

Reading Christine Montalbetti

Warren Motte

Christine Montalbetti's books are innovative, compelling, and slyly enticing constructions that provide some of the finest readerly experiences that French fiction currently has to offer. They put on stage a wide variety of characters, situations, and events, yet each book testifies in similar ways to a profound reflection on narrative art, and each pays close attention to the *critical* dimension of contemporary writing. That this should be the case is logical enough, once one realizes that Montalbetti leads a double life. On the one hand, she is beginning to make her mark as one of the most intriguing young novelists in France; on the other hand, she is a professor of literature at the University of Paris, and the author of a number of important critical and theoretical works that have confirmed her as a scholar of narrative. Insofar as her fiction is concerned, its most salient trait is undoubtedly the manner in which it takes the reader into account. These are generous texts wherein the author invites her reader to inhabit textual space, and to participate in a meditation focusing both upon the book of the future and the future of the book. For my own part, I am persuaded that it is precisely in such texts that the contemporary French novel realizes its potential and seeks to renew itself. From their very first sentences, Montalbetti's books call upon their readers relentlessly, inveigling us, flattering us, cajoling us, attempting to persuade us that we have a role to play in the process of storytelling. *Western*, for instance, begins thus:

Call him anything you want, this thirty-year-old in the checkered shirt who rocks back and forth under the roof of this porch in what can only be called a makeshift apparatus, haphazardly, with nothing like the harmonious movements of an actual rocking-chair—the slow movement of its curves in an ergonomic unity conducive to day-dreaming—making do, under the circumstances, with this senescent chair, even being a little too hard on it, a chair covered in nicks and smudges telling of past carelessness (see that chipping, those splotches, the gashes on its rungs, the scars in its back), a rustic model (notice how thick the rungs are, the clumsy spindles fanning out), pushing it just a little bit too far, having wedged its back legs into a crack in the floor, while its front legs, like the lone two fangs, if you will, in some scarcely populated jaw, bite erratically at the ground, as though that jaw were snapping shut.

SELECTED WORKS BY CHRISTINE MONTALBETTI

Sa fable achevée, Simon sort dans la bruine. [His fable concluded, Simon steps into the drizzle.] P.O.L., 2001.

L'Origine de l'homme. [*The Origin of Man.*] P.O.L., 2002. Forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press in 2012.

Expérience de la campagne. [Experience of the countryside.] P.O.L., 2005.

Western. P.O.L., 2005 / Dalkey Archive Press, 2009.

Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux. [Stories about the feeling of love.] P.O.L., 2007.

Petits Déjeuners avec quelques écrivains célèbres. [Breakfasts with a few famous writers.] P.O.L., 2008.

Journée américaine. [American Day.] P.O.L., 2009.

Le Cas Jekyll. [The Jekyll Case.] P.O.L., 2010.

L'Évaporation de l'oncle. [The Evaporation of Uncle.] P.O.L., 2011.

An imperative in the first-person plural is one of the most characteristic signatures in Montalbetti's writing. It suggests a complicity between narrator and reader that she wagers upon throughout her work, proposing a narrative contract steeped in complaisance, one which guarantees that, whatever else may come to pass, author and reader are—and shall remain—allied. Yet that very complaisance serves a variety of purposes other than that of merely putting the reader at ease, I think; and it sets the stage for a series of canny maneuvers that Montalbetti practices elsewhere.

The key technique that she practices is that of "intrusive" narration, and it colors each of her novels and short stories. Narrative voice in her writing is utterly irrepressible; her narrators are unrepentant *causeurs* who condition our reception of the text in crucial ways. Yet to be fair, as intrusive as they may be, they constantly invite the reader to engage in dialogue with them, as if both narrator and reader were present in the story, and in position to shape it productively. Montalbetti uses a variety of effects intended to engage us, and some are less subtle than others. Flattery, for instance: she often positions her reader as the one individual who is capable of appreciating the kind of storytelling she is putting forward. In one of her short stories, she remarks, "you are the one person who may imagine flawlessly the particular trouble that the unlucky hero of this story

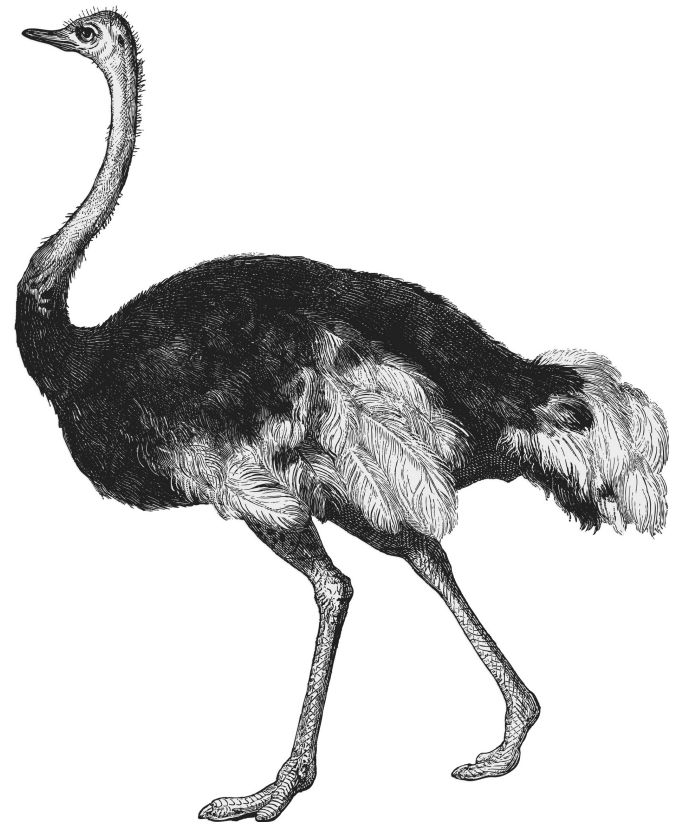
experiences." Another translation of this passage, this time cast in barefaced blarney, suggests itself: You are a smart and resourceful reader, indeed an ideal one; I have foreseen your readerly responses and have predicated my own narrative strategy upon them; I shall tell you everything you wish to know in this, my story.

Another technique, one closely akin to flattery, is cajolery. Montalbetti resorts to that tactic when she feels that the reader's attention might be flagging, or when she senses that the reader might be unwilling to make the kind of interpretive leap that a particular narrative situation demands. In the middle of an especially garrulous passage describing a sunrise in *Western*, Montalbetti enjoins her reader, "come on, there you go, easy now, easy . . . I want you even more passive, more trusting, that's good . . . you're floating, you paddle around, come on, let yourself go, reading can be wonderfully regressive . . ." She strokes her reader here as one might stroke a golden retriever, fondly and benevolently. It is quite a different figure, then, from the one she habitually appeals to, a reader distinguished by intellectual acuity, by resourcefulness, and by active interpretive participation. Yet the manner in which she attributes shifting characteristics to her reader is very much a part of the game she plays in her discursive strategy, and its ludic quality is meant to be savored.

As she deploys the array of effects designed to grab and retain our attention, Montalbetti occasionally puts that very process on display, and asks us, with transparent sincerity, to consider it, as she does on one occasion in *The Origin of Man*: "But what wouldn't I do to retain your attention?" What indeed? For her solicitation of the reader seems to acknowledge no boundaries, and the pact that she attempts to seal with us includes a clear hospitality clause, "because you're my guest, after all." Yet it nonetheless becomes clear—and indeed Montalbetti takes pains that it should—that such effects are surface phenomena intended to function on a first level (just as polite conversation renders

a more purposeful dialogue possible), and that both writer and reader, working within the complicity that those effects help to establish, recognize them as such. As complaisant as they may appear, then, they are nonetheless intended to reinforce the notion of narrative *authority*; and each of those techniques is calculated to make us imagine that we are hearing the author's voice in each instance where that interpretation is even barely possible—and to make us feel, too, that that voice is addressing us directly and without mediation.

Montalbetti takes her time in her books, and she calls insistently upon her reader to follow her through the dilatory meanders of fiction. These are "loiterly" texts (to borrow a term coined by Ross Chambers), which put forward the notion that we are fundamentally loiterly by nature, and that we take pleasure in digression. However else stories may come to be, they are certainly not made in an instant, Montalbetti argues, and they should not be told in an instant, either. In their final form, they bear the traces, more or less legible depending upon the case, of a lengthy imaginative process. That process is a wandering one, Montalbetti argues, rather than a strictly ortho-linear one. Stories are governed by teleological principles, certainly, but they proceed toward their goal in a crablike fashion, going this way, then that way, then this way again. In short, they take their time—and so should we.



CONTEXT

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Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984) was a leading figure in the Russian Formalist movement of the 1920s and had a profound effect on twentieth century Russian literature. Several of his books have been translated into English, including *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love*, *Theory of Prose*, *Energy of Delusion*, and *Bowstring*, all published by Dalkey Archive Press.

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Illustrator, painter, cartoonist, filmmaker, poet, novelist, songwriter, set designer—there are few things Roland Topor (1938–1997) hasn't been, but no matter the field, his uniquely gleeful and absurdist gallows humor remained constant. In 1962, he co-founded the Panic Movement, and in 1973 animated René Laloux's Cannes-winning short science fiction film *Fantastic Planet*. Roman Polanski's 1976 film *The Tenant* was based on Topor's 1964 novel of the same name, and in 1979, Werner Herzog cast him as Renfield in his remake of *Nosferatu*.

CONTACT

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Montalbetti's fiction posits plot only to shy away from it, deferring plot while constantly whetting our appetite for it, playing on our desire to know what "happens." In so doing, she practices a dexterous sleight of hand, playing a textual shell game, keeping us guessing about where narrative truth lies. Each of her digressions tells a story, one that may be related

to the principal story at hand only by the most tenuous of links. They are anecdotal and offhanded, chatty, and apparently spontaneous on the surface; yet a closer reading confirms that they are also deeply calculated. Just in that light, then, Montalbetti's digressions may be seen as fictions within a fiction; and as such they perform an intriguing critique upon

fiction itself, destabilizing conventional narrative norms and enabling other, less conventional dynamics to come into play. The skepticism that they display with regard to tradition may prompt us to think about process issues in the text at hand, and to appreciate the manner in which those process issues adumbrate new narrative prospects. In short, Montalbetti uses digression strategically, as a critical tool, in fictions that adopt an overtly critical stance, casting a speculative gaze on their own conditions of possibility.

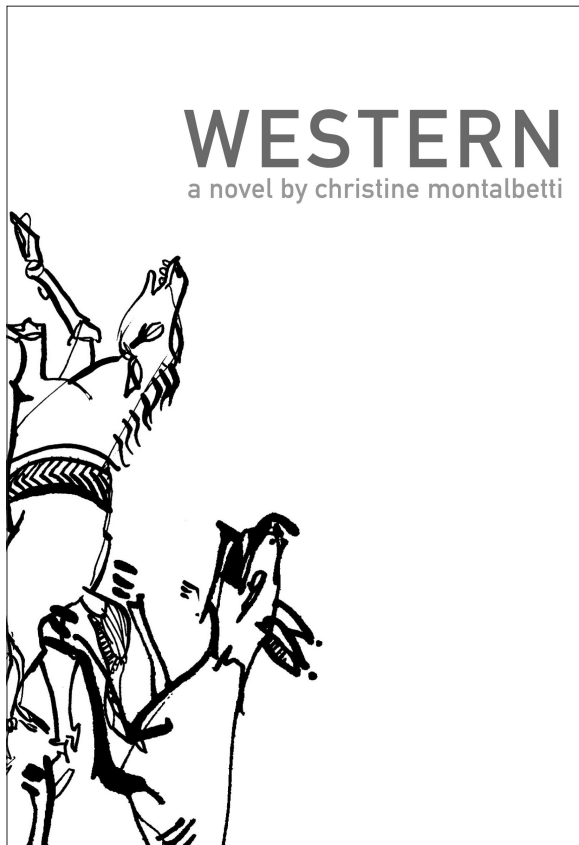
Montalbetti encourages her reader to consider the notion that the interest of fiction may not be principally invested in plot, but rather in elements of narrative that we usually view as being peripheral to plot. She launches one of her short stories, for example, in the following manner: "I don't know

about you, but for my part, when I look at a painting, it's often not the main subject that I focus upon; rather, it's the little scenes in the background, those secondary subjects, limned quickly by the brush, and positioned vulnerably apart from the central figure." She is clearly attempting thereby to shape our reading of the text to follow, exhorting us to make the broad leap of faith that it demands—that is, to entertain the possibility that more interest may be found in the margins of things than in what we have always thought of as their vital center.

The idea of discursive freedom is pivotal here, I think. It is a principle that Montalbetti claims for herself, but it is also one that she extends to us, as if fiction were, more than anything else, an unfettered conversation between author and reader. The kind of conversation that Montalbetti puts on offer in her books is a suavely playful one; moreover, it is one that does not hesitate to call the boundaries that we normally erect between fictional worlds and real worlds severely into question. From time to time, she postulates wormholes connecting those worlds, inviting us to follow her through them, imagining for instance situations where a character speaks directly to the reader, or consulting us about which way best to tell her tale, or indeed positioning us as characters in a fiction that she has constructed. We implicate ourselves deeply in the stories we tell and the ones that we read, Montalbetti argues, and sometimes

we may lose ourselves therein. "You too, to a certain degree, inhabit a parallel world," she says, making a crucial move in the game she plays with us, suggesting that different worlds do in fact collide, causing temporary havoc and opening troubling, aporetic vistas perhaps, but also—and more importantly—enabling us to see things anew.

In such a manner, Christine Montalbetti seeks to remind us that narrative may be a construction, but that it is nonetheless part of our world, whether it be a case of the stories she chooses to tell, or that of the stories we habitually tell to ourselves. We inhabit those constructions happily, sadly, blithely, earnestly, in work, in play, turn and turn about—in fact, just as we inhabit our more obviously material edifices. If we have no quarrel with the idea that the world is played out in fiction, why should we balk at the notion that fiction may be played out in the world? In such a light, the future of fiction will inevitably be decided both in fiction and in the world, in a debate that shuttles purposefully back and forth between illusion and reality, causing the boundaries between those sites to seem increasingly dubious. For the most urgent message of Christine Montalbetti's writing contends that fiction, just like the world of phenomena, is staggeringly unconfined. ■



Reading Gerald Murnane

Nicholas Birns

In one sense, Gerald Murnane is the most Australian of writers. Unlike most of his countrymen, who are inveterate travelers, instinctual cosmopolitans, Murnane has never left Australia. Indeed, he has largely confined himself to the Australian state of Victoria, visiting Tasmania once, New South Wales a few times, South Australia now and again, and rarely if ever witnessing "the far sunlight of Queensland" (as he says in his collection *Landscape with Landscape*). Like a good many Australians, Murnane is of Irish background and had a Roman Catholic upbringing. For many years Murnane lived a quiet suburban existence with his family, and has now retired to a small town in the west of Victoria. His greatest hobby is the characteristically Australian one of horse racing. Moreover, Murnane writes in a vein of Australian "realism" initiated by the garrulous anti-realism of the early twentieth-century novelist Joseph Furphy, whose vernacular erudition and love of having sport with his reader contribute to Murnane's vision as much as does Patrick White's high style and braiding of language and loss. If a writer like Peter Carey, with his inventiveness, verve, and prescience, is the outward face of Australian literature, Murnane is its inward face: contemplative, deeply humane, dedicated above all to craft.

SELECTED WORKS BY GERALD MURNANE

- Tamarisk Row*. William Heinemann Australia, 1974.
A Lifetime on Clouds. William Heinemann Australia, 1976.
The Plains. Text Publishing, 1982.
Landscape With Landscape. Norstrilia Press, 1985.
Inland. William Heinemann Australia, 1988. Forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press.
Velvet Waters. McPhee Gribble, 1990.
Emerald Blue. McPhee Gribble, 1995.
Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs. Giramondo, 2005.
Barley Patch. Giramondo, 2009. Dalkey Archive, 2011.

But in other ways Murnane is the least Australian of writers. Homebody though he may be in real life, in his fiction he has traveled to Hungary and to Paraguay, to Romania and to the grasslands of South Dakota. He is an erudite writer who is massively well read though owing true debts only to a select body of peers: Proust, Emily Brontë, Hardy, Nabokov, Borges, Calvino, Halldor

Laxness, and Gyula Illyés. Moreover, like many of these peers, the places mentioned in his fiction do not really correspond to reality, even though they sometimes have names we recognize. Repetition plays a key role in Murnane's fiction, which is often very abstract and lacking the detailed descriptions and settings we have come to expect in not only traditional but much innovative fiction. In Murnane's hand, a passage like this, which would be the beginning of a conventional novel:

On a certain afternoon in the early 1950s with a hot sun in a clear sky but with a cool breeze blowing from the near-by sea, a man aged about thirty years was riding on horseback towards a swampy area overgrown with tea-tree and with other sorts of dense scrub. The swampy area was near the centre of a low-lying island within sight of the mainland of south-eastern Victoria. (*Barley Patch*)

is here an elaborate decoy, just the sort of obvious narrative reward one is not going to get from anyone who, as Murnane likes to put it, would be the "chief character" in one of his novels. Murnane's texts teach their reader to stifle routine narrative urges,

to search harder and more exactly along the paths of imagination. As David Musgrave notes, Murnane, though on the one hand richly creative, also asks of his readers a "renunciation of imagination," even as Murnane is incontestably, in Musgrave's words, "Australia's most innovative writer of fiction."

Gerald Murnane was born in 1939 in the Victorian suburb of Coburg—the resemblance to Proust's beloved Cabourg is intriguing—just old enough to remember the war years and grow up during the 1950s. Murnane's boyhood was passed in a fervently Catholic atmosphere, and Murnane grew up thinking he might be a priest. A loss of faith not dissimilar to James Joyce's—later written about in Murnane's novel *A Lifetime on Clouds* (1976), not dissimilar to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—brought him, after several uncertain years, to the literary life. The story "In Far Fields" from his collection *Emerald Blue* shows how uncertain his entry into the realm of high literature was, how ridiculously disconcerting he at times found it.

Murnane's first novel, *Tamarisk Row* (1974), gives first sighting of some of Murnane's obsessions—horse-racing, images as gnomic clues to destinies, migration, the brief exaltation of a Christian hope

that becomes impalpable, chimerical. Clement Killeaton is a third-person point-of-view character much resembling the young Murnane. In his next book, *A Lifetime on Clouds*, Murnane complicates this by having his similar protagonist, Adrian Sherd, veer off into fantasies: of America as a land of sexual allure and, conversely, of a priesthood at once a refuge from the chaos of sexuality and a way to strangely consecrate it. Repeatedly compared not only to Joyce's novel of growing up in Dublin but to Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, *A Lifetime on Clouds* also gestures toward the later work of both Joyce and Roth, by giving creativity—beyond the manifest, surface life—a privileged role in not only suturing the gaps in reality but voyaging beyond them into a distant field of the imagination.

Both the conservatism of the '50s and the new stirrings of the '60s—always represented for Murnane by Jack Kerouac, whose works, especially *On the Road*, gain a strange new aura when seen through Murnane's eyes—still continue to inform Murnane's worldview. Even in his latest novel, *Barley Patch* (2009), Murnane returns to the period of his boyhood and youth in order to plumb memory, desire, and the mysteries of life that become more explicable, but no more masterable, with age. Unusually, Murnane is as interested in the surface indicator as he is the deep structure, especially in the names of people and places, which he lingers over, toys with, mulls.

The Plains (1982) is defiantly abstract, clearly a fable about the very possibility of fable, a tribute to the impossible but irresistible task of finding a meaning beyond the visible. Murnane postulates a remote counter-Australia away from the known societies of the coasts, a place that is a kind of diorama of his own imagination where a young filmmaker quests for love and inclusion on the permanent cultural record in a realm that is utopian and gossamer. The theme of the absent woman, seen in *Lifetime* as a palpable object of desire, is transmogrified in this book into the paragon of an epistemological hope:

Then I want to bring to light the plain that she remembers—that shimmering land under a sky that she has never quite lost sight of. And I mean to see still other lands that cry out for their explorer—those plains that she recognizes when she gazes out from a veranda and sees anything but a familiar land.

The Plains is superbly successful on its own terms. What is interesting, though, is that Murnane's subsequent works do not stay at this level of abstraction, but turn back inward to reality, much as Cézanne turns back to the object after Impressionism. This does not mean resuming the realism of the first two novels, but chronicling lived circumstances amid imaginary tableau. *Inland* (1988), perhaps Murnane's greatest work, is filled with both displacement and pathos, of lost loves re-sought but never secured, of mirror-image collaborations as perilous as they are audacious, and of repeated geographical mantras that achieve both a Whitmanesque breadth and enjoy a modernist irony. This era is also the time when much of Murnane's great short fiction is written,

appearing in *Landscape with Landscape* (1985), *Velvet Waters* (1990), and *Emerald Blue* (1995). Ranging from meaty, ramifying novellas to taut parables, these experimental fictions reveal their narrators both weeping for the world and dismissing it as a mirage.

Murnane is fully aware of the non-objective tradition in which he writes. Yet his literary education was autodidactic in nature and did not coalesce until his late twenties. Part of the key to Murnane is that he was both a late bloomer and someone who, just at the moment he had begun to make his reputation in his late thirties, began to withdraw from the hum and buzz of the literary scene. Murnane was a revered teacher of writing at Deakin University. His former students, including Tim Richards, Christopher Cyrill, and Tom Cho, are among the major figures in the next generation of Australian writers. But Murnane never wrote with the mentality of an academic or an active legislator in the Republic of Letters. Murnane has never courted publicity, though certainly he has never engaged in any melodrama trying to avoid it. Because Murnane was in so many ways self-educated (he was not a literature major as an undergraduate, but, astonishingly, concentrated in Arabic), Murnane's self-reference is rough-hewn, runs in its own authorial grain, is rife with eccentric quibbles and ramifications.

Many assumed Murnane had given up fiction with "The Interior of Gaaldine," the last story in *Emerald Blue*, both because it trailed off into a series of concocted horse-racing details that seemed in its own inconspicuous way valedictory and because Murnane published no fiction for almost fifteen years afterward. One says "published" and not "written," because Murnane is known to write long manuscripts that he does not choose to publish for personal reasons. Moreover, he has produced many letters, diaries, and accounts of his life and his preoccupations, which are not strictly speaking works of fiction, but to which he devotes much time as a part of his mental labor. Famously able to write in his living room even as his three sons, when young, bustled about in great commotion, Murnane is a born writer who has produced so much that what his readers can see is only the tip of the iceberg.

