto demonstrates his skillful use of a simple, abstract theme—which likely won't challenge his *Godfather* score in popularity—to create a fun dialogue between pianist and orchestra.

Olivier Messiaen
Preludes, for piano

From Papaleo to Sébastien Brebel, Italian to French, next on the list is a piece from one of the quirkiest twentieth century modernists. Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) shared his predecessor Debussy's love of simple, unconnected harmonies, but added a serious dose of experimental and hyper-modern compositional technique. I like these preludes largely for their evocative titles, which recall the isolation that Brebel writes of. The second is "Song of ecstasy in a sad landscape," the sixth is "Bells of anguish and tears of farewell," and the best is the fifth: "The impalpable sounds of the dream."

Teresa Clotilde del Riego
"Homing"

In her interview in this issue, author Susana Medina says, "Anyone with a modicum of intelligence cannot but be perplexed at how history has excluded women from so many fields." The canon of classical musicians—composers even more so than performers—only provides further evidence of this exclusion. Prompted by Medina, I found this 1917 composition, a charming and—to my American ears, at least—very good tune by Teresa Clotilde de Riego (1876-1968). An Englishwoman of Spanish descent, a number of her compositions were quite popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her biggest success, "Homing," with its refrain, "all things come home at eventide like birds that weary of their roaming," is still often performed and recorded today.

Unsuk Chin
Violin Concerto

In honor of Dalkey's Korean Literature Series (represented in this issue by Charles La Shure's essay on Kim Namcheon), I've chosen this work by German-based Korean composer Unsuk Chin (b. 1961), one of the most successful modern composers. In Chin's music one finds a shimmering beauty emerging from extremely dense textures. While the music of other avant-garde composers can feel heavy, Chin achieves an appealing lightness; it is no coincidence one of her other projects was music for *Alice in Wonderland*. This violin concerto is a great example of her style, and earned her a Grawemeyer Prize—one of the most important international prizes awarded for composition.

Søren Nils Eichberg
Endorphin

Perhaps some Danish music can prepare us for the Danish books that Paul Larkin tells us need to be translated. *Endorphin* probably won't help you read, but it will certainly wake you up. Eichberg (b. 1973) is quickly making a name for himself as a composer, having become composer-in-residence at the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. His fame will likely only keep growing—unless, of course, robots are the future, as suggested by the titles of his popular composition "robot opera." This short showpiece starts out as a modernist homage to Richard Wagner, gradually relaxing into a particularly beautiful (and substantially slower) middle section, which itself slowly devolves into chaos as the endorphins move back into overdrive for the finale.

Per Nørgård
Fons Laetitiae, for soprano and harp

Per Nørgård (b. 1932) is Denmark's leading contemporary composer, which means quite a lot in a culture (let's follow Paul Larkin, and call it "Scandiwegian") that loves its classical music. Nørgård has been very successful as a symphonist, and his works are regularly performed by orchestras around the world; he's even written a book. His work employs modern compositional techniques, and delivers a clarity and beauty reminiscent of the ur-Nordic composer Jean Sibelius. I've chosen one of his smaller-scale, more delicate works to close out this playlist, to help us come down from the endorphin rush of Eichberg's piece. It is a beautiful and serene piece—as one might expect from a harp/soprano duet—and every bit as joyous as its title ("Fountain of Joy") suggests. ■

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