Perhaps encouraged by the enthusiasm of his editor at Giramondo Publishing, the energetic Ivor Indyk, Murnane embarked on a new period of creativity in the twenty-first century. His selected essays, *Invisible Yet*

Enduring Lilacs, appeared in 2006. With their reflections on Proust, Kerouac, and the challenges of learning Hungarian, they brought Murnane's vision to a far wider readership.

Why has Murnane spent much of his later adult life trying to learn Hungarian? Part of it is the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the impact that the refugees coming to Australia made on the seventeen-year-old Murnane. Part of it is the Magyar presence as a bit of Central Asia in Middle Europe, the sense of an external voice, the other within the same. Part of it is simply the need for a sacred language, sacred not in the sense of scriptural but in being secret.

Barley Patch is an intensely personal book, but also one rigorously engaged with the making of fiction. In the opening pages

of the book, the narrator looks back on his experience as an adolescent, discovering a doll's house in the second story of a relative's house. This is evocative on a tangible level, but also carries symbolic connotations of a surplus of meaning, of meaning, as it were, having a second story, an additional layer not immediately explorable. Furthermore, the boyhood

reading of the chief character, especially his reading of Josephine Tey's detective thriller *Brat Farrar*, with its themes of mistaken identity, courtship, and horse-racing, relate to the narrative not just archival but experientially. Reading *becomes* experience, or, as Murnane often seems to indicate, the richest experience can be had only through reading, not just the immediate engagement with the text but the residue, the aftermath, of images that hover and abide. *Barley Patch* is also a dirge for the inaccessibility of a landscape never fully occupied. Murnane both cites and avoids his own name, describing a two-word sign posted by a landmark:

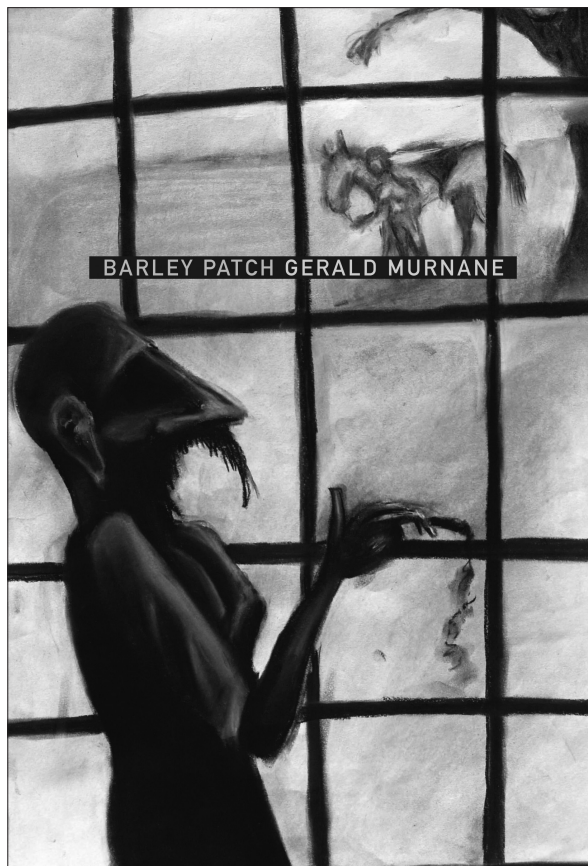
The second word is *Bay*. The first word is the surname of my paternal great-grandfather followed by the possessive apostrophe.

Your paternal great-grandfather is likely to bear the surname that is also yours, and indeed there is a real Murnane's Bay in southwestern Victoria. Yet one must not believe Murnane himself is speaking to us. There is nothing that direct. It is only through the filter of a chief character that dialogue with the reader is negotiated. The Swedish critic Karin Hansson, one of an influential

group of professors and translators who have argued for Murnane to win the Nobel Prize, has stated that "like Husserl and other phenomenologists he considers the study of the potentialities and functions of consciousness, mind, and memory as a primary task in his writing. His attention is directed towards cognitive processes rather than demonstrating the veracity of external conditions." But the one theorist Murnane has ever overtly lauded is the far more hardscrabble American, Wayne C. Booth, whose *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is a text to which Murnane constantly refers. Booth's idea of the "implied author," the author the reader gets from the text—being different from both the more apparent "narrator" and the real-life "breathing author"—has been central to how Murnane understands his own work.

There is a temptation to compare Murnane with W. G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño, two writers who, like Murnane, were both dry and passionate, both writing out of their own historically delimited world but asking the ultimate questions. Murnane differs from these writers, though, in at least two respects. First, he is alive; he is fond of referring to himself as "the breathing author," as per Booth's theories. While Sebald and Bolaño accrued much of their truly global fame after their deaths, Murnane seems determined to do it while he is still with us. Secondly, at least part of the importance of Sebald and Bolaño had to do with politics. Murnane is not incapable of political thought—his story "Land Deal" is a searing depiction of the white settlement of Australia as a nightmare from which Aboriginal dreamers are determined to awake—but he is not primarily political. Wrongly cast by certain Australian critics as an aesthetic mandarin, Murnane is hardly that. He is indeed a proletarian sage, immersed in Australian daily life, admiring the mansions of the wealthy magnates depicted in *The Plains* but knowing he will never be anything more than an object of their patronage. Murnane is dedicated to fiction above all, to its imaginative manifestation as fable and gesture. But this dedication is not meant to be a mere foil to reality. The narrators of Murnane's fictions are, indeed, powerless to do anything but follow the lead of the images that festoon their minds; their volition is contingent; they are led by their own fascinations. Creating art is less an exercise of will than an inadvertent grace.

Murnane is a very personal writer. Or, to put it another way, as Booth's narratological theories would suggest—the implied author of Murnane's texts is an intensely personal one. This makes the implied reader of these texts a highly personal one too. We put our own selves into Murnane's work partially because their systemic awareness asks that we make a reciprocal investment tantamount to that which has been made by our authorial interlocutor. Thus, it is not a will o' the wisp that critics have read Murnane so subjectively. Yet none of the established critical guides to Murnane, including the present writer, should be allowed to have the final word. Murnane is a writer to be experienced individually, as each reader embarks on their own journey in quest of, as the narrator of "Sipping the Essence" (*Landscape With Landscape*) put it, "something richly colored like Queensland that was not quite within my grasp." ■



A Speech for Aglaja Veteranyi

Werner Morlang

Aglaja Veteranyi (1962–2002) was born in Bucharest to a family of circus artists who toured Europe relentlessly until finally settling in Switzerland. She worked as an actress, performer, and artist as well as a writer, and only published one novel—the searing Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta—during her lifetime, though other books have appeared posthumously. She committed suicide in 2002. The following text was written by her friend, the critic Werner Morlang and spoken at the Neumarkt Theater on February 16, 2002 on the occasion of a memorial tribute.

No, this isn't meant as an obituary. We always know better in hindsight. Anyone wanting to seize hold of what's incomprehensible will never be at a loss for explanations and blueprints for analysis. Aglaja's end seems to point back to a troubled beginning, lack of security, disorder, and early sorrow in abundance, childhood traumas held in check by this "work horse," as she liked to call herself, making such extreme demands on her vital energy that her unhealed wounds finally burst open, with fatal results. We recall Aglaja's dark statements about how life itself was just too much and how hard she found it to simply accept, let alone love herself. We recall that indecipherable, abruptly startled look that would show in her eyes now and then, and we reproach ourselves for having paid too little heed to such signs. And then there's the real sign—her novel and her short prose pieces are everywhere pervaded with jagged passages; we took note of them, no doubt, but not of the actual disasters that generated them. Even in the story of the child stewing in the polenta we merely observed how a circus girl managed to banish one vision of horror through another, thus underestimating or overlooking the twice-experienced fear and the violence she was inflicting on herself through the play of her thoughts.

Nonetheless, I refuse to comb through Aglaja's texts for pathological elements

SELECTED WORKS BY AGLAJA VETERANYI

Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta. Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999 / Dalkey Archive Press, 2012.

Das Regal der letzten Atemzüge. [The Shelf of Last Breaths.] Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2002.

Vom geräumten Meer, den gemieteten Socken und Frau Butter. [On the Depleted Sea, the Rented Socks, and Frau Butter.] Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2004.

and to view her life as a tale of woe, doomed to failure. Her sad end should not be taken as a verdict pronounced upon a life story that was by no means unhappy in itself; I'm sometimes even inclined to speak about Aglaja as an outright success story. Illiterate for years, thanks to her family's itinerant lifestyle, Young Aglaja made a plan for turning this uneducated girl into a writer, set about the job energetically, and through her eighteen-year career as a writer created the incomparable polenta girl. It made me angry that most of her obituaries talked about "a promising talent." Aglaja's novel is not a literary debut, not a journeyman display of ability; no, this book succeeds completely in what it sets out to accomplish. At almost the same time as she began learning the German language, as an act of revolt against her background, there rose up in Aglaja the desire to become a writer. Even on vacation, in all the hubbub of an Italian beach, she worked zealously on her written exercises and immediately showed them to her friend and mentor Hannes Becher for examination and correction. She presently produced a novel titled *The Pan Flute*, which remained unpublished, and over the years she made a career out of writing prose pieces that unfolded in every imaginable direction. She was able to say, not without some pride, that she was one of the German-language authors most often

published in anthologies—long before the polenta girl.

The energy, even the determination, with which she acquired the German language was tangible in the literary quality of her sentences right to the end. Of course, her writing wasn't immune to failure, but whatever she put down on paper was filled with intense energy. However laconic, unembellished, or elementary her sentences might sound, they were always unmistakably her own, or—to use one of her favorite expressions—they were never "borrowed goods." Every sentence was a forceful, compact unit, yet contained within a tight structure. She herself would talk about the "heartbeat" of her prose. Her texts contain nothing beside the point, nothing ornamental, no loose ends; instead, they lunge dramatically at the full effect. Anything lukewarm, rickety, or mediocre struck her as despicable, and I remember that she once rejected a title I'd proposed with the disdainful comment that it was tasteful, all right, but "pastel." On the other hand, she could hardly contain herself for delight when I passed on to her the word *wolkenleise* (quiet as a cloud), used by Else Lasker-Schüler. Aglaja was very taken with evocatively formed words and sentences, her own as well as others', which she would copy onto blank postcards and send around to her group of friends. If a literary text didn't find favor with her, she would call it "thin" or would say, "The air's gone out of it," a judgment she did not spare her own work when it wasn't up to her standards. She took criticism in her stride, and her way of dealing with literary matters was, as always, straightforward. Though it is a stimulant and purgative often resorted to in the cruel terrain of literary competition, not once was I ever able to detect in Aglaja the slightest envy of her fellow authors. On the contrary: she was always championing writers less favored by success, all the more because it hadn't been very long since she herself had needed to hawk her texts around while being considered

"merely marginal." After the polenta girl appeared, of course, she had recognition lavished upon her, and she hardly had any reason to feel insecure. She took note of her success with gratitude but didn't wallow in it. As she put it, her earlier fear of landing in the gutter never left her.

She was in no way conceited about her work as a writer, which she would pursue in public places like cafés whenever her scarce time allowed, and afterward, as far as I know, type the day's yield into her computer that same evening. Having been made "official" in this way, her texts gained sufficient validation in Aglaja's mind for her to distribute them among her friends or use them at readings. Because of her many different activities it wasn't always easy to arrange a meeting with her, but when it happened, she devoted herself to it completely. On occasions like this, Aglaja was—and I don't know any other word to describe her intense vitality—totally "present." She seemed always to be living at the height of the moment. She might be happy or sad but never artificially elated or downcast for no reason. She loved it when life could be woven into stories and was no less excited to hear them from others than to tell them herself. Her concise approach to literary expression was matched by quick wit in conversation, with which she would interrupt a pleasant chat expressly to delight, amazing her interlocutor with his or her own gales of laughter. Even though Aglaja held an utterly endless number of readings and appearances after her book was published, she considered each of them a serious obligation and was as happy about playing to packed houses as being surrounded by a gathering of well-heeled elderly ladies, perplexed by what she called their "whipped-cream souls." [. . .] I seldom knew her to be preoccupied, reserved, or introverted. Even in good times, however, something would often come into her face that somehow dampened this personality otherwise overflowing with life. It was as if her conspicuous lip-pursing were somehow

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revoking the openness of her being and the wonder in her ingenuous eyes. She was uninhibited and bashful, intrepid and apprehensive at the same time, as if she were being haunted by some pivotal experience from her childhood: a fatal combination of fantasies about being all-powerful and feelings of inferiority.

Aglaja couldn't stand hearing circus life romanticized, yet she put the circus child on public display. She rebelled fiercely against having to grow old and having to die, and she would occasionally refer to Canetti on the subject. That said, she hoped she would manage to grow old gracefully; her devout wish was to live two or three hundred years. Whatever her age, she would never have relinquished her childlike outlook, the wellspring of her literary imagination. The very first of the many favorite quotations she favored me with came from Henry Miller, she claimed, and it reads: "The most impor-

tant thing of all is to gain conscious deliberation and then develop the courage as an adult to do what children always did when they still didn't know anything." She would often dwell in conversation over the loss of childhood boldness and imagination in the lives of adults and was very deeply touched during a reading when a member of the audience objected that you would never be able to tell that her protagonist, in this early draft of her follow-up to *Polenta*, was thirty-seven. Because the book, at least in its first version, was about the death of Aglaja's aunt, who for many years had taken the place of Aglaja's mother. In an effort to gain some distance from the prose of the *polenta* girl, she incorporated herself in the third person as Anna, but the fact is she wasn't having any great success in making this character at all convincing. Aglaja also complained that the text was turning out too gloomy. After a time, though, she

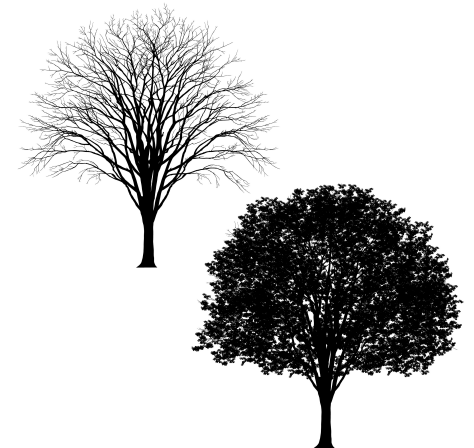
found her way back to the first-person, along with *Polenta's* mystifying cheerfulness, and for as long as she was granted time to work on this new version, she was very satisfied with the results.

Was it fear of having to part with her anarchic, childlike nature that brought about what she called the "breaking point" in her inner woundedness? On good days she would tell me a story, her exuberance brimming over, about how she was once coaxed to go with a child she didn't know into a certain room, how the child then lay on the floor, bared its belly, and made motions like a friendly dog for her to pet it. This episode is included in one of Aglaja's last stories, titled "Café Papa," but there the innocent love play is transmuted into a murderous "SLAUGHTER OF GEESE."

Aglaja is dead. It's hard for me to talk about Aglaja in past tense. Sometimes it hurts to

read her work. But I'm looking forward to the time when all that's wonderful and heartening about her writing and her having lived will rise up anew. ■

Translated by Vincent Kling



Interview with Gerhard Meier

Werner Morlang

*Gerhard Meier was born in 1917 and spent most of his life in the small Swiss town of Niederbipp. He studied building construction for several semesters, but in 1938 went to work in a small lamp factory in Niederbipp, where he rose to the position of designer and manager. He had always wanted to be a writer, but for the next twenty years avoided literature entirely, out of fear it would absorb all his energy. But spending six months in a sanatorium for tuberculosis in 1956–57 made him decide to leave his job and devote himself exclusively to writing. He produced a steady stream of books of poetry and novels that attracted increasing attention and literary prizes, culminating in the Baur and Bindschädler tetralogy (1979–1990), of which *Isle of the Dead* is the first book. Meier died in 2008 at the age of 91.*

*This interview took place on July 29, 1993, and was originally published in German in *Das dunkle Fest des Lebens: Amrainer Gespräche* (Zytglogge, 2001).*

WERNER MORLANG: In *Isle of the Dead*, it wasn't the stroll through Olten, or the teaming up of Baur and Bindschädler that was the starting point—you were looking for a vehicle that could elevate the material you chose, weren't you?

GERHARD MEIER: The important thing was this world of Amrain, which is populated, even by myself, and there of course I myself was a model to a considerable extent. Baur and Bindschädler are two invented figures who stroll through Olten, and in doing so bring Amrain to life. Through their conversation, through their talking, I could enter into the history of certain families from Amrain and also into the history of my own family, the history of my own life. And this human cosmos—for heaven's sake, it

sounds rather pretentious—which includes the natural world, the animal world, the plant world, and the world of things, all this I tried to capture through the conversation of the two old veterans.

WM: Did you give Baur and Bindschädler particular characteristics as you went along, according to the different way each behaves?

GM: There's something to that. In all my works I did very little planning, manipulating, or cheating, but left things to undecided, unpredictable powers. I didn't intervene strongly, and that perhaps gives the whole a certain credibility and self-contained quality. [. . .] It's not worked out, not forged, not an artisanal production, but arose vegetatively, by way of rampant growth and powers and influences that were not apparently conscious in me.

WM: Did you intend the reader to take Baur and Bindschädler as separate individuals?

GM: I do believe that they are two distinct figures. Baur is somewhat more talkative and the other perhaps rather thoughtful. They are two characters, but they also mirror each other as well.

WM: For the most part it's Baur who talks about his life, while Bindschädler mostly listens, and then obviously writes down what he's heard. So there is this other distinction: Baur simply has the ambition to write at some later point but doesn't, and Bindschädler is the one who actually writes.

GM: Bindschädler didn't want to write, but ends up writing. That's exactly right.

WM: Could one say that you divide yourself between a Gerhard Meier who experiences and a Gerhard Meier who writes?

GM: That might come from my shyness about putting myself forward. That could be. But I approach a text rather the way a musician approaches a score, by way of hearing, by sounds, rather than by way of the intellect. I do respect the intellect, and would like to involve it, but, you know, the rest of the world relies on intellect. Those who don't are children [. . .], to some extent the old, and perhaps precisely artists. People who cultivate what the world otherwise doesn't cultivate.

WM: From the very beginning of the novel, you posit remembering as a constant of life.

GM: I'm convinced that we are not born unwritten. It's not only the birds that come into the world with the program of their migratory flights inscribed, but we too have received a mental dowry, a mental resource program laid out for our path, and we seem to be homesick all our lives for the substance, the aroma, the essence of this essential resource. Like animals, we have certain programs within us [. . .] without which we could not live. Of course, later on what we learn and what we experience is added to that, so much so that at times one asks oneself—as Baur does at one point—whether in the end we live only in order to be able to remember ourselves. Because everything in creation is so much a matter of being borne away by wind and stream, there must be an opposing force, which we call the power of memory, so that whatever it is does not get lost, but remains. For that reason art seems to have to do with remembering. [. . .] [But] life isn't only

remembering. Life is acting, breathing, eating, sleeping, working, protecting oneself against wind, cold, drought, hail, and heat. There are functions, tasks, and events, among others. [. . .] But if we orient ourselves on material things, as has happened in the last few decades, we impoverish ourselves in a way that can become quite grotesque.

WM: *Isle of the Dead* has many connections to your reading.

GM: [. . .] Cooper made me into an Indian or American, Tolstoy into a Russian or Slav, and through Proust I almost became Gallic. That's how these people can stamp you.

WM: Are memories [. . .] connected to, and activated, in the working of your imagination?

GM: I believe so. [. . .] Memory works like a sieve in which something is kept back. Without this sieve the individual life, life altogether, runs the risk of disappearing into a distant, unknown ocean. That's why remembering is so important, and that's why, in my opinion, we have art.

WM: As epigraph to *Isle of the Dead* you have Flaubert's motto, "What seems beautiful to me and what I would like to do is a book about nothing."

GM: There is much more in this motto than just a desire of Flaubert's. It contains the whole drama of creation. I don't believe in world-shaking, world-historic events, in large-scale occurrences. [. . .] However powerful, however gigantic events may be in the world, something always remains the same, moving again and again along the same paths, and in this

simple realm their drama, their greatness, is revealed. That is where, ultimately, there is an incredible stillness. I've been preoccupied with these phenomena my whole life long, without intending it, and now that I'm getting old I realize with an almost ecstatic fascination that apparently it's this ungraspable aspect that is what it's all about: this passing on, this blowing wind, these shadows. It sounds almost illusory, but it's the opposite of that. It's not art's job to stuff us full or comfort us with illusions. Art's task is to disillusion us by showing us that life is not only a matter of a sausage, a piece of bread, and a bottle of beer, but that it is an unvarying, silent behavior that exhausts itself in endless repetitions.

WM: Among the everyday events in *Isle of the Dead*, walking is central, the stroll through Olten. Did you take this route often? Was it a favorite walk of yours?

GM: For a time it was pretty much my invariable route in Olten, and out of love for the things I came across, the banalities, I gladly laid out this route precisely in the novel. Spirituality must be hung on banality, otherwise it's not responsible, not perceptible, and that's a good thing. But I don't have a particularly close attachment to Olten. [...] I especially emphasized the industrial quarter. I was drawn over and over to these out of the way places—or to put it differently, the beauty of ugliness got hold of me again and again in life.

WM: Does that mean that the beautiful should no longer be evoked?

GM: I noticed in William Carlos Williams how gloriously the unbeautiful, the unaesthetic, the ordinary, the small, can shine forth when it is placed against the right background. I'm a little in love with these discordant phenomena. [Reads aloud Williams's poem "Pastoral."] I have never been interested in aestheticism understood as the merely beautiful, the select, the dressed up. For me the aesthetic is anchored much more deeply, connected with the completely immaterial and with the movingly small, the eccentric, the vulnerable, the susceptible, the inconspicuous. That's why I like Williams so much, but not only because he illuminates this world. In art it's not just a matter of the motif, of what is represented, but above all it is the sound. [...] Art has to do not only with the beautiful and the good in the solid bourgeois sense, it is much more existential and above all more incomprehensible. We should confess that we really comprehend little, understand little, and that we are dependent on intimations and traces in order to find our place in the world. Reason alone won't carry us through, and often leads us astray.

WM: Walking resembles writing. Have you felt an affinity between these two activities?

GM: [...] I had my best insights, my best thoughts while walking, and I believe that walking and talking are very, very close to one another. Less so walking and writing, but walking and talking. In walking one can have good conversations. That's doubtless

why I sent the two friends [in *Isle of the Dead*] on such long, conversational walks, because I think that the world, and life, can best be captured that way.

WM: You have astonishing sequences of associations from image to image. Wouldn't you call that free association?

GM: No, not consciously, never, never.

WM: It doesn't have to be conscious. Free association could indicate capturing something that occurs to you suddenly and involuntarily.

GM: Yes, but not randomly, only associations that are interrelated and in every case connected with one another. Everything takes place within this cosmos, everything fits within the sphere. Nothing falls outside, although certain skips occur and are felt as such, certain motions, but only occasionally.

WM: *Isle of the Dead* can be considered a novel about a family, something new in your work. Was this a sudden revelation while writing?

GM: No, because since childhood I've been extremely interested in what goes on under the roofs of the houses around mine or in the families of people I knew. The happenings in my own family involved me directly, and had the greatest effect, entirely existential. I had to endure them or participate. [...] Also, I was a component of the musical scores that arose over the decades under my roof and in the area. These scores filled me with sounds, and I've been lucky that I've been able to save some of these sounds in my sound, in my writing, although as I mentioned before I have never placed people in the center, or wanted to.

WM: What were your feelings when you reread *Isle of the Dead*? Did the real figures behind their literary depictions come to mind?

GM: That too, but my overriding impression was of the shadows of clouds passing over a landscape, in which it was less the clouds than their shadows that struck me. That was by no means deliberate, but reading a book releases light or an aroma or a tone in me. I need to read a book or see a movie a second time or hear a piece of music a third time, before the pegs emerge, these banalities, these foreground things, these so-called realities. I'm above all interested in the sound, and that's why when I read a book for the first time I have only a weak concrete impression [...].

WM: Don't you also want the characters to be accurate, down to the smallest details?

GM: Yes, and it's precisely such trifles that reveal yet again the painful being thrown into life [*Geworfenheit*, Heidegger's term—trans.], the painful laying bare of the person, that stands behind it. I never render such banalities cynically or arrogantly, they simply form the line of melody in a great piece of music, in the score of this character. I am—that's why I recited Williams's poem "Pastoral"—a lover of the banal, the small.

It is so moving when it's done right, when it is really banal, but it needs a background in front of which it can shine.

WM: Have your three sisters read the book?

GM: They may have read in it. [...] But the novel is really not one to one, not a chronicle. From what I found at hand something really new came about, I don't need to have any scruples about that. Besides, I've never made fun of people but have always respected them. I might almost say that I have always placed other people above me. Even towards the most ordinary people I felt I was the weaker, the frailest. What saved me from feeling superior has been a certain vegetative love, love for the swallow, the daisy, the person. [...] Yet I'm no grand reconciler, I never wanted to turn the world into an idyll, on the contrary: I'm fascinated by the world beyond the idyll. An idyll, as we understand it, is a put-on, an inconsistency, and to strive for an idyll is of course a self-deception.

WM: When you present characters in a few traits, a few gestures, were you thinking of how little such a life amounts to, and how little our inner and outer images of ourselves correspond to each other?

GM: Yes, and the grotesque that shows or expresses itself in these images is also moving, and plays a huge role. Beckett didn't invent the grotesque, he only portrayed it.

The grotesque is a given, and we can't do anything about it. But one must not except oneself and think that one is better, as writers in our century, especially in recent decades, have sometimes done. That's of course not the right way. A writer, any artist, must have a great deal of love. That sounds as if one hardly dare say it, but one must simply say it. Love, an existential love for the world, is a basic power, in life as in art.

WM: Past moments are presented in such a way in *Isle of the Dead* that at times life is sometimes transfixed as paintings, which hang in the art gallery of Baur's soul. Is your understanding of this aesthetically grounded?

GM: I do believe that we are overwhelmed by paintings, images, that our soul resembles the museum of Ludwig Zimmerer in the Ulica Dąbrowiecka in Warsaw, where some seven thousand paintings by "naïve" Polish artists are hoarded and preserved. Our soul is a gallery, a museum full of paintings, which each of us collects in his own fashion. [...] Life can apparently only be apprehended through the picture, the image, never by way of the intellect, never by way of the abstract or the concrete. [...] We think we have firm ground under our feet, in rationality, but that is a fallacy. It's precisely groundlessness that provides a firmer ground than the rational.

WM: The title of your novel is that of a famous painting by Arnold Böcklin,

although it's rarely mentioned in the text. Why did you choose it?

GM: I can't say I remember much about that. On the one hand I have a rather divided opinion about Böcklin, on the other hand the Basel version of his *Isle of the Dead* [. . .] has always moved me. But sometimes the world paradoxically appears to me as an island of the dead, while the realm beyond the world or the earth seems to me the opposite. That might explain the title, [. . .] because a relatively small number of living individuals, even if numbered in the millions, inhabit the earth, whereas a great number are present who are stored, that is as skeletons, under the earth. So death is more strongly present than life, that's true of the plant and animal worlds as well. The earth is a giant cemetery, a ghost ship, where one stands for a certain time on deck and then goes below.

WM: You compare Amrain itself to a Persian carpet. How does that fit with your understanding of literature?

GM: My understanding of art or literature includes the knowledge that art, for exam-

ple a novel, is first and last a product, but that art has to do and should have to do with art, that art cannot be a pale imitation but remain in contact with life, must in some sense serve life. That's what makes art so provoking and paradoxical: on the one hand it is artificial, on the other hand it interests us only when it relates to creation, to life, to human life, to individual people. One could also see this carpet's pictorial qualities, in their repetitions, as a musical score.

[. . .] Art has to do with artificiality, with aesthetics, and also with the world opposite so-called reality. On the other hand, art should open up this reality, or at least let it be sensed, like nothing else can. Only by way of art can we sense the extent of creation, feel it, taste it, hear and see it.

WM: Is art also a means of overcom-

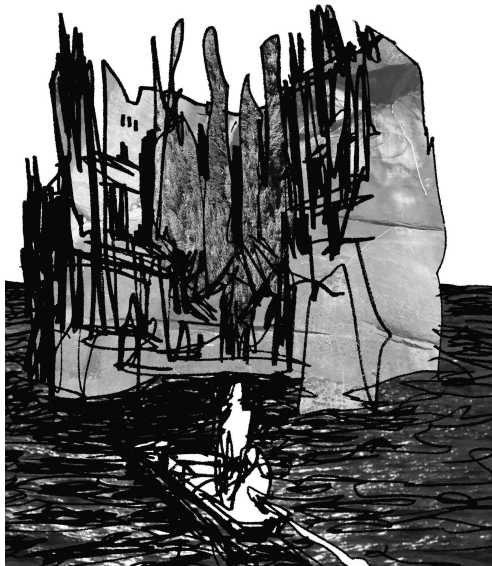
ing the loneliness of the individual?

GM: Art also has to do with eroticism, that is, with love in general, but also in the sense of sexual love. Without love, without the erotic, without the aesthetic, creation would be pale or dark or not worth living in, and it is perhaps out of these three elements that poetry arises. That's what sings in this image of the meadow of flowers; perhaps it's there that, in a childish fashion, art is represented, in that one has only an image at his disposal in order to portray something unimaginable, incomprehensible.

WM: You say in *Isle of the Dead* that "the right to happiness" would be "a meager utopia." Freud said that man's goal of happiness is not contained in the plan of creation.

GM: I don't know Freud's statement, but I am most deeply convinced that we have a right to nothing. We have perhaps [. . .] the grace of encountering or the grace of becoming part of something. Of course that sounds rather pious and discordant to many people's ears, but I am convinced that we are not the ladies and gentlemen that we always try to present ourselves as, but are bound up with creation the way the swallow, the daisy, or the cherry tree are. That is where we belong, and we can be happy that we belong there. [. . .] We belong there, and cannot make an exception of ourselves. The daisy takes its life as it is given; the swallow makes its flights, brings up its young, and chases mosquitoes in the evening against the sky. [. . .] They'd never dream that they might have a right to happiness or self-realization. That should also be true of us. Of course we are rather privileged, but we belong to the great whole, and when we accept that, we do not endanger the great whole. But when we arrogate something to which we have no right, we endanger the basic principles of our life, as we have very clearly done in recent decades. ■

Edited and translated by Burton Pike



Against the Monotony of the Negative

A Conversation with Giovanni Orelli

Giuliano Boraso

The formidably learned Giovanni Orelli (1928–) is a central figure in Swiss-Italian letters. The first of his many novels, L'anno della valanga (The Year of the Avalanche), was published in 1965. He is also the author of several volumes of poetry and has been active in the cultural sphere of the Ticino. In 1997, he was awarded the Schiller Prize. His docufictional phantasmagoria Walaschek's Dream (1991)—inspired by a lesser-known painting by Paul Klee titled Alphabet I, which features black letters and symbols scrawled over the sports page of a newspaper—is a madcap and encyclopedic portrait of European culture under Nazism. With a cast made up of historical luminaries like Arthur Schopenhauer, Vincent Van Gogh, Viktor Shklovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, Paul Klee himself, and the titular footballer/soccer-player Eugene Walaschek, who led Switzerland to victory over Nazi Germany in the 1938 Swiss National Cup, Walaschek's Dream is allusive, ironic, and elegiac, and can only be compared to the works of James Joyce and Arno Schmidt.

This interview was conducted on the occasion of the 2011 reissue of Walaschek's Dream by the Italian publisher 66thand2nd.

GIULIANO BORASO: What is it like to see *Walaschek's Dream* come out again in Italy twenty years after its first publication?

GIOVANNI ORELLI: It's a complete pleasure. I don't know if vanity has anything to do with it, and anyway all writers are vain to some extent, which shouldn't necessarily be seen as a bad thing—otherwise nobody would even write. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I wrote this novel—my fourth—for myself, after a certain disappointment after the first three. But if not for me, then for an alter ego. And so with a particular kind of pleasure, and also because of a little insomnia. When I couldn't fall asleep I would invent the football teams you see in the book—devils, angels, the Fathers of the Church, intellectuals, artists, and so on—and I had fun with it. Just as I did remembering the names of soccer players from the past, which triggered associations related to my teaching, to teaching Italian meter, prosody, and stress in poetry. For example, I like the four, eight, ten rhythm of the hendecasyllable "Mi stringerà, per un pensiero, il cuore"—Umberto Saba. But I could also cite Dante: "Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura." And I said to myself, "Why not Bacigalupo, Ballarin, Maroso," the

defense for the Italian National team and for Grande Torino [Turin's famed team of the 1940s, all of whom perished in the 1949 Superga air disaster]?

GB: Even from these initial comments, it's clear that Orelli the poet can't be separated from Orelli the novelist. Your prose is also strongly influenced by poetry.

GO: A feeling for poetry, yes, spans all of my literary work. When I invented that [football] team composed of names from the Bible—Amalek, Habakkuk, Melchizedek, Enoch, and then Walaschek too; the last, on the bottom as the left wing, is Enoch, and the other character says, "oh, f***," instead of "fuck," a word that another writer might use on every page of a book but which I block out, with an incredible modesty for which I'll be venerated by who knows whom. Or Ariosto, the most Mondrianesque, abstract Ariosto, and his verses of numbers—in groups of ten, twenty, four, seven, eight—and his heroes: Otone, Avolio, Berlinghiero, Avinio. These are the kinds of things that amuse me, playing with names. I taught secondary school for forty years and with my kids I always repeated the words of an English poet whose name I don't even remember: "Anyone who

thinks that Homer's catalogue of ships isn't poetry doesn't know the first thing about poetry."

GB: One should never ask a writer—especially a poet—how he conceived of the structure of his own work. But the architecture of *Walaschek's Dream* is so unusual that the temptation is overwhelming.

GO: *Walaschek's Dream* grew out of a continuous association of ideas. Not for my other books, but for this one, I can say the exact date and time of its conception. One morning, before a UNESCO commission meeting in Berne, I went to visit the Paul Klee Museum, which was temporary at the time, near the train station. In a corner, that painting, *Alphabet I*, was specially displayed—a minor painting of Klee's, even if I always advise great prudence when it comes to the adjective "minor." When I saw it I immediately thought about how Klee had acted like the perfect homemaker who, when she needs something to collect potato peels, wouldn't use the obituary page, because it would seem like an act of disrespect toward those who have just passed on to a better life, but chooses the sports page, because with sports—even if it is the

religion of our time—basically, nobody gets offended. And so Klee, intentionally, I believe, also chose sports. And looking at the page up close, under the artist's brushstrokes, you can see the names of the teams and the players. There, at that moment, the idea for *Walaschek's Dream* was born, which then developed through this continuous series of associations of ideas. I'd almost be tempted to define this book not as a novel, not a diary, but almost an encyclopedia, an encyclopedia of memory connected to the setting of the osteria, where everything takes place. Now, I'm going to say something a bit delicate, I hope it won't be misunderstood. About Dante, the greatest author in the world, who I've always drawn upon. *The Divine Comedy* is in a certain sense a giant encyclopedia. And I like to think that my *Walaschek* is also a kind of encyclopedia, a minor one, of course, but with many ideas inside it that are associated with one another, some congruously, others perhaps more arbitrarily.

GB: In fact, your novel has often been talked about in terms of accumulation, dizziness . . .

GO: . . . that was precisely the biggest risk I took, the risk of putting too many things together, or some that weren't pertinent. That was the danger. Sometimes erasing is much more useful than adding. Take, for example, the Kafka story "A Message from the Emperor": a sublime, utterly astonishing half-page. But with the device of accumulation, of free association, I also saw a positive, playful element, clearly taken from Dante, that is, the possibility of bringing characters together irrespective of their places in space or time. Earlier, I mentioned the osteria, the meeting place for the group of customers who discuss the meaning of the *O* drawn by Paul Klee on the sports page of the *National Zeitung*. Well, my parents actually owned an osteria, and that osteria was my first public university, because at home we didn't have books, not even the Bible, not even *The Betrothed* or *The Divine Comedy*. But I had all those chance teachers at the osteria, and it's there that, thanks to them, I came to learn what went on in the world. I received my first education thanks to men that I still cherish, like the carpenter who also appears in the novel, one of the greatest readers of Dante I've ever met, and I hung on his words because he told me things that seemed so fantastic, about murders and things like that, because he had emigrated to America and had brought back considerable life experience. And I bring him to life in the novel, and put him alongside Arthur Schopenhauer, Bertrand Russell. This is precisely the arbitrary, encyclopedic element: putting things from my everyday experience together with the great masters of my education. Running several risks, first of all the risk of disorienting the reader, or irritating him with overly personal material. That was the greatest difficulty to overcome.

GB: Which is overcome once the reader, within this "personal material," perceives a sense of the universal tragedy, which, as

I see it, is the support for the entire book. Despite its irony, playfulness, lightness, it is, for all intents and purposes, a tragic book. Despite Walaschek, who races ahead without turning to look at all the horror at his heels, and his liberating dream.

GO: That's absolutely what it is. Even the choice to put at the novel's center characters like Schopenhauer, whose ironic pessimism is very dear to me, says a lot about how much I agree with that reading. The foundation of human life is quite tragic, and old age even more so. But I didn't want to radicalize that sort of pessimism throughout. In fact, when I recount Walaschek's dream, when I have him returning to Geneva from Berne where he'd attended a reunion of the old legends of Swiss soccer, there at the ending I thought of the fifteenth canto of the *Inferno*, the Brunetto Latini canto. Here it's more of an analogy with cycling than with soccer. Imagine a Paris-Roubaix [race], a group of six, seven riders ahead, and farther back, by two or three minutes, another group following and a single rider between the two groups. And I wonder, is he someone who fell back from the first group, the breakaway riders, or did he break away from the second group, the chasing pack? And I associate that lone rider with Brunetto Latini, the sinner, who "seemed, / across that plain, like one of those who run / for the green cloth at Verona; and of those, / more like the one who wins, than those who lose." I wanted an optimistic ending for the novel, I planned it that way. And I did it through Walaschek's final dream and with a parodic device, that

is, entrusting [the ending] to the words of a seventeenth century theologian who talks about grace. I borrowed, no, I literally stole his words but instead of applying them to divine grace, to theology, I applied them to the grace of football. To some extent I'm also indebted to Carmelo Bene. Once, in a discussion about literature, he said: "You know who the greatest stylist in Italy is?" I would have said Gadda, Manganelli, someone like that. But he said: "Falcão." [Paulo Roberto, the football player]. And I thought, "By God, he's right!" Even Guicciardini, a writer I admire, who's shamefully neglected in the schools, would probably agree. In his dream, Walaschek plays the most beautiful game in the world and wins. And so a moralist could also claim that my novel concludes with the message that the world will be saved by grace and beauty.

GB: And yet, to return to pessimism, the underlying message of the novel seems to be the exact opposite. In the face of 1938, the horror of Nazism, the brutality of man, beauty seems to succumb, powerless. Earlier, you mentioned a planned, intentionally optimistic ending. Does this mean that if you had followed your instincts, the ending would have been different?

GO: I was afraid of a monotony of the negative. And so I inserted this spark of hope, which is nonetheless related to a dream, a utopia. And it's not a coincidence that the novel is called *Walaschek's Dream* and not "Walaschek's Reality." 1938 was one of the most horrible years in the history of humankind. At that time, Hitler

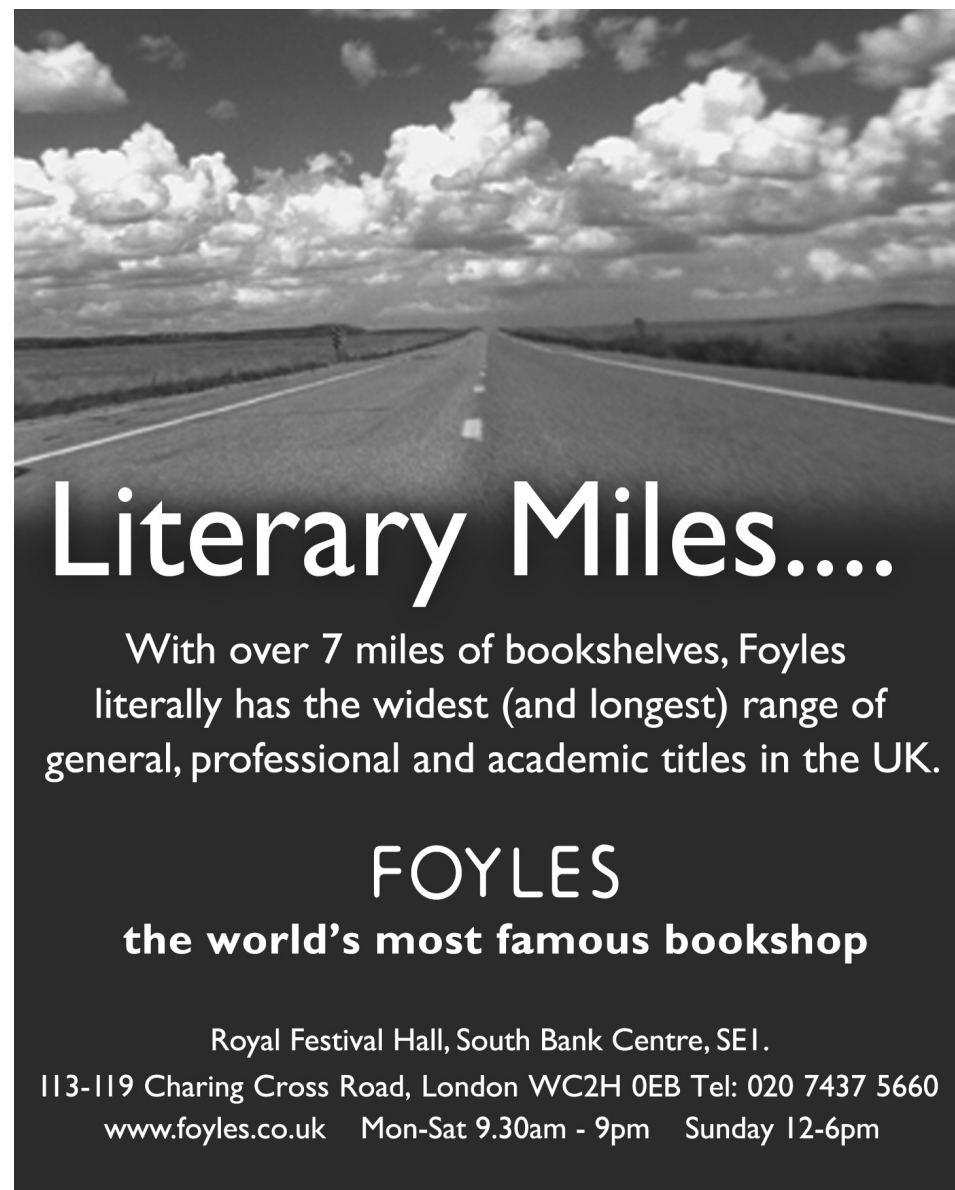
was winning and the utopianists were in jail. And the heads of government dealing with the advance of Nazism certainly weren't utopianists, but people of "tears and blood," like Churchill. In 1938, the historical picture is totally negative. You see, I grew up in a very Catholic family, I knew the Latin Mass by heart, I almost know it even now. But growing up I had a total crisis of faith: that faith collapsed, along with the myth of resurrection and everything else. It makes me think of Pirandello, when he stood behind the giant rear end of Marcus Aurelius's horse and shouted, "Lucky you, yours is made of bronze!" Or Foscolo, or all those other giants who lost their faith. There remains a base of negativity, of pessimism, on which, however, one can't linger too long, in a repetitive or monotonous way.

GB: A Klee painting is at the center of your novel and so it seems fitting to conclude our chat by returning to the "degenerate artist." In his *Diaries*, Klee writes: "The more horrible this world, the more abstract our art, whereas a happy world brings forth an art of the here and now."

GO: I must return again to the classics, to the continuous miracle that is Dante, or back to the battles narrated by Ariosto at his most Mondrianesque, which have always so entertained my kids in the classroom, with all those heads and arms flying around. I reference Mondrian not because I particularly care for him as a painter. I like Picasso more. Cézanne. Those are the modern painters I prefer. But there's no doubt that Klee's words hit the mark, that his retreat into abstraction is quite understandable. For him, abstraction was the pain of dealing with a world that had made him that way, that had made him paint an abstract tree that no longer had beautiful leaves that grow in spring. It's the tragic sense of the world that leads to abstraction, it's indisputable, one can't not agree with a statement like Klee's. Another painter who could be of assistance here is a Swiss artist, Ferdinand Hodler, who painted the face of his companion, Valentine Godé-Darel, day after day as she suffered from cancer, her face getting thinner, more hollow, her nose like a vulture's beak. As the illness slowly takes its cruel course, his Valentine becomes more and more abstract, formless, horrible. After a certain point you can barely make out the features of her face. Some time after Valentine's death, Hodler painted another portrait of her, but this time it's in full relief, sharp, realistic, without that abstraction dictated by the progress of death. That's Hodler's dream, it's peace rediscovered after his beloved's death, after the pain has subsided. But then, in that case, the dead are more alive than the living, and the living are the dying ones. In this sense, the dead are the ones who win and not the ones who lose. ■

Translated by Jamie Richards

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Interview with Boris Pahor

Franco Baldasso

For a member of the Slovenian minority in Trieste, Central Europe's history of violence began decades before the Nazi concentration camps, and did not end with the defeat of Fascism in WWII. This is the message of Slovenian writer Boris Pahor, and perhaps this explains his enduring importance and popularity to his countrymen and fellow Europeans both. In his most acclaimed book, *Necropolis*, Pahor recounts his experience as a "red triangle," a political prisoner shuttled between four concentrations camps in the last years under Nazi rule. Yet the book is not solely a recollection of his imprisonment; it is an opportunity for a master to meditate on the dramatic events of an entire lifetime, and on their meaning for the present, both personally and historically.

Going back after twenty years to the desolate landscape of the Vosges Mountains in Alsace and visiting the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp where he was once imprisoned, Pahor remembers the atrocities of the camps with a striking clarity, almost cinematic. What is at stake for Pahor, however, is that the Nazi camp is in his case only the last indignity in a long sequence of crimes and violations. His personal history of violence begins on July 20, 1920, when at the age of seven he was present at the nighttime destruction of the *Narodni Dom* ("National House"), the community hall of the Slovenian minority in the city of Trieste, Italy. The local Fascist militia set fire to the building, supposedly in retaliation for recent attacks by Croatian nationalists in the city of Split. This was a grim foretaste of life under Mussolini, who would rise to power two years later, bringing with him systematic racial discrimination against Slavic minorities in Italy, and bloody repression of every sort of defiance. Young Pahor was no longer allowed to attend the same school as Italian children, both of his parents lost their jobs, and his native language was brutally banned. Nonetheless, at the outbreak of the Second World War, Pahor was forced to fight for the Italian Army in North Africa as a Fascist. After the Italian Armistice and his return to Trieste, Pahor was soon arrested as a member of the Slovenian resistance, and

found himself turned over to the Nazis as a traitor. He who had fought for the freedom of his people, strangled by Italian nationalism, was now obliged to die as an "Italian" in the camps.

Meeting him at a library of Slovenian books in Trieste, I see that Boris Pahor stands as a living monument to his conviction that history is never one sided, no matter what the "winners" and politicians might say. At ninety-seven years of age, he is no less possessed by a fierce desire to speak the truth, no less angry at the injustices he and his countrymen were made to suffer.

BORIS PAHOR: After all these years the quest for a "just" history should be a matter of honor for a nation like Italy, but politically speaking there is still no real will to clarify what happened . . . Why weren't Italian war criminals indicted after the war? . . . This is only one small part of a history that is still not taught in schools, despite all the good books on the subject that have been published in recent years. Italian imperialism became most apparent during the Fascist era and the 1941-43 occupation of Yugoslavia, but it was in the works as early as the nineteenth century, when the Italian nationalist movement wanted to "redeem" the city of Trieste, which was then part of the Habsburg Empire, without taking into account that all the surrounding countryside was populated by Slovenians. These people were accustomed to go into the city daily: farmers selling their produce, dockworkers, women serving in bourgeois houses or sometimes working as prostitutes. Historically speaking, Slovenians were a Central European people, but after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 they found themselves scattered across many different countries. In order to save itself, Slovenia joined Yugoslavia, despite the hundreds of thousands living in territories now ruled by Italy. Slovenia then became, in the eyes of the world, a Balkan entity . . . Tito and his Communist Party, the only legal party after the institution of the "second Yugoslavia," erased the reality of a pluralist struggle for liberation encompassing the entire spectrum of political ideas. A federation uniting

different republics would have been a remarkable achievement, if things had actually worked out that way. Instead, we got a kingdom with a king: Tito. Slovenia couldn't help but be the loser in such a situation. Culturally speaking, Slovenian writers had only one way to gain recognition, even in Western Europe: to be recognized first in Belgrade. Personally, I had decided to criticize the regime, and together with my wife ran a journal between 1966 and 2000;

because of some articles published in this journal, *Zaliv* ("The Gulf"), the dictatorship eventually—in 1975—prohibited me from stepping foot in Yugoslavia.

FRANCO BALDASSO: Was it because of Tito's regime that you decided to remain in Trieste, despite what had happened during the war, and despite your ordeal in the camps?

BP: It's necessary to highlight here that the Slovenians hadn't been a minority under the Habsburg Empire, despite the fact that the Italians were numerically superior. There were more Slovenians in Trieste than in Ljubljana. The city has two pasts, as Italian/*triestino* writer Scipio Slataper points out in his books. I was born an Austrian citizen in 1913; the Slovenian language was one of three used in our city on an equal standing. Our history as a "minority" only began in 1918—when it was imposed on us. So, as a *triestino*, it was simply nonsense to move to Yugoslavia: there was no reason for it! This is my home. I had no desire to move to Ljubljana. With the Anglo-American occupation of the city after the war (1947-54), we could reopen Slovenian schools and theaters, print our own newspaper, and so forth. We regained a normal cultural life after decades of Fascist repression.

FB: And what about the relationship with Slovenia?

BP: In Yugoslavia, Tito realized he couldn't close the borders completely, as it happened with Stalinist countries in the rest of Eastern Europe. He allowed a certain amount of cultural freedom—so we could live very close to the fatherland, both in a material and a spiritual way. And then, Article 6 of the new Constitution of the Italian Republic recognized our rights—despite a certain hostility from nationalists, which never quite went away.

FB: Still, it took forty years for there to be any recognition of the importance of your books in Italy, despite your many publications and prizes, in France, Germany, the United States . . .

BP: The story of this recognition is a novel itself. Here in Trieste there's a sort of Europe "in miniature." The role of the local newspaper, *Il Piccolo*, was crucial. It was this newspaper that opened up new possibilities for me and one of its editors, Alessandro Mezzena Lona, who gave *Necropolis* the push it needed to be taken on by an influential publisher [Fazi] in Rome in 2008. The book was launched as a sort of discovery, and I was invited onto a popular Sunday talk show. After that, things changed a lot. I wouldn't have thought that a book about concentration camps would cause a stampede into the bookstores, but the

book did indeed enjoy a huge success all over Italy . . .

What I like most is being able to meet young people. They read my books for more than just descriptions of Nazi crimes. Our history is filled with so many tragedies.

FB: Do you see a keen interest in these themes in the young people you meet?

BP: The young are definitely smarter than their depiction by the media. In the last few years I've been invited to almost 150 schools. Sometimes, the kids are shy because they feel they can't really understand what I'm talking about. I start with Fascism, I speak then of Nazism, and eventually move on to the communist dictatorship in Yugoslavia. I am teaching them part of their own history. Still, I think it would be better if the Italian state took charge of this . . .

FB: About *Necropolis*, was the book known locally, in Trieste, before its Italian publication in 2008?

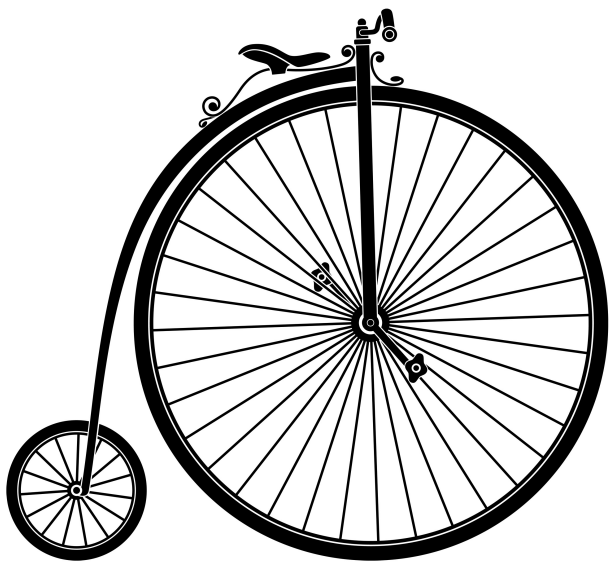
BP: A small local publishing house had translated some of my books about the Fascist repression of Slovenians when Slovenia entered the EU in 2005. Still, the way *Necropolis* was recognized in 2008 was amazing. I had a typescript of the book, already translated into Italian, sitting at home for more than twenty years! I'd sent it to all the major publishing houses. I also sent it to Primo Levi, but he never replied . . .

FB: In what year?

BP: Around 1972. I still have the letter I wrote to him. I only wanted to know what he thought about my book, since it deals with my visit to the camps after the war, which isn't the usual departure point for an ex-inmate's book about the camps. The gist of *Necropolis* is the paradox of a free man visiting the place where he was expected to die. I don't speak only of my own camp, but of the many camps throughout Europe as well. I also meditate upon the meaning of what happened in a society that basically doesn't care. Today, we have a "memorial day" once a year, and that's it. There were camps where people died of starvation, illness, beatings, hangings everyday. And I'm not talking about the camps for Jewish people. I met only one Jew in fourteen months of imprisonment.

FB: But you never ended up meeting Levi?

BP: I sent him my manuscript, I only wanted to know his opinion. Many publishers at that time probably thought, "Well, we already have Levi—why should we care about a Slovenian from Trieste? His book won't ever sell . . . How do you publicize a Slovenian from Trieste?" I suppose some wounds are still open. ■



Mere Words, Mere Art

Slovenian Literature: Ten (Plus) Novels

Erica Johnson Debeljak

To become acquainted with the literature of a nation, especially one as small as Slovenia, is inevitably to become acquainted with the fears, neuroses, and preoccupations of that particular nation and its people. In Slovenia, a country of two million that until 1991 had always been part of larger and more powerful multilingual entities (first of some version of the Habsburg Empire for nearly a millennium and then of some version of Yugoslavia for seventy-five years of the twentieth century), such preoccupations revolve around identity, pride, and resistance.

For Slovenians, identity resides most palpably in language and by extension in literature. Indeed it was predominantly the tiny and perennially threatened Slovenian language that kept this small tribe together over the centuries. Never taken for granted, it became the heart and soul of the people and, although the following list of books includes only novels, poets are the high priests of the Slovenian people, and poetry their temple. Pride resided in rural poverty, in the countryside, in the struggle of this diligent race of hardworking peasants to wrest survival from a beautiful and varied land that was at times miraculously fecund, at times simply brutal. Resistance, for twentieth-century Slovenia, can be located first in the struggle of the Littoral Slovenians against their Italian occupiers (this occurred in the aftermath of World War I when Austro-Hungary was dismantled and a third of Slovenia and a slice of coastal Croatia annexed to Italy), and later, and more crucially perhaps, during the crucible of World War II, when Partisan forces took to the verdant woods and rugged hills, and fought against the occupying Italians and Germans. Recall: in all of Europe, only Yugoslavia liberated itself from Nazi Germany without the help of either Russia or America.

With the fall of both communism and Yugoslavia, the unexpected birth of the Slovenian state in 1991, and the subsequent rise of market capitalism, all three of these genetic markers—language, rural poverty, and resistance—have entered a period of looking-glass reinterpretation. Now that the long-suppressed dream (of independence) has come true, the primary ingredients that went into its realization matter little to a new generation that takes independence and freedom, the Slovenian language and shopping malls to be their birthright.

Literature means different things to different people. For past generations of Slovenians, many of the books in the list below provided flesh to their growing minds and bodies during a time of scarcity and censorship. These novels were as essential to them as food. To the current generation of savvy, traveling, computer-literate Slovenians, and of course to for-

eign readers as well, these same books are not lifeblood: now they must succeed as mere words, as mere art.

The following is a list of ten Slovenian novels of the twentieth century. The selection, as always in such lists, is subjective. One slight departure is that item ten on the list is not one book but many, a brief survey of significant works that have been published in the post-1991 period and may or may not acquire the towering stature of the others. Time will tell. But the post-independence era of Slovenia, with its new set of fears and neuroses and preoccupations, must be given its due.

1. *Hiša Marije Pomočnice*, Ivan Cankar, 1904
(*The Ward of our Lady of Mercy*, translated by Harold Leeming, DZS, 1976)

Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), Slovenia's pre-eminent turn-of-the-century prose writer, was amazingly prolific during his relatively short writing life. From 1899 to 1918, Cankar published thirty-three books in a broad variety of genres. Perhaps because he emerged from a background of hardship himself—he was one of seven children born to a far from prosperous family—the tone of his work is generally dark and his recurrent themes are those of injustice, poverty, and the plight of society's most helpless victims.

The Ward of our Lady of Mercy provides little relief from the darkness. It tells the story of fourteen little girls in a convent hospital, left there by their parents to die of various ailments, many of syphilis passed on by the abusive parents and caretakers themselves. The novel, though its principal themes are religion and death, ran into trouble with the censors and critics at the time of its publication (one famously calling it “refined pornography, brought to artistic perfection”) because of the erotic content of two chapters detailing the sexual abuse of some of the convent's inmates. But the novel ultimately belongs to its transcendent main character, Malchie, whose death is depicted as a sort

of mystical transformation, a final redemption from life's hardship and misery, and more broadly a sacrifice for all humanity, even the most cruel and oppressive.

2. *Alamut*, Vladimir Bartol, 1938
(*Alamut*, translated by Michael Biggins, North Atlantic Books, 2004)

Alamut, named after an eleventh century Persian fortress, is both an unusual work by Slovenian standards, given that relatively few exotic historical sagas have been written by Slovenian authors, and one of the most well-known novels outside of the country's borders, having been translated into over fifteen languages. The novel tells the story of the historical figure Hassan-i Sabbah and the Hashashin warriors, considered by some to be precursors of today's Islamic suicide bombers. The protagonist of *Alamut* is the young and idealistic ibn Tabir, who arrives at Hassan-i Sabbah's fortress intent on becoming a warrior in service to Hassan only to discover that the indoctrination of soldiers is based on fabrication and the drugging of recruits. The fortress grounds contain a contrived garden paradise replete with *houris*, the virgins that await Islamic martyrs after their deaths.

Vladimir Bartol (1903–1967) was an ethnic Slovenian from Trieste and, during the years that he wrote *Alamut*, Slovenians in Mussolini's Italy were not allowed to speak their own language, their Slavic surnames were forcibly Italianized, Austria was annexed to Hitler's Germany, and Stalin's purges had reached their murderous climax. Certainly it is the provocative content of *Alamut* that accounts for the wave of post-9/11 translations (into the English and Hebrew languages, among others) and yet the novel's success is above all due to the universality and timelessness of its message: a screed against all forms of fanaticism.

3. *Minuet za kitaro*, Vitomil Zupan, 1975
(*Minuet for Guitar*, translated by Harold Leeming, DZS 1988; Dalkey Archive Press, 2011)

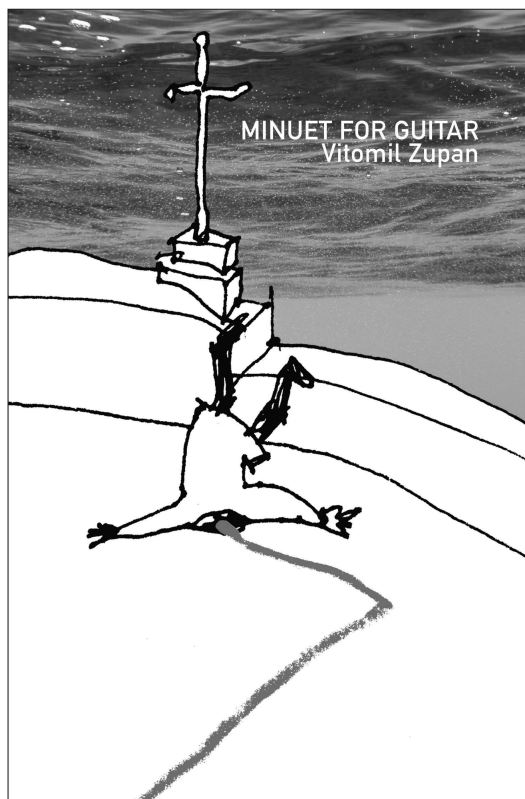
Vitomil Zupan (1914–1987) has the ideal biography for a postwar Slovenian/Yugoslav writer. He was interned by the Italians during World War II, managed eventually to join and fight with the communist Partisans, and then, for all his trouble, was jailed after the war by the same communist Partisans as a “suspicious intellectual.” But if his life story is stereotypical of a postwar Central European dissident, his writerly voice is anything but: it is casual, self-deprecating, sardonic, and even sexy. If Cankar is Slovenia's Emile Zola, Vitomil Zupan is its Henry Miller.

Minuet for Guitar takes place in two distinct time frames: the first during World War II, when a young Slovenian soldier, Berk, fights with the Partisans while retaining a commitment to liberal rather than communist values, and the second in Spain, some thirty years after the war, when Berk strikes up a friendship with a former Wehrmacht officer who fought against him on the very same battlefields. The voice of Berk is so fresh it makes the reader really see the bucolic European countryside engulfed in fratricidal war, makes the reader feel the terrible detachment of the soldier swept along by impersonal historical forces while facing his own personal extinction each day. Balancing Zupan's “noir” irony are the erudite philosophical musings that punctuate and deepen the work.

4. *Spopad s pomladjo*, Boris Pahor, 1978
(*A Difficult Spring*, translated by Erica Johnson Debeljak, Litterae Slovenicae, 2009)

If, despite independence, the deepest source of Slovenian identity is that of the eternal minority—a minority in Austro-Hungary, in Yugoslavia, and now in the European Union—then Boris Pahor (1913) is more than a writer: he is Slovenia's patron saint and protector. An ethnic Slovenian born in Trieste, Pahor was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 and sent to the concentration camps, an experience that became the subject matter of much of his later literary work (work that is often compared to that of Primo Levi and Imre Kertész). And yet arguably of equal importance to the Slovenian people has been his tireless advocacy of minority languages and cultures in Europe.

Mesto v zalivu (City in the Bay, 1955), *Necropolis* (1967), and *A Difficult Spring* (1978), taken together, comprise a trilogy of Pahor's war experience. The first pres-



ents the crucial weeks when a young Slovenian intellectual in Trieste must decide how to engage with the totalitarian forces closing in on him. The second is a harrowing nonfiction account of the experience of the concentration camps. The third, *A Difficult Spring*, is a more intimate novel that could be classified either as Holocaust or sanatorium literature. It deals with the existential choice—between life and death, love and darkness—faced by Radko Suban, a deportee returning from the camps who spends several months in a French sanatorium and falls in love with a pretty, trite, and flirtatious young nurse. Her capriciousness strikes him as a betrayal of the camps and all who died there, and yet also as the very source of life.

5. *Galijot*, Drago Jančar, 1978
(*The Galley Slave*, translated by Michael Biggins, Dalkey Archive Press 2011)

Drago Jančar (1948) is a towering figure in contemporary modernist Slovenian fiction. Like many Slovenian writers of this caliber, he writes prolifically and in many genres, but is best known for his novels, short stories, and plays. Jančar was a dissident in socialist Yugoslavia, jailed for his activities, and his literature often deals with the individual in confrontation with repressive institutions and a chaotic world. He was instrumental in Slovenia's movement toward independence. Jančar's novel *The Galley Slave* is a dark Central European equivalent of the picaresque novel. It tells the story of Johan Ot's wandering from Germany into Slovenian and Mediterranean lands. Though it takes place in the seventeenth century, it reflects the contemporary human condition of loss and exile.

6. *Vampir z Gorjancev*, Mate Dolenc, 1979

Vampir z Gorjancev (The Vampire from Gorjanci), an extremely popular novel later turned into a film, is set in the 1970s in a region under the foothills of the Gorjanci Mountains, which separate Slovenia from Croatia. In this groundbreaking work, Mate Dolenc (1945) departed from the prevalent existentialist mood of Slovenian literature of the day and adopted a romantic realist style that allowed him to switch back and forth between real and fantastic registers. The novel tells the story of an artistically minded student whose pursuit of knowledge leads him from the urban center to remote villages permeated by rural folklore, where he encounters the realm of the undead, and specifically, the beautiful and ethereal Leonora. It never becomes clear whether Leonora is a real character or a metaphor for the unattainable, the world just beyond our reach. Despite *Vampir z Gorjancev*'s popularity and prescience (beating the current vampire fad by some twenty-five years), Dolenc abandoned this fantasy world, his later novels dealing with naturalist themes such as the Adriatic Sea and its numerous islands, a realm that after Slovenian independence and the breakup

of Yugoslavia also existed just beyond the reach of Slovenians.

7. *Prišleki*, Lojze Kovačič, 1984

Prišleki (The Newcomers), Lojze Kovačič's (1928–2004) epic and panoramic trilogy, was voted "the Slovenian novel of the century" by literary critics. It turns stereotypes on their heads, as novels of the century should do—stereotypes such as the dignity of rural poverty, the unifying sanctity of the Slovenian language, and the noble heroism of resistance. It also reverses another one of the other great preoccupations of twentieth-century Slovenia—emigration. According to some estimates, more than one quarter of the Slovenian population left Slovenia during three great waves of emigration, but the newcomers of Lojze Kovačič's masterpiece move inexorably, unwillingly in the opposite direction.

Prišleki is the (autobiographical) story of a family forcibly returned to the Slovenian homeland in 1938. The patriarch, a furrier, had emigrated with his German Saarland wife to Switzerland in 1911 where they achieved a certain bourgeois respectability, but then at the height of the global economic crisis, the Swiss authorities "escort" them out of the country. This experience, narrated through the eyes of the youngest child, a son, is one of nearly unmitigated misery. Rural poverty holds no dignity for the family of newcomers. Rather it offers a surreal and terrifying landscape of mud and shit, bogs and grim forests. The Slovenian language, far from being a unifier, is used against the boy who speaks an accented version of it. Resistance is not possible as the family remains perennially suspect because of their Germanic roots. In short: the newcomers belong nowhere.

8. *Filio ni doma*, Berta Bojetu, 1990

Berta Bojetu (1946–1997) is a decidedly rare phenomenon in postwar Slovenian literature, a Jewish woman writer. It would be difficult to decide what element of her identity is more remarkable: being one of the few women who dared enter the masculine temple of Slovenian letters, or being a member of Slovenia's almost non-existent Jewish community (most having been expelled, not during World War II, but during the Middle Ages). Bojetu wrote two novels during her lifetime that are representative of Slovenian postmodernism: *Filio ni doma* (Filio is not at Home) and *Ptičja hiša* (The Birdhouse, 1995). *Filio ni doma* is a dystopian feminist novel, full of violence and dark brooding, that takes place in a village on an unnamed Mediterranean island. The upper part of village is populated by women and children, and the lower part by men. The novel's main character has a granddaughter, Filio, and an adopted son, Uri. Uri is soon segregated to the male part of the island where he is socialized in practices of bestiality, homosexuality, and, above all, brutality toward women. Uri and Filio eventually come together in their effort to leave the monstrous society of the island.

9. *Namesto koga roža sveti*, Feri Lainšček, 1991
(*Instead of Whom the Flower Blooms*, translated by Tamara M. Soban, *Litterae Slovenicae* 2002).

Feri Lainšček (1959) is one of Slovenia's most popular contemporary novelists. His work sells well, receives many awards, and is frequently made into successful films. Lainšček is a decidedly regional writer, coming from Prekmurje, Slovenia's eastern flank, the plains of Pannonia, bordering Hungary and famously populated with storks, Gypsies, and a dialect that nobody else in Slovenia understands. *Instead of Whom the Flower Blooms*, Lainšček's most famous work, tells the story of Halgato, a young Gypsy boy who struggles to escape the fate of his family—his father was killed by Yugoslav UDBA (the local equivalent of Soviet KGB or East German Stasi) and his mother is a faithless beauty—and transcend his doomed community—poor fiddlers, tinkers, and knife sharpeners who ply their wares and services across the bleak grassy plains, all too often succumbing to violence and drink.

10. Post 1991—A New Era of Southerners and Women

An amazing shift has taken place in the eighteen years since Slovenian independence. As Slovenians became the king of their castle, the majority at least within their own country, internal minorities

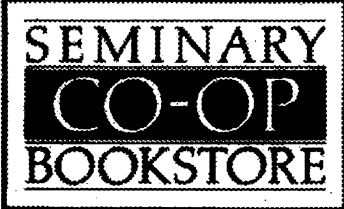
began to demand voice. Namely, Slovenian fiction has seen an increasing emphasis on the experience of the ex-Yugoslav minority within Slovenian society (the so-called southerner: mostly Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims). The two most noteworthy books in this category are Andrej H. Skubec's *Fužinski bluz* (Fužine Blues) and Goran Vojnovič's *Čefuri raus!*, the surprise winner of 2009's Slovenian equivalent of the National Book Award. One caveat about these books is that they may well be untranslatable, much of their vitality and humor relying on the mélange of southern Slav languages, and on the juiciness of southern slang, registers that are all but lost in translation.

The other development since 1991 is the emergence of a veritable army of Berta Bojetu's figurative daughters: women writers in Slovenia. There are a host of talented young women writers, uncowed by the dominantly male character of the literary scene, who write with an entirely fresh voice, sometimes humorous, sometimes simply more straightforward and well-rounded than their male counterparts, though generally not as darkly dystopian in their subject matter as Bojetu. Worth including in this category as both novelists, and perhaps equally importantly as short story writers, are Maja Novak (*Feline Plague*), Suzana Tratnik (*Tretji svet*), Polona Glavan (*Noč v Evropi*), and Mojca Kumerdej (*Fragma*). ■

Writers	&	Critics...
Paul Auster	Y	Walter Benjamin
Jorge Luis Borges	O	Judith Butler
Gertrude Stein	U	Marjorie Garber
David Foster Wallace	C	Cornel West
Eileen Myles	H	Mikhail Bakhtin
Susan Howe	O	Laurence Rickels
W.G. Sebald	O	Roland Barthes
Richard Powers	S	Maurice Blanchot
Samuel Delany	E	Marjorie Perloff
Jorie Graham		Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick
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My Private Life

Emmanuel Hocquard

Emmanuel Hocquard's "Ma Vie Privée" appears in his collection Ma haie: Un privé à Tanger 2 (2001), not yet available in English translation. This excerpt appears with the kind permission of Editions P.O.L.

The complete "My Private Life" runs to forty-two parts.

1. There's that absurd story of the Chinese artist to whom the Emperor has offered a commission for a landscape that'll go in one room of the palace. The painting finished, the Emperor is invited to come examine the work. Delighted by what he sees, he turns toward the painter to commend him. The painter, however, is nowhere in the room. He's gone into the landscape. There's something a little suspect about that story. I always get caught up there: there's something suspect about that story.

2. Here, too, there's something a little suspect. My sixth sense is warning me that this is a trap. I'm going to have to proceed on tiptoe. Or scuttle sideways like a crab up to the world of Official Literature.

3. Entering a bar, the Continental Op sees a sign posted:

ONLY GENUINE PRE-WAR
AMERICAN OR BRITISH
WHISKIES SERVED HERE

He reacts by observing: "I was trying to count how many lies could be found in those nine words, and had reached four, with promise of more." (Dashiell Hammett, quoted by Steven Marcus.)

4. Did you say Literature? Last night, December 32, 1994, in answer to the question, "What's on television tonight?" Alexandre responded: "Television! on every channel!" Well put! In answer to the question, "What's there to read in all these literary books?" the reply would be: "Literature, of every sort!"

5. *Anecdote I.* A late afternoon walk around the playing fields. Light going down under the eucalyptus trees. Back to the house. Having along the way bought a roll, Life-Savers shaped, of red candies. With a hideous pharmaceutical taste. And eaten all of them. Nightfall. Disgust. Nausea. Terrible guilt. That day my life changed. Boredom and mistrust, the result of eating red candies.

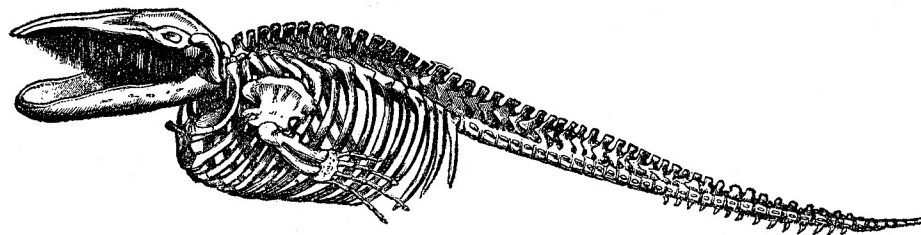
6. Yesterday, aboard the Paris-Bordeaux high-speed train, a little girl reads in a loud voice: "The chicken makes eggs, the sheep makes wool, the cow makes milk." I am struck by the complete absurdity of what I hear. And the poet, what does he make? That's the way one becomes a liar. By repeating such absurdities in a loud voice on the train.

7. Let's suppose, for just a minute, that a chicken could talk. And that it says: I

make eggs. Does anyone think, even for a minute, that *its* egg-making talk would have the same meaning as that of the little girl on the high-speed train? No, of course not. The meaning could never be the same because the intonation wouldn't be the same. If anybody asks, I'm in the chicken's camp.

8. Supposing you stumbled on my letters and took a look at them: what I wrote my friend is not what you'd read. Because you're not my friend. On this subject, one might say something like: you see only our profiles, while we see each other face to face.

9. *Anecdote II.* Nightfall. In the distance, behind the house on the rue du Village, the blackening contours of the Old Mountain. Paul and two friends are getting ready to camp there overnight in a tent. They ask me to come along too. Though I want to go



the thought of it fills me with fear. I don't dare say no and so hide myself in a bed of periwinkles, where I see them depart without me after some lengthy calling out and looking for me. Lights flicker up on the Old Mountain, whose outline is now invisible against the night.

10. Nobody ever insists enough on the one who's addressed. Everything is there. In my end is my beginning, Dear Thomas Stearns. Dear Mademoiselle Lynx. And the madman of an Author who reads Kierkegaard to the chickens. Necessity makes men run wry, / And hunger drives the wolf from wood, dear Ezra. My intention is the one who's addressed.

11. I've never had a business card. However, there was a period when I told myself that if I had to have one engraved, I'd put "television viewer" under my name. And just as television is aimed not so much at people as at television viewers, so the Literature Machine is aimed at its Readers. The reader is a piece of that machine. A machine that runs on itself and for itself. The chicken makes eggs and Literature manufactures Readers. When I write to my friend, I don't write to a Reader.

12. In the course of producing Readers, the Literary Machine produces Authors. Cows make milk and Literature makes Authors. These days, they're even seen on television. And that's where the superiority of television over literature lies: it goes farther in the same direction: toward the obscene. When I write to my friend, I am content to

sign my letter. I am not the Author of my letter.

13. I don't reproach television for being what it is. It is very good such as it is and if it didn't exist someone would have to invent it. Television shows not "things as they are" (cf. Battman, in *Le Commanditaire*), but "television as it is when it intends to show things as they are." It seems to me one would need a huge helping of hypocrisy or ignorance to imagine that Literature could be more pure, in Mallarmé's sense of that term. Literature, too, is a corrupt place, though its corruption wears a mask of all that is honorable. It's that mask that interests me.

14. Literature is a machine to produce Literature, not thinking, not criticism. In order to study, or to critique, I have no need of Literature. No more than I do philosophy. To tell the truth, for thinking, nobody needs

it. I have no need of Literature for critical thinking, but I need to think critically about Literature seeing as how I've so imprudently fallen into it. To think critically about Literature is not a way to make it; it's a way to remove it, to rub it out, to undo it. And, by doing so, remove it in me, undo it in me, rub a hole in the paper of my faults. I'm in the camp of the chicken and the cow, but I think about what the little girl reads. About how there's something a little suspect in what she reads.

15. Nevertheless, you'll say, you write. And you publish the things you write. I write. I write out of a need to think. That's how I'm made. I need to think by writing. For myself. I myself am the one who's addressed, not my reader. Olivier said it—and he was right—"the reader's the one who sinks a book." Who makes of it something *more*, in place of something *less*. I try to write books of less. Because, for me, to think by writing is an attempt to focus.

16. The private is employed so as to focus or shine a light into obscure regions, not so as to make them more numerous.

17. Regarding literature though, that obscure region—it's no more than a drop of water compared to the Pacific Ocean of unadulterated obscurities that make up my life. And, talking about my life—it, too, is terribly murky. I sense somehow that there's something suspect in saying "my life." I keep the word *life* under extremely high surveillance, as a doubtful concept. My sixth sense warns me that it's a big

word. One of those big words on which one constructs the kind of dam that bursts on the River K. What makes me say that *my life* seems suspect to me? The fact that *my* in *my life* means something different than *my* in, for example, *my shoe*. It's got a different tone. If I write, I lost my shoe, the shoe's the object I lost. If I write, I lost my life, I can't simply think of my life as an object. Who's ever bequeathed his life to anybody in his last will and testament?

18. When I was small, I copied out whole books or whole excerpts of books that I sent to my friend. I could have sent her the books, but I sent her copies, written out by hand, of books I loved. If I'd sent her the books, I would have been sending her literature. Such was not my intention. My intent was to tell her that I loved her by sending her, copied out by hand, books or excerpts of books that I loved. By sending her those copies I sent her the literal.

19. Extremely important, in my eyes, the literal. I take the word literally, that is to say, *à la lettre*. By definition, the literal can only relate to what comes strictly under language, oral or written, regardless of what is the truth-value of the statement. Which excludes propositions like "Édouard was literally mad" or "That literally happened to me." *Literally* there means something like *really*.

20. It follows that if one talks of the literal, it can only relate to a proposal already made, either orally or in writing. In other words, there can only be question of the literal on the occasion of a proposal's repetition, at an instance of deafness, or querying, or uncertainty. At a murky instance. Or with a playful intent. Children play at repeating things.

Example. Olivier says to Emmanuel: Pascalle's dress is red. Emmanuel, who's misheard, or who's not sure he's grasped what Olivier said or who's surprised because he's seen that Pascalle's dress is green, turns toward Pierre who repeats what Olivier said: that Pascalle's dress is red.

Here we have a particular type of representation. Not the representation of a firsthand observation on the actual color of Pascalle's dress, but the re-presentation of the statement of the observation in question. No matter that Pascalle's dress (that of the first proposal: Pascalle's dress is red) is actually red. What counts is that the second proposal, Pascalle's dress is red, is, literally, the same as the first. It's this sort of tautology that produces the literal. And as = is impossible, Pascalle's dress is red says something other than Pascalle's dress is red. Is everything clear?

21. What I write appertains to this discrepancy. ■

Translated by John Latta

How I Write

Viktor Shklovsky

*The following essay was written for an anthology entitled *Kak my pishem* (How We Write), originally published in 1930, which consisted of responses to a questionnaire (see below) on working methods solicited from Russian writers such as Andrei Bely, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Evgeny Zamiatin, Boris Pasternak, Osip Mandelstam, Yuri Olesha, Boris Pilnyak, Veniamin Kaverin, etc. Shklovsky's essay was reprinted in the 1990 anthology of his work, *Gamburgskii shchet* (The Hamburg Account, forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press).*

I've been writing for fifteen years and over time I've obviously changed my manner and style of working.

Fifteen years ago it was much harder, because I didn't know how to get started. Everything I wrote seemed like it had all been said before. Individual pieces didn't coalesce. Examples were all self-referential. For the most part this is all still the case. I still find writing difficult, except now in a different way. A piece of mine might be spun off into an independent work, but the main thing, as in film, is what goes between pieces.

Creation in general and the creation of a new literary style in particular often

arise when a chance mutation takes hold. More or less like what happens with the development of a new breed of cattle.

There is a universal literary style, one founded upon the individual style. No one actually writes in this style—it makes nothing move, it is intangible, it is imperceptible.

There is the emphasis on the flouting of syllabic-tonic prosody in Mayakovsky.

There is the emphasis on dialect, on idiolect in Gogol. Gogol most likely did not write in the language in which he actually thought, and his Ukrainian prosody affected his style. As distant stars affect the orbits of planets.

I write beginning with facts. I try not to modify facts. I try to link disparate facts. I may have gotten this from Lomonosov—the juxtaposition of disparate ideas—or it may come from Anatole France, banging the heads of epithets together.

So maybe rather than epithets, I'm trying to bang things—facts—together.

Currently I'm starting to write differently, particularly if I'm working on a scientific study. Here I proceed from the subject matter. The "why" doesn't interest me until the "what" and "how" have

been resolved. I do not go in search of explanations to the unknown.

I begin a work by reading. I read without trying to strain myself. Rather, I try not to commit things to memory. The strain, the attentiveness—they simply get in the way. One should read serenely, just looking at the book.

I read a lot. As you can see, you're getting an essay on how I work rather than one on how I write.

Let's continue.

I read without straining myself. I make colored bookmarks or bookmarks of various widths [for citations]. While I don't write the page number on my bookmarks, it would be good to do so, in case they fall out. Then I look over my bookmarks. I make notes. The typist, the same one typing up this essay, retypes my pieces with the page numbers. I line up my pieces—and there are many of them—in columns along the wall of my room. Unfortunately my room is small, and I feel hemmed in.

Getting the sense of a citation is very important: I turn it around, and join it to other citations.

Pieces tend to stay up on my wall for a long time. I sort them and pin them up in columns again, and brief transitions occur to me. I write a sufficiently detailed chapter outline on some sheets of paper, and sort the now integrated fragments into stacks.

Then I start dictating the work, marking insertions with numbers.

All these techniques immeasurably speed up the pace of the work. And they make it easier. It's like working directly onto a typesetting machine.

During this process the outline and often even the subject are almost always modified. The work's meaning turns out to be different than intended, and it's in the wreckage of the work's potential that one can agonize over the unity of subject matter, the possibility for a new arrangement, the algebraic compression the subconscious performs on the subject matter that we call inspiration.

The work grows and it evolves. I don't think I so much complete my books as stop writing them, and that if I were to rewrite them two or three more times they would be better, clearer, and my audience would understand me, not just my friends, but that I would be divested of my wit.

This wit, for which some reproach me—it is a consequence of my method, a certain lack of refinement.

I cannot edit myself, just as I cannot read myself. Other thoughts occur to me, and I depart from the text.

Listening to myself reading aloud would be torture.

This manner of working and this lack of refinement are not flaws. Just as a glassblower can't make a mistake, if I master a technique completely then I

can't make a mistake even when I work quickly. In the end, however, it must be said that I produce no more than many who work at a slower pace.

And it's time for a break.

I am forever talking to people, and I don't believe that people should write everything on their own. I am convinced we ought to write in groups. I am convinced that friends should live in the same city, and meet frequently, and that the work gets done only if done collectively.

The best year of my life was when I would talk to Lev Yakubinsky¹ on the telephone, every day, day after day, for an hour or two. We put up the scaffolding over the phone.

I am convinced, Lev Petrovich, that it was pointless for you to get off the phone to get back to your real work.

I am convinced that it would be pointless for me not to live in Leningrad.

I am convinced that when Roman Jakobson moved to Prague it was a tremendous blow both to my work and his.

I am convinced that people in a given literary community should consider one another in their work, and that they should change their lives for one another.

For me it is somewhat complicated because I am a scholar, a journalist, and an author. There are other facts, other relationships to subject matter, other arrangements of the device. It is a burden to efface the evidence of my method in my scholarly writing so that I might write books to be understood by foreign scholars, to be accessible, to not demand mental realignment.

But I want to demand it.

In his work the journalist needs integrity, and courage.

I was riding on the Turksib. Everything dusty and hot, lizards peeping. Tall grass: here wormwood, there feather grass, and stiff prickly desert grass, tamarisk, lilacs not yet in bloom.

Out there, in the fall, salty rivers flow into the freshwater Balkhash, the freshwater lake with the salty inlets. Out there people ride cattle and horses just like we ride streetcars. Out there the Kirghiz borzois leap through the wormwood on unseen legs, resembling nothing so much as slender undulating cardboard cutout spines.

Goats wandering across the sands. Automobiles stuck in the salt flats for weeks on end. Camels pulling carts. Eagles soaring hundreds of feet overhead, ready to light on the telegraph poles, the only place to land in the desert.

Out there they're building the Turksib railroad. Hard work, necessary work.

Out there it's so hot the Kirghiz go dressed in felt boots, felt trousers, and felt caps. Where they're not called Kirghiz, they're called Kazakhs.

Building a railroad is hard work. There isn't much water. Bread has to be brought



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Observer

in. There has to be bread. Bread has to be stored somewhere. So many workers, all of them needing a roof over their heads.

But they built it anyway.

Good books come when we are forced to overcome our subject matter, when we are stalwart.

This is also known as inspiration.

This is how I wrote *A Sentimental Journey*.

Zoo, Or Letters Not About Love I wrote somewhat differently.

We had an anthem in OPOAYAZ.² A very long anthem, as we were rather prolix and no longer young.

One couplet went:

From a formalist point of view even enthusiasm
Is a convergence of devices

This is entirely possible.

Enthusiasm is dulled by the inertia of expertise, and in particular the literary inertia of enthusiasm.

So it is with books.

I had to write a book, a biography, something along the lines of “One Hundred Portraits of Russian Literary Figures.” Would that I might have been infatuated with it, that I might have

found some sort of convergence, that I might have contracted a love for it, the way a weakened organism contracts a disease.

The result was a badly written book.

I very much want to write prose now. I am waiting for convergences. I am waiting for invention. I am waiting for subject matter and inspiration.

There are, of course, other inert books for which I have contempt, ones made out of expertise and filler.

Such filler can deface even the best subject matter.

Individual instances grapple with the larger subject matter in Eisenstein’s all-too-significantly titled film, *The Old and the New*.³

To the dilettante who mutters that the film is flawed—“why don’t they show the cooperative?”—we note that the film is not a correlate, that it advances a theme, and that it is organized through the consciously selected and aestheticized material of the *syuzhet* art. *Syuzhet* devices are like a set of French curves never meant to be used for tracing a given curvature.

One must learn.

Comrades, I cannot recall the lengthy and insightful list of questions you asked

me. You can find a bibliography of my work somewhere, but I have no idea what my future holds.

Translated by Adam Siegel

The *Kak my pishem* questionnaire:

1. Preparatory period. Duration.
2. What kind of subject matter do you use most (autobiographical, literary, observations and notes)?
3. Do you generally use living persons as models for your characters?
4. What provides you with the initial impulse for a work (anecdotes, commission, images, etc.)?
5. When during the day do you work—in the morning, afternoon, or evening? How many hours a day at most?
6. Average productivity—pages per month.
7. What sorts of stimulants (*narkotiki*) do you use, and in what amounts?
8. Do you write with a pencil, pen, or typewriter? Do you sketch when you’re working? How heavily is your work revised by editors?
9. Do you work from an outline and does it change?
10. What do you find most difficult? Beginnings, middles, or endings?

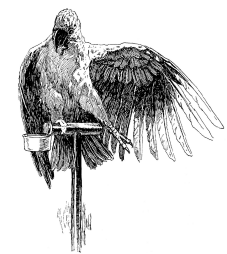
11. Which senses most often generate images? (visual, aural, tactile?)
12. Do you insist on some sort of rhythm to your prose?
13. Do you proof your work by reading it aloud (either to yourself or to others)?
14. How do you feel when you have completed a work?
15. Do you revise your work for new editions?
16. Are you affected by reviews?

Endnotes

1 Lev Yakubinsky (1892–1945): Russian linguist and formalist.

2 Obshchestvo izucheniya POeticheskogo YAZyka: Society for the Study of Poetic Language.

3 Eisenstein’s 1929 film, also known as *General’naia liniia* (*The General Line*), focused on a single female farm-worker to extol Soviet collectivization of agriculture. ■



Reading Asaf Schurr’s *Motti*

Todd Hasak-Lowy

Israel is not the easiest place to live. Indeed, this country confronts its highly diverse population with a similarly varied set of difficulties. A very partial list includes national conflict, ethnic tension, and religious strife, all three of which are often described as intractable. But this almost unimaginable difficulty presents certain advantages to writers, even or especially writers of fiction. The world, after all, finds difficulty fascinating. At home and abroad people want to understand the difficulty that is Israel, want someone to give it all a name, want to read the words of a writer equipped to tie it all up with a poetic flourish. Readers from Korea to Brazil are searching for someone capable of positioning a few well-drawn individuals against that wide canvas of historical, political, social, and religious overabundance (also known as “the Conflict”), thereby making this overabundance a bit more intelligible. This is how the novel, as a genre, compensates for its fictional status, how it manages to constitute a form of knowledge despite never having happened: it takes the political and the historical and translates them into the personal and the biographical so that the individual reader can finally understand.

The global desire to understand this bottomless difficulty is remarkable. There are seven million people in Israel (depending on how you count—even the straightforward matter of counting inhabitants is far from simple over there), which is roughly the same number of people who live in Bulgaria or Honduras. But how many of

their writers get translated into English? In the last twenty years over five hundred book-length works from Hebrew literature have been published in English.¹

But this worldwide interest comes with strings attached. People read Hebrew writers primarily to get *The Story*. The big one. The national one. Or the religious-cum-national one. People read for the epic story, the one with all those wars fought over and against that possibly mystical two-thousand-year-old backdrop. Israeli writers can be critical, their stories can be ironic, tragic even, so long as they include *The Story*.

In this regard the book before you disappoints, or, more accurately, disobeys. Take Asaf Schurr’s *Motti*, change the names of the main characters, switch around another fifty words scattered here and there, and delete, by my count, a single three-sentence stretch (describing a dream of all things), and this novel could be set in any of a thousand cities around the world. Unless I’m way, way off here (or unless you’re one of those readers who thinks absolutely everything is an allegory²), I’d say that this

1 This figure—which includes fiction, poetry, and books for children—comes from Nilli Cohen at the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature.

2 The influential Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has advanced such an approach to so-called “third-world” literature (an obviously problematic category, especially in the Israeli case). In “third-world texts,” according to him, “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.” Jameson’s widely read article is typically rejected in scholarly circles, but I think it’s fair to say this allegorical shadow looms over much reading of, in this

book, despite the language and country in which it was written, is not about Israel. It just isn’t. This in itself is noteworthy. The very absence of Israel in this Israeli novel does tell us something about contemporary Israeli culture,³ but contemplating the presence of this absence only takes us so far. To understand *Motti*, one must look elsewhere.

■

So what is *Motti* about? Plot summary won’t really explain it. There’s a man (*Motti*), a dog, a friend, an object of affection, an accident, and an extremely difficult (there’s that word again) decision. Even for a short novel, not that much really happens. As such, some readers will dismiss *Motti* for failing to tell a conventional story (if they didn’t already dismiss it for failing to tell *The Story*).

case, modern Hebrew fiction. See Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text*, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), pp. 65–88.

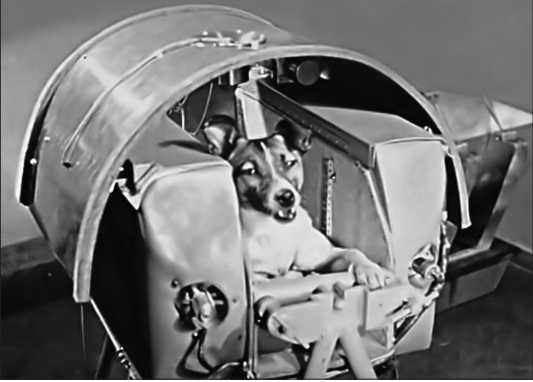
3 It should be noted that *Motti* received considerable attention upon its publication in Israel, including a glowing front-page review in the *Haaretz* book supplement (more or less the Israeli equivalent of the *New York Times Book Review* or the *Guardian*). The Israeli reading public’s (and/or its critical establishment’s) readiness to accept and even embrace *Motti* on its own unconventional terms says something about the expansive sense of what constitutes Israeli culture within Israel here in the early twenty-first century. Anglophone reading sensibilities, I’m guessing, are rather parochial by comparison, as I’d more confidently recommend *Motti* to a fan of David Foster Wallace than to one who prefers Amos Oz.

But this book most certainly should be understood as a novel, and a novel tapping into one of the genre’s central traditions. *Motti* is a novel riddled with self-consciousness. Asaf Schurr—or Asaf Schurr as implied author—is everywhere in this book, reflecting on the story being told, interrupting the story no longer being told, and drawing attention to the contrived nature of the project of novel writing as a whole.

This approach to the form, this refusal to let the story simply be, this impulse to draw back the curtain, is a tradition stretching back to what may well have been the very first novel, Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. Unfortunately, the gradual resurgence and apparent ubiquity of this gesture during the last half century—following a longer stretch that included nineteenth-century realism, during which period this narrative strategy receded—has lead many people to mistake it as a recent (and thus trivial or frivolous) trend. Nowadays the self-conscious novel is often identified, categorized, and then dismissed as “postmodernist” (or, even worse, as “po-mo”), and that’s that. Such thinking seems to believe that the “serious novel” and the “postmodernist novel” occupy mutually exclusive categories.

But identifying a strategy at work in a novel is not the same as explaining the meaning of either. In other words, not all self-conscious novels are created equal. Indeed, the technique is remarkably flexible, which explains, in part, why novelists have returned to it again and again throughout the genre’s four-hundred-year history.

MOTTI
a novel by
ASAF
SCHURR



Motti is most certainly—to quote Robert Alter’s description of the self-conscious novel in general—“the kind of novel that expresses its seriousness through playfulness.”⁴ Though even this may be overstating Schurr’s interest in anything smacking of the antic. In contemporary American fiction, the appearance of the writer in his or her own plot, or even the mention of a third-person narrator’s self-awareness within a narrative, often operates as a distancing gesture. Through this move the writer flaunts a certain cleverness, dem-

⁴ Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), ix.

onstrates his or her mastery of the genre’s many incarnations, or simply compels the reader to recognize the underlying absurdity of fully caring about this illusion we call fiction.

By contrast, Asaf Schurr employs this strategy with almost deadpan candor. As I read it, this novel’s many self-conscious asides seem the product of pure, unadorned honesty and sensitive, lucid contemplation. Put differently, this novel is in large part an oddly humble reflection on writing, on imagining a world, and on trying to make sense of our real world through an extended exercise that relies on nothing but words. Schurr’s “playfulness” is perfectly sincere and thus raises the emotional stakes of the narrative. He might spoil the illusion that is his story, but this is a small price to pay for the multi-dimensional clarity and unlikely wonder this novel offers again and again. As he says at the end of his preface about the book to come, “everything is on the table and in midair the table stands.”

I suspect that this tendency toward self-consciousness reflects one of Schurr’s central motivations as a writer, but Schurr and/or his narrator are hardly the main characters in his novel. *Motti* revolves, as its titles suggests, around the eponymous protagonist. Schurr’s *Motti* is quite nearly a loner. He has a dog, a single friend, and an infatuation with his neighbor, Ariella. Beyond this we know virtually nothing about his external reality. No mention of family, no mention of his relationship to the city or country in which he lives. From a slightly different and uncharitably critical

perspective, we could even say that *Motti* is an incomplete character.

But *Motti* comes to life for the reader through our access to his inner world, where we find him endlessly preoccupied with his possible futures. In particular, *Motti* thinks about his future life with Ariella, about the passion they’ll share, the difficulties they’ll encounter, the family they’ll make, and the inescapable end patiently waiting for both of them. Much of the events in *Motti* never happen at all, not even within the novel’s imaginary world. Instead, we learn about *Motti*’s life by learning about all the lives he imagines himself living in the future. *Motti* is hardly a hero in any conventional sense, but the reader identifies with him nevertheless, since we all live so much of our lives in the private ether of our endless speculations.

By casting as his protagonist a master of anticipation, speculation, and fantasy, by allowing possible futures to dwarf the immediate present again and again, Schurr reveals what it means to be a novelist in the first place. Or, from a perhaps more telling perspective, allows us to see the extent to which all of us are novelists of a sort: preoccupied with crafting our plot, overwhelmed by the burden of choosing from among the endless possibilities, and hard-pressed to come up with anything even approaching a satisfying ending. By portraying his protagonist in this way, Schurr both motivates his own asides and vindicates the frankness informing this playfulness as well.

I detect a certain inescapable melancholy at the center of all this, a feeling somewhere

between despair and sorrow stemming from a shared failure to experience our external worlds as richly as we experience all the private events in our minds that never quite happen. The external real, it seems, will always pale next to the internal unreal. The main consolation, at least in Schurr’s case, seems to be expressing this last sentiment so poignantly. *Motti*’s ultimate achievement (and the reason I hoped to translate it) is its language, which is at once precise and daring, sober and inventive, self-deprecating and ambitious. In a book so small that covers so much novelistic territory that has apparently already been covered (and dismissed as not just covered, but as exhausted, too), the pitfalls are numerous. But by finding just the right word time after time, by establishing and maintaining a singular tone located somewhere between amazement and defeat, Schurr justifies his refusal to follow so many often-imposing novelistic rules.

None of this is to say, of course, that all Hebrew novels, let alone all novels, should be like *Motti*. We should continue to read Hebrew novels to get The Story, we should read Yehoshua, Grossman, and Castel-Bloom if we really want to understand what life is truly like over there. But we should make room for something else, too, something utterly different, something concerned with a rich inner world somehow prior to the great, messy world outside. That a person could maintain the sensitive faculties necessary for detecting and then transcribing the elusive and fragile language of this private territory, all while living in that overwhelming and difficult reality called Israel, is all the more reason to read *Motti* with a serious and generous eye. ■

Reading Orly Castel-Bloom’s *Dolly City*

Karen Grumberg

Dolly City is an astonishing novel. It leaves some readers enthralled, some stunned, and others intimidated. Orly Castel-Bloom told me that, in the months following the Israeli publication of the novel in 1992, people who recognized her as its author were actually afraid of her. Castel-Bloom’s writing—confrontational, fearless, and disconcertingly funny—often evokes such visceral reactions. Now, nearly two decades after its appearance first shocked the Israeli reading public, the novel remains as provocative and powerful as it was then.

Born in Tel Aviv in 1960 to French-speaking Egyptian Jewish parents, Orly Castel-Bloom spoke only French during the first years of her life. She studied film at Tel Aviv University for one year and theater for another at the Beit Zvi theater school. She started publishing in 1987. By the time *Dolly City* appeared, Israeli critics had already been debating the merits of Castel-Bloom’s writing for five years. Her first collection of short stories, *Lo Rahok mi-Merkaz ha-Ir* (Not Far from the Center of Town, 1987) evoked

much critical controversy, particularly regarding its unconventional language and style. Her second collection, *Sviva Oynet* (Hostile Surroundings, 1989), and her first novel, *Heykhan Ani Nimtset* (Where Am I, 1990), confirmed the originality of her voice, but some critics still questioned the “literary” value of Castel-Bloom’s writing: the unadorned, conversational Hebrew of her stories, peppered with English expressions, was labeled flat and therefore inadequate for literary expression. Her unsentimental and sometimes absurd characters were considered devoid of humanity and incapable of evoking the reader’s sympathy or interest.

The publication of *Dolly City*, while it did not dispel entirely the questions regarding Castel-Bloom’s literary merit, established her as a prominent figure, impossible and irresponsible to ignore. Gershon Shaked, an influential literary critic, deemed that Castel-Bloom had “done nothing less than change the face of Hebrew fiction.” The esteemed author S. Yizhar praised her writing, and the

prominent critic Dan Miron declared her to be one of the most interesting writers of her generation. *Dolly City* was reviewed in all the major Israeli newspapers. Adi Ophir, in his review for *Ma’ariv*, recommended that readers read the novel three or four times: first, “to absorb the shock”; second, to understand how and why *Dolly* does what she does; third, to connect *Dolly*’s world to one’s own; and fourth, to get to the bottom of Castel-Bloom’s idiosyncratic use of language. In a review in *Ha’aretz*, Ariel Hirschfeld declared that *Dolly City* constitutes a new Israeli-Hebrew dictionary, challenging all accepted definitions and values. Indeed, *Dolly City* helped establish Castel-Bloom as one of the most important living writers of Hebrew, compared to a diverse array of authors from Dostoyevsky to Kafka. Though not everyone agrees on the merits of Castel-Bloom’s writing, it leaves no one indifferent.

By now, four novels and four short story collections later, the centrality of *Dolly City* in the world of Israeli letters

is undisputed. This is somewhat incongruous, given that the novel is itself an attack on all forms of authority, political, social, or linguistic. Zionist ideology, represented here by *Dolly*’s acquaintance Gordon (a parody of the Russian Zionist A. D. Gordon), is tolerated but not taken seriously. The Holocaust, the memory and memorializing of which is a primary component of collective identity in Israel, is presented in *Dolly City* as a crime warranting bloody vengeance, and also as a means of exclusion of non-European Jews like *Dolly* from the nation’s consciousness. The novel’s critical confrontation with Israeli society leads it to raise questions about gender as well. *Dolly*’s obsessive and fiercely independent motherhood is complicated by the fact that her son’s paternity is unknown and by the mystery of her own father’s death. In Israeli literature, which historically has been preoccupied with fathers and sons, the dearth of literal and metaphoric fathers in this novel makes a significant statement. The language, too, contributes to the novel’s iconoclasm.

Some readers dislike what has been called Castel-Bloom's "thin Hebrew," which they see as stripped of the richness and depth of the "literary" Hebrew considered the epitome of Zionist ideals. A close reading of her stories and novels, however, shows that there is more to Castel-Bloom's use of language than meets the eye: it is informed by biblical allusions, clever word games, and an awareness of the ideological dynamics of language. Moreover, her Hebrew resonates with readers because it acknowledges and incorporates its own perpetual development through television, slang, new technologies, and the languages of immigrants. Not surprisingly, Castel-Bloom's "thin Hebrew" has spawned more than a few admiring imitations.

One need not know Hebrew to get a sense of how revolutionary *Dolly City* is. The prose pummels the reader. Dolly, by turns apathetic and enraged, is articulate and perhaps overly perceptive. "Madness is a predator," she observes. "Its food is the soul. It takes over the soul as rapidly as our forces occupied Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip in 1967. [...] And if a state like the State of Israel can't control the Arabs in the territories, how can anybody expect me, a private individual, to control the occupied territories inside myself?" (95-96). She explicitly relates the chaos within her to the political mayhem that plagues her environment. Violence reigns in her city. And a strange city it is: dystopic, fantastic, phantasmagoric, nightmarish—Dolly City is unlike any other setting in Hebrew literature. At once Tel Aviv and every other city in the world, Dolly City recalls the alienating metropolis that is by now a familiar setting of modernist writing, at the same time adding terrifying new features to this landscape. It is a city whose inhabitants are not only lonely, anxious, and unfriendly, but also deeply depressed and murderously violent. Dolly's own aggressive tenden-

cies, which drive her to surreptitiously inject unwitting passersby with morphine, murder a host of German orphans, castrate her psychiatrist, and more, reflect the violence of her city and affect every aspect of her relationships with others, from strangers on the street to her own son. No recognizable ethical or moral code governs Dolly City, and nothing is too sacred to escape the blade of Castel-Bloom's pen. This is a world where everything has lost its significance—Dachau in Dolly City is just a word on an old plank—so the reader must question everything.

The violence that is so prevalent in *Dolly City* is related to two particular overlapping concerns that Castel-Bloom addresses: motherhood and the nation. The experience of motherhood as expressed in *Dolly City* is at once universally human and specifically Israeli, as attested by two of the most striking images in the novel: Dolly's son glued to her back and the map of the Land of Israel she carves on his back. The first image speaks to phenomena that cross linguistic, geographic, and cultural boundaries: it magnifies the fears and concerns that are part of every mother's experience, and casts the son as a burden the mother must bear. The latter image, an explicitly political, fleshly

cartography, addresses the idiosyncrasies of Israeli motherhood, subject to the demands of national identity and, more concretely, of the military, in which every secular Israeli Jew—male and female—is required

to serve at age eighteen. Dolly's *raison d'être* is to protect her son: "I wanted to be in command on all fronts, and what's wrong with that?" she demands. "I'm not entitled to demand sovereignty over the defense of my son?" (52). The vocabulary of war is not coincidental in this context. Dolly's son's eventual conscription to the Academy of Brutal Seamanship denies her "sovereignty" over his "defense," even as it liberates him from

his obsessively protective mother. The mother/son interaction is one of many in the novel marked by aggression, paranoia, and impatience. Perhaps *Dolly City's* most chilling accomplishment is laying bare a society in which not only politics and war but also interpersonal relations are exceedingly violent. A mother cuts into her son's flesh; suicides regularly plummet earthward from skyscrapers; vehicles collide into each other relentlessly; Jews crucify non-Jews in the street. Subject to Dolly's keen gaze, these violent social relations erupt on the surface of Dolly City

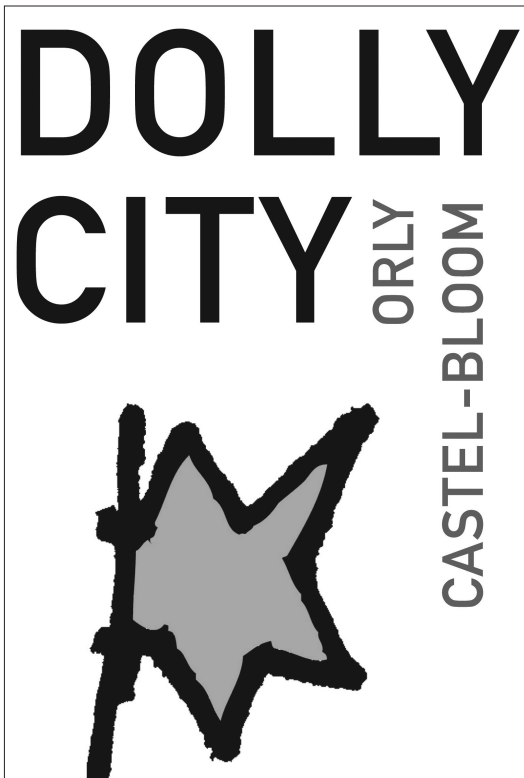
itself in the form of cancerous tumors. Dolly's response—a frenzied attempt to cure the city, followed by indifference—parallels the broader postmodern concern at the heart of the novel: contemporary society is sick and there is no cure in sight.

It would be a mistake, however, to allow this bleak assessment to overshadow other qualities of the novel. Perhaps one of the most effective resources in Castel-Bloom's critical arsenal is her sometimes macabre sense of humor. Despite the seriousness of the issues it confronts, *Dolly City* is a very funny book. Like the novel and two collections of short stories by Castel-Bloom that preceded it, *Dolly City* uses black humor, satire, parody, and sarcasm to express anxiety and to criticize social norms. Castel-Bloom, like her contemporary Etgar Keret, finds new discursive possibilities in humor: the language of humor allows her to make the banal original, and the horrible somewhat palatable.

Dalkey Archive's new edition of *Dolly City* at last makes this important novel available to English-language readers worldwide, filling a lacuna in the library of Israeli works available in translation. As we move into the second decade of the millennium, the relevance and acuity of *Dolly City* become increasingly apparent, not only for Israel, but for contemporary society as a whole.

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Unheard Music

Craig Dworkin

In 2009, poet and critic Craig Dworkin assembled a catalog of works of silent music to accompany a film about Czech-born artist Pavel Büchler, who claims that his work “makes nothing happen,” and is himself the author of several musical compositions that don’t include music. Below are some notable entries from Dworkin’s project, focusing on the history of such organized “moments of silence.”

ALPHONSE ALLAIS: *Marche funèbre pour les funérailles d’un grand homme sourd* (1897). The great granddaddy of silent pieces. Allais—something of a cross between Erik Satie, Raymond Roussel, and Joel Stein—is probably best known for pioneering fiction structured on holonyms, but he was also a composer. Sort of. The first movement of his *Funerary March* is simply nine empty measures [see the *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (Paris: Ollendorf, 1897)]. No recording, to date, but a scaled-down version for string quartet was premiered at the FestivalManké (Nice) in 2000, under the direction of Ismaël Robert (who perhaps took a cue from Henry Flynt’s 1961 Fluxus score, which reads: “The instructions for this piece are on the

other side of this sheet.” The other side, of course, is blank).

ERVÍN SCHULHOFF: “In Futurum” (1919). Manic, anxious silence. The influence of early jazz and dada cabaret songs is palpable in the third movement of the Czech modernist’s *Five Picturesques* for piano. Though entirely silent, the score bristles with notation: from long, angst-filled tacets to jittery quintuplet rests. The counting is tricky, and with any but the most accomplished pianist it can detract from the work’s potential for emotional outpouring; according to the composer’s headnote, the piece is to be played with as much heartfelt expression as desired—always, all the way through [“tutto il canzone con espressione e sentimento ad libitum, sempre, sin al fine!”].

JOHN CAGE: *Silent Prayer* (1949, unrealized). Hints at the neodada origins of *4’33”* and its latent corporate critique. Cage’s plan was to “compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be three or four and a half minutes in length—those being the standard lengths of ‘canned music.’” Cage, that still unravished *mariée*, would have *mise à nu* canned

music and translated it into a Duchampian “hasard en conserve [canned chance].” Always seemed to be playing in the elevator in my old building.

JOHN CAGE: *4’33”* (1952). The classic. In three movements. Premiered by David Tudor on piano, although it sounds pretty good even in transcriptions. Not to be confused with either the showier *0’00”* (1962), “to be performed in any way by anyone” “in a situation provided with maximum amplification,” or the watered-down *Tacet* (1960), which “may be performed by (any) instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time.” Recommended recordings: Frank Zappa’s acoustic rendition on *A Chance Operation* [Koch 7238], or Lassigue Bendthaus’s electronic version on *Render* [KK Records 115]; the definitive recording of *0’00”* is by Peter Pfister [hat ART CD 2-6070]. For

real range and lots of artistic license (well, lots of license at least), check out Roel Meelkop’s compilation of nine different performances on *45:18* [Korm Plastics 3005].

YVES KLEIN. *Symphonie Monoton-Silence* (1957). Meant to provide a sonic equivalent of his monochrome paintings, the second movement of Klein’s *Symphony* consists of twenty minutes of silence—just enough time to give the audience a chance to shake the sense of ringing from their ears: the first twenty minutes consist of a sustained D major chord. The work was originally conceived for full Wagnerian orchestra, but performed in 1960 at the Galerie Internationale d’Art Contemporain by a small chamber orchestra who memorized the score on short notice (though perhaps after peeking at the scrupulously notated version prepared by Pierre Henry a few years earlier). There is also a later, atmospheric version scored for mixed choir, strings, flutes, oboes, and horns. Not to be confused with the similar-sounding conclusion to Guy Debord’s film *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952), which stretches aggressively on for a full four minutes longer. Though he denies any influence, Klein, not coincidentally, was present at the premiere screening. There are rumors that Klein also issued a completely silent recording, in 1959, of a *Concert de vide* [Concert of Vacuum] (not to be confused with Sir Malcolm Arnold’s roughly contemporaneous concert of vacuum *cleaners* [op. 57, 1956]).

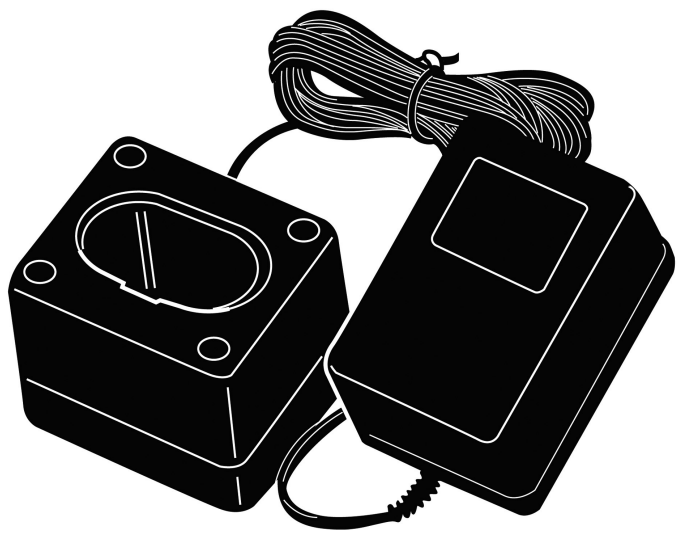
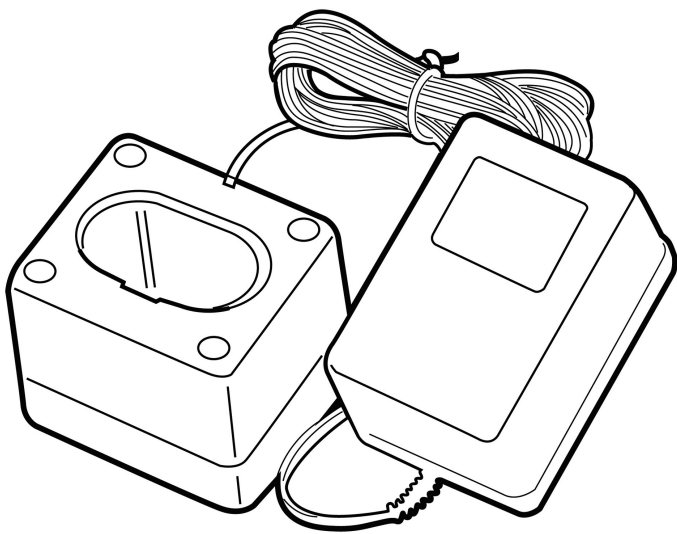
JOSEPH BEUYS: *Grammophon aus knochen* [Record Player of Bone] (1958). A higher-fidelity version of Beuys’s *tonband in filzstapel* [audio tape in stacked felt], the *stummes grammophon* [mute phonograph] displays a covered phonograph record, perhaps with a recording of Beuys’ felt-wrapped piano (felt, of course, is a material known for damping sound, as it’s used around the hammers *inside* a piano). Though we’ll never know, because the swing arm and needle have been replaced by a bone, bluntly inverting Rainer Rilke’s hallucinatory dream of playing the jagged coronal suture of the skull with a phonograph cartridge.

GEORGE MACIUNAS: *Homage to Richard Maxfield* (1962). A student in John Cage’s composition course at The New School For Social Research (and the first professor of electronic music in America when he took over the class as Cage’s successor), Richard Maxfield must have heard the story Cage liked to tell about his own student days: “One day when I was studying with Schoenberg, he pointed out the eraser on his pencil and said, ‘This end is more important than the other.’” Maxfield, who seems to have taken good notes, was best known for using the erase button on the tape machine as a compositional tool.

Maciunas’s *Homage*, accordingly, instructs the musician to follow a performance of one of Maxfield’s compositions by flippantly flipping the erase switch while rewinding Maxfield’s master tape. There is no record that Maciunas’ piece was ever performed, although he did provide a “chicken variation on the same theme” (“just rewind the previously played tape of R. Maxfield without erasing”), thus exponentially increasing the likelihood of a performance and opening the possibility for an encore. Maciunas’s self-canceling composition became a kind of *tombeau* in 1969 when Maxfield performed a fatal defenestration.

JEAN-LUC GODARD: *Bande à part* (1964). In a moment of boredom, unable to think of how to entertain themselves and too agitated to indulge in a true French *ennui*, Franz (Sami Frey) proposes that the *bande* take “un minute de silence.” Godard obliges by cutting the soundtrack [*la bande sonore mise à part*]. “Une vraie minute de silence, ça dure une éternité” [a real minute of silence can last forever], Franz notes, but Godard’s lasts only 33 seconds. Accessible, funny, narrative reprise of the acerbic, mean-spirited, abstract silence from the final twenty-four minutes of Guy Debord’s *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952). The Situationists would denounce Godard’s version as a “tardily plagiarized and useless [. . .] pretentious false novelty,” but they were never known for their sense of humor, and it’s really pretty funny. A similar and even shorter composition, presumably by Michel Legrand, accompanies the tabletop finger performance of the film’s iconic dance scene, in which Odile and Arthur negotiate the steps they’ll soon dance to Legrand’s hipster swing number “Le Madison.” In mono.

KEN FRIEDMAN: *Zen for Record* (1966). Blank phonograph record in homage to Nam June Paik’s *Zen for Film* (1964): a 16mm film consisting only of clear leader (often claimed to be an hour long, the screening I saw was advertised as 10 minutes, though it clocked in at closer to 8). Not to be confused with Christine Kozlov’s *Transparent Film #2* (16mm) from 1967, or Madison Brookshire’s 2007 sound film *Five Times*, an audio update of Ernie Gehr’s 1970 *History* (“five rolls of film, unedited, spliced one after the other,” as Brookshire describes his version: “The only images and sounds come from the light that reaches the film when it is loaded into and taken out of the camera”). The incidental soundtrack to Paik’s film is a lot louder than Friedman’s disc. If you get a chance, sit near the projectionist; even after only eight minutes you’ll never forget the nervous clack and twitter of the shutter, blinking like a blinded Cyclops in the noonday sun . . .



STEVE REICH: *Pendulum Music* (1968). Like your high-school physics lab, but without fudging the results. Several microphones (no input) are suspended from a cable over a loudspeaker, with amplifiers arranged so that they generate feedback only when the microphone and loudspeaker are in alignment. The mikes are set swinging along their pendular paths, honking briefly each time they pass the speaker and coming naturally to a droning stop. Premiered in Boulder by Reich and William Wiley, the performers for the 1969 Whitney concert were Reich, Bruce Nauman, Michael Snow, Richard Sierra, and James Tenney. Two good recordings from the Ensemble Avantgarde (two versions) [Wergo 6630-2] and Sonic Youth on *Good-bye 20th Century* [SYR4].

TIMM ULRICHS: *Schleifpapier-Schallplatten* (1968). A series of monaural discs made from thirteen grades of commercial sandpaper in a nuanced mood-music suite orchestration of V. A. Wölfli's industrial noise composition "Pferd/Horse/Elastic," named after the Pferd company's steel-cutting discs. Wölfli apparently just slapped a hundred of the construction-duty grinding wheels inside record covers (safe to 5100rpm if you can crank the player that fast, but try only at your system's risk). Putting the dust in industrial, the anarcho-duchampians Dust Breeders (Michael Henritzi with Thierry Dellès and Yves Botz, aka Mickey H and Youri Potlatch), issued their first single, "Sandpaper Mantra" (1989), as a 7" piece of sandpaper guaranteed to *elevage de poussière* when run under a

diamond stylus. Their 1995 dance classic "I'm Psycho 4 Yur Love" then swapped the materials, so that vinyl was housed inside a sandpaper record sleeve, making the psychedelic noise even noisier every time the disc is removed [rrr062/EPP02]. An anonymous release in 1980 had used the same strategy on a microhouse track, issuing a blank grooved disc inside a sandpaper sleeve of Adolor/Norton P80 G21 abrasive sheets; starting as minimal techno, the track becomes increasingly glitchy with repeated play (variable speed). These discs are all introverted and considerate versions of various antisocial packaging for albums from The Durutti Column (1979: *The Return of the Durutti Column* [FACT14]); Illusion of Safety (1999: *Illusion of Safety* [Mort Aux Vaches 2]); and Feederz (1984: *Ever Feel Like Killing Your Boss?* [Steal 1]). Housed in sandpaper covers with the abrasive surface on the outside, in homage to Verner Per mild's design for Guy Debord and Asger Jorn's book *Mémoires*, they deface the albums next to them with every reshelving.

ROBERT WATTS: non-vinyl records (1969–72). Starting with the *String Record*, Watts began manufacturing records with various groove depths and material properties, but with no sound reproduction, to be played at a number of speeds. As Watts explains:

I began experiments with the manufacture of a series of records in different materials such as metals, plastics, wood, clay and latex. Most of these were made on a machine lathe at Rutgers

University, and I thought of them as being sound portraits of this machine. At 20 rpm, with lots of ripping scratches breaking the drone, the *String Record* sounds like the cabin noise of a jumbo jet as its aluminum skin suffers a catastrophic structural failure.

BRACO DIMITRIJEVIĆ: *Njegove Dovke Glas* (His Pencil's Voice, 1973). Pre-post-historical work from the Sarajevo-born conceptualist, who has written: "I want a style as neutral as possible, a kind of universal writing." In this case, the neutral style takes the form of a stylus, the carbon of the diamond transformed into a softened graphite: the universal phonography here was done with a sharpened pencil on a piece of white cardboard, creating a unique variable-speed phonograph record (16, 33, 45, or 78 rpm). I've never heard this one (well, you know what I mean), but apparently the album was exhibited in Zagreb and Chicago in the '70s. Whereof one cannot speak . . .

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY: *Record Without a Cover* (1985). Issued without a sleeve or cover, and with the stern instruction "do not store in a protective package," one side of the 12" 33 rpm disc contains music made by "manipulated records on multiple turntables recorded 4-track at Plugg New York City March 1985" (as the inscription on the verso of the grooved side reads). Though museums and collectors probably take pretty good care of their copies, the inevitable damage to the unprotected vinyl

was intended to increase the nonmusical noises over time, in a collaborative duet between chance inscription and the carefully recorded turntable improvisations. On initial release, the former member of that duo is entirely silent. While the side engraved with written text remains silent, its legibility decreases in an inverse ratio to the audibility of the grooved side's aleatory duet [Recycled Records/reissued by Locus Solus in 1999]. In contrast, Marclay's sophomore release, *Record Without a Groove* (1987) was issued in a swank suede protective package. In mint condition it reportedly sounds a lot like a Coil B-side. Edition of 50 [Ecart Editions].

COIL: "Absolute Elsewhere" (1984 *et seq.*). Reichian music (though that's Wilhelm, not Steve), Coil's EP is the sonic equivalent to the architecture of an orgone box: a lot of attitude and BS with nothing inside. In this case, BS stands for B side: the verso of the 12" *The Soundtrack to the Program HOW TO DESTROY ANGELS: Ritual Music for the Accumulation of Male Sexual Energy* (a long way of saying what T. Rex summed up with "bang a gong; get it on"). Unlike the gong-show A side, "Absolute Elsewhere" manifests itself — depending on the particular pressing — as a track of sheer noise, a constant quarter-hour tone, a series of lock-groove test tones, or a smooth grooveless slab (that is, a record with no "coil" at all). The CD version (1999) consists of one second of silence [L.A.Y.L.A.H. Antirecords LAY05]. ■



On Noise and Racket

Arthur Schopenhauer

In 1937, a 31-year-old Samuel Beckett, convalescing from a spell of "gastroic flu (so called)" and his first completed novel, *Murphy*, wrote to Thomas McGreevy: "When I was ill I found the only thing I could read was Schopenhauer. Everything else I tried only confirmed the feeling of sickness. It was very curious. Like suddenly a window opened on a fug. I always knew he was one of the ones that mattered most to me . . . a philosopher that can be read like a poet, with an entire indifference to the a priori forms of verification. Although it is a fact that judged by them his generalisation shows fewer cracks than most generalisations." *The following mass of cracked and flagrant generalization is excerpted from the great post-Kantian pessimist's 1851 collection of essays, Parerga and Paralipomena—two volumes*

much concerned with human suffering and its sources, among them: women, bad poetry, and noise.

Kant has composed a disquisition on the Living Powers: I, for my part, would like to write a dirge and a threnody for them; because their exceedingly frequent employment in knocking, hammering, and clattering has been, throughout my life, a daily source of anguish. Admittedly, there exist an enormous number of people who merely laugh at such things, for they are impervious to noise: these are precisely the same people who are likewise impervious to reason, to ideas, to poetry and works of art, in short, to intellectual impressions of every kind: and this is owing to the density and sturdy texture of their cerebral matter. In contrast, I find lamentations over the

pain occasioned by noise in thinking men in the biographies or miscellaneous accounts of personal remarks of almost all the great writers—for example, those of Kant, Goethe, and Jean Paul; indeed, if any of them omits to mention it, this is purely because the context fails to provide an opportunity. For my part, I construe the matter thus: as the value of an enormous diamond smashed to pieces is reduced to that of so many slivers; or as an army, if it scatters—that is to say, dissolves into tiny bands—is rendered impotent; so a great mind is likewise reduced to the commonplace as soon as it has been interrupted, violated, scattered, diverted; for its superiority is conditional on all of its strength—like a convex mirror all its beams—being focused on a *single* point and object, and precisely in this is it thwarted by clamorous interruption.

Thus all eminent spirits have been highly averse to every sort of disturbance, disruption, and diversion, but particularly to violent noise; whereas the rabble finds little objectionable in the same. As a matter of fact, the wisest and wittiest of all the nations of Europe—England—has made its eleventh commandment *Never interrupt*. Racket, however, is the most impertinent of all interruptions, for it disrupts our very thoughts, indeed, shatters them. But where there is nothing to interrupt, this shattering will not, of course, be especially felt. — Now and again I will find myself afflicted and perturbed by a persistent middling noise for quite some time before becoming consciously aware of it, in as much as I simply feel it as a continual impediment to thought, a stumbling block, until at last I realize what it is.

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But now—pressing onward from *genus* to *species*—I must denounce as the most unjustifiable and nefarious of rackets that truly infernal snapping of whips in the echoing streets and alleys of our towns. These abrupt, piercing, brain-shredding, thought-murdering cracks must strike anyone with anything even remotely resembling a thought in his head as unbearably painful; every such

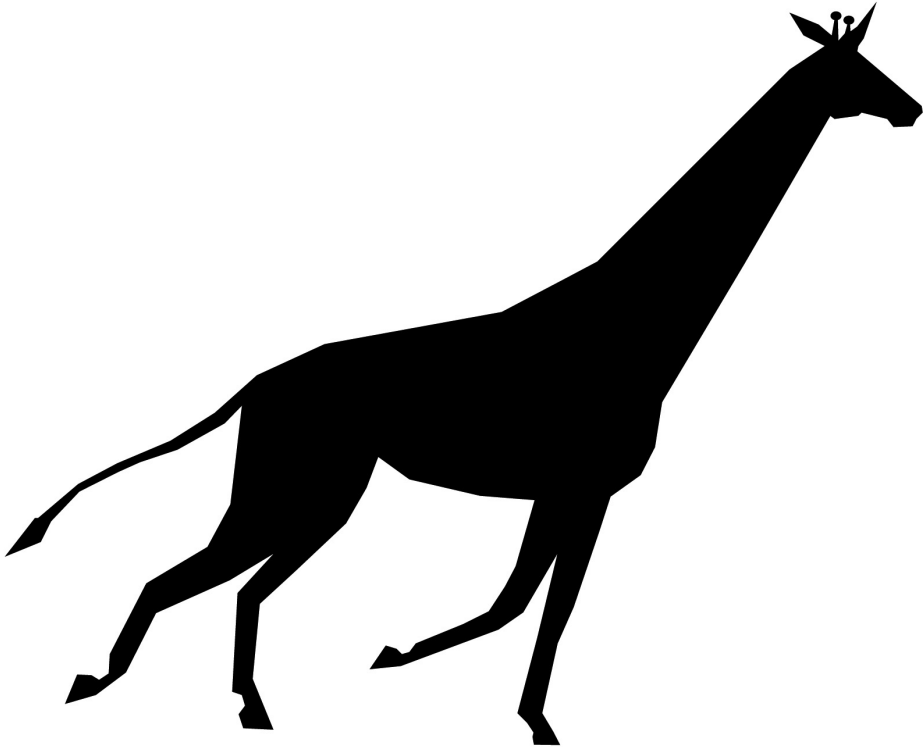
crack must disrupt hundreds of his mental operations, be they ever so degraded; they sweep, however, through the cogitations of a thinker as painfully and perniciously as an executioner's sword between a head and trunk. And now, add to all this that the accursed cracking of whips is not merely unnecessary, but worse, completely counterproductive. That is to say, its imagined psychologi-

cal effect on the horse is entirely blunted and comes to nothing, for thanks to the incessant abuse of the whip, the animals have become wholly inured to it: they invariably fail to quicken their pace; as one sees particularly when drivers with empty hacks go trawling for customers, constantly cracking and clattering, though dragging along with the slowest of steps: the slightest touch of the whip would be more effective. The matter at hand must therefore constitute precisely an impudent mockery of those that work with their heads on the part of the poor and laboring portions of society. That such an infamy is tolerated in our cities is indeed a gross injustice and barbarity; and all the more so, as it would be rather easy to abolish by means of a police ordinance requiring knots to be tied at the end of every whipcord. It cannot hurt to call the proletariat's attention to the mental labor of the superior classes: for when faced with all such mental labor they are seized by an ungovernable fear. But that a wretch driving a single nag or a carhorse through the narrow alleys of a city, incessantly cracking a fathom-long whip with all his might, does not immediately merit five passionate strokes of the rod—of this, all the philanthropists in the world, all the societies convened for the abolition of corporal punishment, no matter how sound their reasons, will

never persuade me. What, with all of this general solicitousness for the body and its needs, should the thinking mind be the only thing that we fail to afford the slightest consideration and protection, never mind respect? — We can only hope that in this too the more intelligent and sensitive nations will take the lead, and that the Germans will be led by their example. Meanwhile, *Thomas Hood* has remarked of the latter: *For a musical people, they are the most noisy I ever met with.*

Now—what of the literature treating the subjects touched on in this chapter? I have only *a single* work to recommend (though a lovely one)—namely, a poetic epistle in *terza-rima* by the renowned painter *Bronzino*, entitled *De romori, a Messer Luca Martini*: here the torment visited upon one by the manifold dins of an Italian city are elaborately and very wittily delineated, in a tragi-comic fashion. One will find this epistle on page 258 of the second volume of the *Opere burleschi del berni, Aretino ed altri*, ostensibly published in Utrecht in 1771. ■

Translated by Aaron Kerner



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100 Good Reasons to Kill Myself Right Now

Roland Topor

- | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1) Best way to make sure I'm not dead already. | 31) I'll become a citizen of the world. | 57) Instead of tearing my gray hairs out one by one, might as well tear my head off all at once. | 82) To see if paralytics will be healed on my tomb. |
| 2) It'll throw off the last census. | 32) Euthanasia wasn't made for dogs. | 58) With a revolver: to be noisy after 10 P.M. | 83) So the twentieth century will finally contain an important event. |
| 3) They're waiting on me down below to start the party. | 33) I'll have the last word. | 59) With gas: to savor the charms of that last cigarette. | 84) To feast on the exquisite blood of young women, once I'm a vampire. |
| 4) They shoot horses, don't they? | 34) 67% of French people support the death penalty. | 60) By hanging: to turn an ordinary rope into a delightful good-luck charm. | 85) Because I've always wanted to speak a dead tongue. |
| 5) I'll rise in the esteem of my peers. | 35) 'Cause it's a good way to quit smoking. | 61) Under a train: to extend other people's vacations. | 86) So I can, quite strikingly, inform everyone of my position on suicide. |
| 6) I'll no longer dread the millennium. | 36) To simplify my duality: I'll see things more clearly with only one of me left. | 62) With barbiturates: Think I'll sleep in tomorrow morning. | 87) Because Paris just isn't what it used to be. |
| 7) Just like Werther! They won't call me ill-read anymore. | 37) A deliverance less laborious than a delivery. | 63) By electrocution: to shake things up a little. | 88) Because Groucho Marx is dead. |
| 8) I'd make a fool of my cancer. | 38) There's nothing left to do. | 64) By defenestration: to escape my fear of elevators. | 89) Because I've read all the adventures of Sherlock Holmes. |
| 9) I'd make a liar of my horoscope. | 39) I don't want to aggravate my lack of social security. | 65) I've heard death is an easy lay. I'm gonna have me some good times. | 90) Because weather forecasts let me down. |
| 10) To be my therapist's ruin. | 40) To kill a Jew, like everyone else has. | 66) If I put my subscriptions on hold, I won't miss a thing. | 91) So others will follow my example. |
| 11) To get out of voting. | 41) To join the silent majority. The real one. | 67) To be good to (tiny) animals. | 92) To start a revolution. |
| 12) An infallible cure for baldness. | 42) To leave behind a widow simply bursting with youth. | 68) To die the same year as Elvis. | 93) To prove my skill, if I don't miss. |
| 13) To make a fresh start! | 43) I can't go on living in fear that my deodorant will wear off. | 69) To skip out on taxes. | 94) For a change of friends. |
| 14) Death ennobles: knighthood at last! | 44) To dodge the draft. | 70) To skip out on rent. | 95) For a change of scene. |
| 15) I'd feel less alone. | 45) To preserve the mystery surrounding me. | 71) To stop snoring. | 96) To be above the law. |
| 16) I'd be fêted next All Saints' Day. | 46) To prove the neutron bomb can't hurt me. | 72) To come back in the wee hours and tug on my enemies' feet. | 97) Because a well-done suicide is worth more than an average lay. |
| 17) The cost of living is on the rise, but death remains affordable. | 47) To lose weight without a diet, or even lifting a finger! | 73) To keep from ripping myself off as I get older, like de Chirico. | 98) So I won't die at a hospital. |
| 18) Good way to find your roots. | 48) I insist on complying with the federal plan for staggered vacations. | 74) Because I'm an endangered species and no one is protecting me. | 99) So my blood will make a nice stain on a canvas. |
| 19) Finally, a martial arts move I can manage. | 49) I'm trying to spare someone else the unfortunate consequences of an assassination. | 75) Because I've prepared a choice phrase for the final moment, and if I wait too long I'll forget it. | 100) Because I've got 1,000 good reasons to hate myself. ■ |
| 20) To be Green and fertilize the lawn. | 50) To save energy, coffee, and sugar. | 76) To sever my umbilical cord once and for all. | |
| 21) To mark the day with a white stone. | 51) So I won't be ashamed to look in the mirror anymore. | 77) To be the founder of a new style: Dead Art. | |
| 22) Others could put my organs to better use. | 52) What if I'm immortal? Might as well find out as soon as possible. | 78) To watch the movie of my life at a very exclusive screening. | |
| 23) To make way for youth. | 53) One less mouth to feed. | 79) To see if there are any virgins left on the other side. | |
| 24) At last, a starring role! | 54) To prove to EVERYONE that I'm no coward. | 80) So they'll deck me out when they lay me out. | |
| 25) To take advantage of the exhibitionism inherent in dissection tables. | 55) To count how many people cry at my funeral. | 81) Because I can't wait to use the amusing epitaph I made up: GOOD RIDDANCE. | |
| 26) To taste the subtle delights of reincarnation. | 56) To see, from the other side, if I've made it over. | | |
| 27) The nightmare of leap years, over at last! | | | |
| 28) To give my body of work a moral dimension. | | | |
| 29) To make people think I'm honorable. | | | |
| 30) To turn this list into a last will and testament. | | | |

Translated by Edward Gauvin

This translation first appeared online at Will Schofield's blog A Journey Around My Skull, a wonderful archive of "forgotten books and eye-popping visuals from around the world." Please visit 50Watts.com to see the current incarnation of the site.



Reading Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*

Kyle Gann

Rodney, on the other hand, is less idealistic.

Allow me to assert, without evidence, an eternal aesthetic principle: No piece of music can be a truly great piece of music unless it gets under your skin, in a good way, and stays there.

For thirty-two years, *Perfect Lives* has been under my skin. It is the great epic poem of the Midwest United States, our own personal *Iliad*. Yet what keeps the work under my skin isn't just that it's a great poem. It's not just that the phrases get stuck in my head and I spontaneously weave them into conversation. Nor is it because "Blue" Gene Tyranny's piano playing is incredible. It's not just that the rhythms in which the speech patterns are cradled are so infectious. It's not just that the video shapes echo each other so cleverly. It's not even that all these things work together so well. All those things could be true, and you still might, after

It is engaging yet permanently elusive. And that keeps drawing us back.

If I were from the Big Town, I would be calm and debonair.

Let me adduce another aesthetic principle, this one not on my own authority. Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt, in his *Will in the World*, points to a change that took place in Shakespeare's plays around 1600: he began dropping the rational motivation of his characters. For instance, in the original Hamlet story, Hamlet must pretend to be mad, because everyone knows Uncle Claudius killed the king, and if Hamlet is seen as a threat, Claudius will have to kill him as well. But Shakespeare makes the murder a secret that Hamlet only learns from the ghost, so there's no reason for Hamlet to feign madness: yet he does it anyway! And in the original King Lear story, Lear divides up his kingdom *after* his daughters declare their love, as an incentive to make them

money for one day—and then returning it. Ambiguous motivation indeed!

If we're all in this together, all jobs're inside jobs.

Even more than that, in *Perfect Lives* the relationship of text and plot seems virtually reversed from the norm. Usually a plot generates a text, but here the text seems to engender its own logic, and the plot seems almost devised to hold the text together, kind of an afterthought. "Plot," Ashley has written, "requires a lot of 'exposition.' We have to keep being reminded of what is happening. I don't have time to do that, and it's not interesting to work on."¹ So *Perfect Lives* dispenses with exposition, to concentrate on the interesting stuff. The plot lies just outside the frame, we can see parts of it, and yet, mysteriously, the text gives the appearance of a continuous narrative logic, but one we can't quite comprehend. That Raoul de Noget begins

that we haven't put our minds to yet. / And, sitting on the bed in the motel room / is no different.

Part of what's out of view are all the books on occult subjects Ashley was reading in the 1970s when he wrote *Perfect Lives*. The two men on the bench in the park in the small Midwestern town come "to make a great division between that which is impermanent and that which is permanent," and the transitory category turns out to include "the particulars of our existence," both those that are physical and mental and those that are neither, such as "attainment, aging, and coincidence." Whence derives this categorizing? From *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, whose foreword tells us that the

illusoriness of death comes from the identification of the individual with his temporal, transitory form, whether physical, emotional, or mental, whence arise the mistaken notion that there exists a personal, separate ego-hood of one's own, and the fear of losing it.²

the opera by looking at a photo "broken on the right edge / sometimes up to two thirds / across the frame" is the perfect metaphor.

Incredibly slowly our view begins to slide.

For instance, here's one of my favorite moments: The people at "The Bar" sit around repeating sayings, "the sounds of life," things like, "Don't you read the Bible, man?" and "Wuh' she's a cute little thing." Turning our attention to the bartender, Ashley continues: "Rodney, on the other hand, is less idealistic." What!? What was idealistic about the people at the bar? Now we have to go back and figure that out. In Ashley's scheme, if we've read it, *Perfect Lives* is about the Midwest. Those sayings symbolize the Midwest, the part of America

Buddy takes up this theme for the patrons of the Bar, and, at the piano, gives us a disquisition on the Self, which is ageless, without coincidence, and without attainment.

Buddy knows there is no separate ego-hood, that we're all in this together. He doesn't react to Rodney's contempt because he and Rodney are aspects of the same consciousness. He knows "We don't serve fine wine in half-pints, buddy" is the sound of God.

Just a sip or two and Buddy talks this way.

Buddy is only one of the characters from whom we learn the framework. The Sheriff in "The Living Room" explains the omnipotent role of opinion (the producer's opinion, that is) in the realm of commercial art such as the movies, and the alternative needed to pursue art outside that world: "the answer to a bad opinion is to assert that, finally, opinion is nothing. People respect this idea." This continues a digression begun at the end of "The Bar" on "the industry":

To be part of industry is to be real . . .

If you're a part of industry, both in your Industriousness and in the nature of your work,

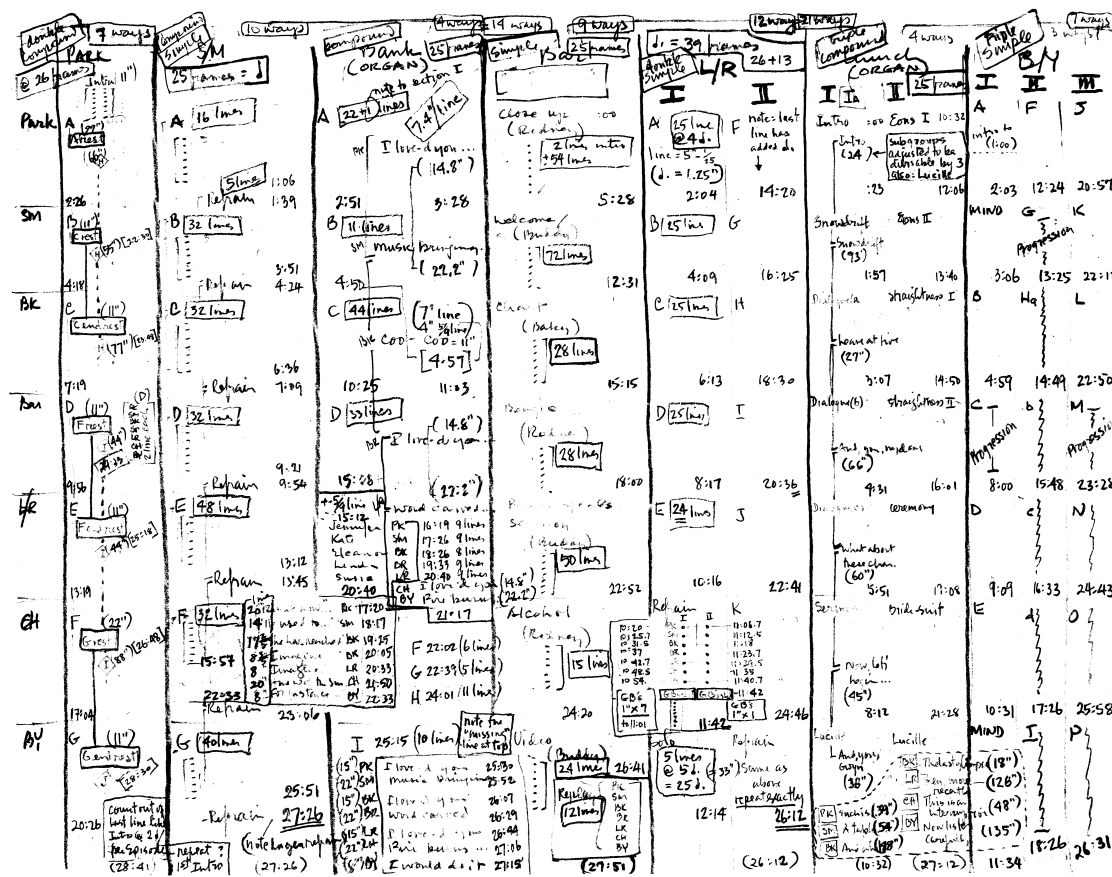
There is a chance that everybody will like your work,

Because it is a part of industry.

And things that are not a part of industry

Are not possible to like.

Ashley is giving us the meta-narrative surrounding his opera; it is made for television, the industry, but it is not part of the industry. *Perfect Lives* comments on its own outsidership, ironically, for it is outside



many listenings, eventually become sated with it and put it up on the shelf.

What raises *Perfect Lives* into the stratosphere of musical experience is its *mystery*: the feeling that, while all the parts are understandable and lovable, the whole thing is just too big to take in. It is so vernacular, so recognizable in its details, so catchy, that you keep expecting it to become familiar and start making as much sense as, I don't know, *My Fair Lady*, or *Oklahoma*. But somehow it's not a complete whole, only part of something immense and half out of view, and we can only intuit what we're missing. The phrases have the simple form of platitudes, yet behind them is a world, familiar-seeming yet mysteriously ordered, and only incompletely alluded to.

speaking well of him. But Shakespeare has him divide his kingdom up first, so we can't understand why he's putting them through this pointless trial.

An intricate plot that follows step by logical step and ties up all loose ends at its close is a pleasure, and satisfies us. We smile, and then we forget about it. But a plot in which the action is clear but the motivation ambiguous draws us in, engages our imagination, and sets us searching for what is revealed in the text, elicit the listener's participation. *Perfect Lives* centers around a bank robbery. But the robbery, conducted by two locals and two out-of-town drifters, is merely for the purpose of removing the

between the Appalachians and the Rockies, because by the time people moved there they had forgotten the stories from the Old Country, and only remember the sayings distilled from them. And so something is idealistic about remembering those sayings . . . but it's a little late, for the text has moved on. Maybe we'll figure it out later. By the time "The Backyard" fades away in its nine degrees of twilight, there are a lot of things we were hoping we'd figure out, but the fading is so heavenly that we don't mind that we missed something. We'll just have to listen to it again. Get it next time.

He is at the center of a ball of hot stuff /

1 "A New Kind of Opera," in *Outside of Time* (2009: Musiktexte), p. 136.

2 Lama Anagarika Govinda, "Introductory Foreword," in Evans-Wentz, trans., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, p. lxii.

only in its nature, not from any lack of industriousness.

And then, the meta-narrative beyond the meta-narrative. Ed and Gwyn's wedding sermon is an exposition of three rules that correspond to three eons of history:

1. Don't talk to yourself
2. Speak only when you're spoken to
3. Make sense

"Don't talk to yourself" is a reminder that talk isn't a part of understanding, but a habit, an arrangement of sounds. This is a central thesis of Ashley's output, the idea that speech is music, and that its sense can be secondary to its sound. As he'll ask in another opera, *Atalanta*, "Who could speak if every word had meaning?" Ashley is convinced he has a mild form of Tourette's syndrome (a condition the Sheriff explains to Ida), and in *Automatic Writing*, a work he made concurrently with *Perfect Lives*, he capitalized on this by capturing his involuntary speech on tape.

The preacher, in fact, infers an eon prior to "Don't talk to yourself," in which speech "may have been prior to the arrangement of sounds as / *An experience* external to ourselves, or as an experience / *Of something external* to ourselves." The idea here comes from Julian Jaynes's 1976 book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, in which Jaynes argued that ancient man believed in the gods because his left and right brain hemispheres had not yet been integrated, and he was interpreting verbal messages from the right hemisphere as voices outside himself. "Don't talk to yourself" brings the eon of conversation. Rule Two, "Speak only when you're spoken to," brings the eon of marriage, which followed conversation as, in Ashley's cosmology, religion followed agriculture. The third eon is in the age of

technique, in which we make sense: "we have accomplished ourselves, / (*Or invented man*, as The Philosopher says)." As the preacher continues here:

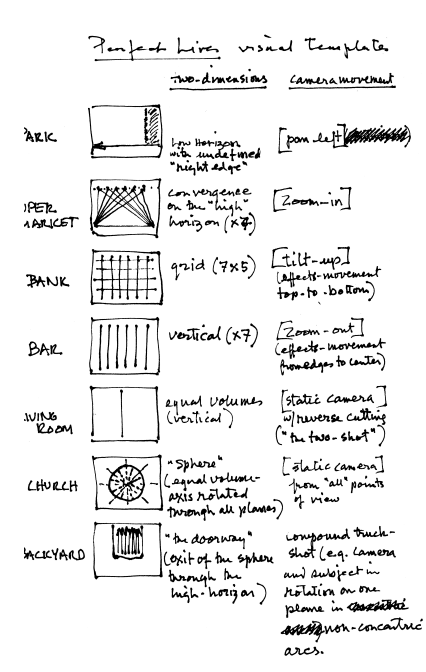
Language has sense built in. It's easy to
Make sense. To make no sense is possible,
But hard. Language does not have truth built in.
It's hard to make truth, which is to stop the search.

Well said, indeed. Thus marriage and religion are part of the attempt to control the arrangement of sounds, and Ed and Gwyn, by getting married, are doing their part in this evolutionary ritual whose meaning is still unfolding.

Speculation follows about the "arrangement of space that we call straightness" and its relation to sound. Some of the background for this comes from the writings about ley lines in ancient England by Alfred Watkins in his 1925 book *The Old Straight Track*. Watkins found evidence that in Druidic times men had made burial mounds and placed "mark stones" in patterns of long straight lines that may have had practical and even magical significance. Ashley originally went further and contrasted the flatness of agriculture with the verticality of cities. Rocks were alive for the ancient Druids, "but for people who make cities rocks appear to be dead." Realizing that his text was too long, he separated this further argument out as a separate text called "Ideas from 'The Church,'" and later used it in two other works: the opera *Foreign Experiences* and the tape piece *Yellow Man With Heart With Wings*. And so, literally and textually, *Perfect Lives* is indeed a segment of something much longer. Moreover, the incident at the Bank, in which Isolde throws

water on Buddy's fighting dogs to create a distraction, becomes the focal point of other Ashley operas: *Atalanta* and the tetralogy *Now Eleanor's Idea*. The characters also continue their lives in other operas: "Now Eleanor" is the Eleanor who was a teller at the Bank, and her search for Buddy's origins is the beginning of a personal odyssey that leads to the lowriders of the New Mexico desert. Junior, Jr., becomes the protagonist of *Foreign Experiences*, a satire on the Carlos Castaneda books. Like the novels of Robertson Davies and John Le Carré, Ashley's operas are a world in which the characters continue to grow and evolve in other episodes.

I am guiltily trying to paraphrase, and explain, something that cannot be explained after all. After thirty-two years of enjoying *Perfect Lives*, I can't say I completely know what it means. As Robert Frost answered when asked to explain one of his poems, "What do you want me to do, say it again in worse English?" There are, however, a few other things you deserve to know. First: at University High School in Ann Arbor in the 1940s, Ashley was captain of the football team. That's right: Donnie is Ashley. His best friend was named Ed, but not Ed Strapping. Snowdrift was his crowd's bawdy nickname for a girl he knew and liked to drink with because she had the key to her father's liquor cabinet. She truly was left at the altar by a groom who never showed up, just as described in "The Church." In other words, in addition to the large-scale historical categories that govern *Perfect Lives*, Ashley is also describing his life in high school. Representing a later stage of his life, Iris, while Ashley was writing *Perfect Lives*, really did want to borrow the typewriter. Lucille, who appears during the wedding, "her hair the color of the sunset," is a homeless woman who lived in Tribeca Park across the street from



Ashley's Manhattan apartment, and whom he came to think of as the guiding spirit of *Perfect Lives*.

Coincidence isn't a mystery to her.

So *Perfect Lives* is a window into an immense world, stretching from the most quotidian details of Ann Arbor teenagerhood to the vastest theories of the evolution of human society, of which our angle of vision gives us only glimpses, from which we must extrapolate the rest. Ashley is a minimalist in that his music does not break into sections and is not articulated by events. That inexorable pulse of seventy-two beats per minute runs through all of *Perfect Lives*, and through some of the other operas as well. He is a maximalist in that his palette contains the entire range of human experience.

More than that, he is a mystic. His characters react to everything that happens with Buddhist calm. They see everything *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the standpoint of eternity. There is an implied vastness beyond the words and music and images of *Perfect Lives*, but in a way there is nothing beneath or behind them. We are not meant to comprehend. We are meant to hear. The words are arrangements of sounds. There is something spiritual about the direct experience of reality here. The music crescendos from the sparseness of "The Park" to the glorious analytical fullness of "The Church," and drops back to quiet in "The Backyard." It's a curve Ashley has likened to the trajectory of an old-time revivalist.³ But even the return leaves us where we were, in the quiet of the mystery of the barn swallows. How is that possible? Giordano Bruno comes to mind. The mystery, the imagination, make *Perfect Lives* a perpetual fascination, like *Hamlet*, or *A Hundred Years of Solitude*.

You don't have to burn the chicken anymore to get heat.

It comes in bottles.

Ahhhhh . . . ■

Kyle Gann, 2011

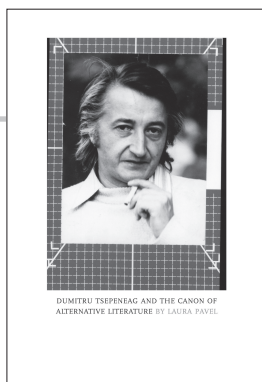
	PARK 11AM	Supermarket 1pm	BANK 3pm	Church 5pm	Backyard 7pm	Living Room 9pm	BAR 11pm
Still Template	ROAD EDGE ✓ Busy hard edge	ROAD/DRAWING fields	CAGE ✓ SILO ✓ LADDER ✓ BRICK ROAD ✓ ROAD	HAY ✓ WATER TOWERS ✓ TIRES ✓ Looking W to E	Farm house HORSE-STEAL DEPUTY'S/INNERS	MORNING ✓ DEPUTY'S ✓ Edges of buildings at sunset	TOWN MALL ✓ HILLS ✓
Moving Template	✓ PAN field open PARK PAN moves Soft edge	✓ ZOOM Road	✓ TILT Road with Kopskotch camera down	WATER tower 3 MORE Bules of hay	DOORS opening X STEGAL'S	SWING (AS ABOVE)	✓ ZOOM OUT down main street
Jill/ David in Landscape	JILL'S ARM LOCATION ✓ PARK Jill-DVT	ROAD-STEAL ✓ DEPUTY'S ✓ JILL INNERS ✓ DVT	AGAINST PRICE WALL ✓ DEPUTY'S ✓ PARK ✓ BARN ✓ 2 FLOREST ✓ STEAL ✓	polo course ✓ INNERS'S DEPUTY'S ✓ JOY ✓	✓ doorway of STEAL'S HORSE ✓ her mother's house	✓ KONNIE'S JEWELRY SHOP ✓ J ✓ D ✓ as landscape	JEWELRY STORE ✓ W
Jill/ David with John Deere	Equip ✓ DVT-Jill	(E) ✓ J/D ✓ (E) ✓	INSIDE EQUIPMENT ✓	CONTAINER ✓ TIRES ✓ also bottom	DOLLY W/ EQUIP ✓ DVT ✓ in cab of machine 30 minutes	3 shots ✓ glasses ✓	INSIDE ✓ W/ COMBINE ✓
	Pan Left open fields/ Park wide	ZOOM IN open fields/ Roads wide	TILT town/ Road cl	(Fixed) Farm wide	Dolly house Med	(Fixed) here also appear Town - tapes 2 shoot	ZOOM out Night Town (reveal) Med

³ Kyle Gann, "Shouting at the Dead: Robert Ashley's Neo-Platonist Operas," in *Music Downtown* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), p. 18.

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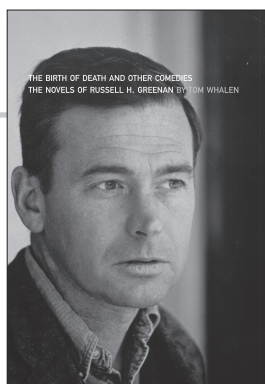
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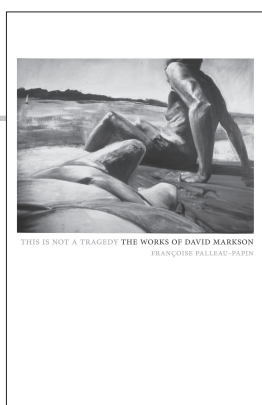
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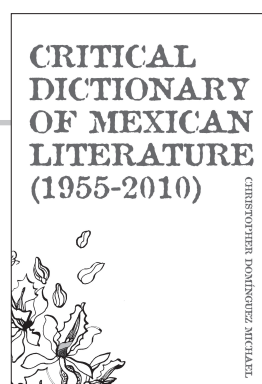
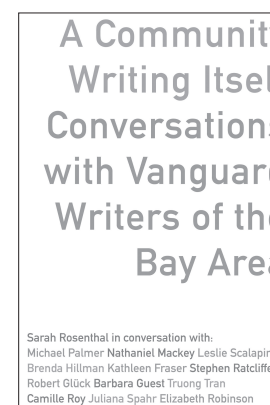
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