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## From Vienna to Leningrad

ROBERT MUSIL IS BEST REMEMBERED FOR PENNING *The Man Without Qualities*, a sprawling, unfinished high modernist opus that tracks the hubristic downfall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The action centers around Ulrich, a not-quite-young ex-soldier who is wealthy, intelligent, detached, and—as the novel’s title suggests—altogether nondescript. The year is 1913, and Ulrich—whose “family name must be suppressed out of consideration for his father”—has been appointed the general secretary of the seventieth anniversary jubilee of the accession of Emperor Franz Joseph. Ulrich’s impassive nature leaves him caught between the desperate nostalgia of Viennese society and the bubbling ferment of the younger generation; consequently, he is the ideal protagonist for the backwards-glancing Musil, who relays this decidedly tragic tale through a screen of acid irony.

One encounters a remarkably different Musil when reading *Intimate Ties*,<sup>1</sup> a pair of novellas that he initially published in 1911 and which have recently been re-released by Archipelago Press. While these novellas were written during the period in which *The Man Without Qualities* is set, even the most devoted followers of Musil will have a hard time relating these two projects to their more well-known successor. In place of urbane wit, Musil employs a languorous eroticism, and instead of funneling great swaths of history into a novel that quite clearly could never be completed, he plunges headlong into condensed moments in time, basking in the murky wanderings of his characters’ minds.

Together, the novellas that make up *Intimate Ties*—“The Culmination of Love” and “The Temptation of Silent Veronica”—“comprise an attempt to paint an internal psychic landscape as much sensed as seen,” in the words of translator Peter Wortsman. Both stories feature female protagonists, and nearly all of the “action” consists of their boundless internal peregrinations; it comes as no surprise that Musil’s experiment in “verbal collage” was initially savaged by critics.

While both of these short works risk running aground amidst a fog of total abstraction, they mimic the circular thought patterns of private obsession with such authenticity that they could easily frighten readers. In “The Culmination of Love,” undoubtedly the stronger of the two novellas, Claudine, a married woman, travels to the countryside to visit

<sup>1</sup> INTIMATE TIES, by *Robert Musil*, trans. by *Peter Wortsman*. Archipelago Books. \$16.00p.

her daughter from a previous marriage at boarding school. As she leaves Vienna, making her way through a crowded train station, Claudine distractedly reflects on her past life, subconsciously noting that “only one faint strain, thin, pale, and hardly perceptible, perhaps still trickled from that former life into the present.” For whatever reason,

The memory of it only surfaced at the train station, when—jostled and disquieted by the throng of people—she was suddenly silently gripped by a dark and distant feeling that breezed by her, a feeling already half gone as soon as she felt it, and yet it roused in her an almost tangible semblance of that practically forgotten chapter of her life.

Despite seeming scant at first, this specter of recollection prompts Claudine to consider the infidelities that marked her first marriage. Alternately rapturous and repulsive, these memories push Claudine into a realm where “all of the sudden everything felt as if it were fated.” The vivacity of Claudine’s imaginative meanderings is so overpowering that it is often difficult to bridge the gap between thought and action—is the undersecretary on her train, upon whom she has suddenly fixed her burgeoning attention, a mere suggestion of a man, an admixture of remembrance and desire?

This narrative ambiguity is palpable for Claudine herself, and her journey becomes marked by “a slowly growing inability to denote and sense the boundaries of self, a self dissolution—an urge to cry out, a longing for immeasurable movements.” One evening, altogether overwhelmed by her desire for a tangible experience, she kneels stark naked upon the rug in her hotel room, sniffing its fibers for a whiff of guests prior. All the while she imagines the undersecretary standing in the hallway, just beyond her door.

A number of critics and past translators have asserted that the two works that make up *Intimate Ties* were Musil’s ventures into the mind of his then-fiancée, the future Martha Musil. Whether inspired by this relationship or not, each novella scrutinizes the inchoate nature of the human psyche with great audacity and compassion, and each functions as a resolute exploration of the limitations of self-expression through language.

In the years following Musil’s death in 1942, as the unspeakable horrors of World War II became readily apparent, a different sort of obsession with the confines of language came to dominate literature written in the forever-altered German tongue. There was perhaps no writer more attuned to the question of what can and cannot be put into words than Ingeborg Bachmann, who was born in Musil’s hometown of Klagenfurt, Austria, in 1926. As a student of philosophy, Bachmann grappled with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the rest of the

Vienna Circle; in fact, the poetry that she began to produce in the early 1950s could be read as a response to Wittgenstein's conclusion to his *Tractatus*: "What we cannot speak we must pass over in silence."

In countering the rigid empiricism of the Vienna Circle, Bachmann yoked together the historically "unspeakable" and the mystical elements of things "unspeakable." Like Paul Celan, her onetime lover, Bachmann saw this linguistic threshold as a landscape in which silence becomes a catalyst for a new conception of language. For Bachmann, this somewhat utopian vision was rooted in her imaginative fixation on the actual landscape of her native Klagenfurt, which rests in a valley below the Karawanken mountain range that divides Austria, Slovenia, and Italy. In a short biographical reflection, Bachmann recalled spending her childhood

in Carinthia, in the South, on the border, in a valley that had two names—one German and the other Slovenian. And the house in which for generations my ancestors had lived—both Austrians and Wends—still bears a name that sounds foreign. Hence, near the border there is still another border: the border of speech . . .

This liminal terrain is evoked throughout Bachmann's oeuvre, in countless poems as well as in the fiction that became her focus in the second half of her career. Firmly seated within history, Bachmann's work uses emblematic, often surreal imagery to create an environment in which backwards-glancing despair and clear-eyed acknowledgment of the present somehow commingle with a faint trace of hopeful futurity.

By the time that Bachmann turned to writing prose, this suggestion of optimism had for the most part withered away—to her it was clear that, despite the defeat of the Nazis, the protofascist tendencies that led to the party's rise were still very much a part of Austrian and German culture. When Bachmann died prematurely in 1973, she was at work on a trio of novels called "Todesarten" or "Ways of Death." *Malina*,<sup>2</sup> which was the only novel Bachmann completed of the three, and which has recently been re-released by New Directions, in many ways reads as the crushing gut-check that counters the muted yet undeniably utopian aims of her poetry.

*Malina* is somehow both exhilarating and claustrophobic, narrow in its focus yet aimed squarely at the universal. Written in the form of an internal monologue from the perspective of an unnamed woman—a writer who refers to herself solely as *Ich*—it fuses subjective narrative with cerebral societal analysis. In a literal sense, *Ich's* life feels impossibly small: much of her time is spent thinking about Malina, the man she lives with (who may very well be her alter ego, or part of her subconscious), and Ivan, the younger Hungarian man she is in love with, who

<sup>2</sup> MALINA, by Ingeborg Bachmann, trans. by Philip Boehm. New Directions. \$16.95p.

lives down the block. Yet her nearly boundless imagination allows her to carve out space for herself, especially within her relationship with the often-tyrannical Ivan.

Like Bachmann, *Ich* is a linguist, but she is forced to keep this talent to herself or else to funnel it into her writing. Though she and Ivan have fashioned their own sort of mutual language, she is well aware that “we’re still missing a lot of sentence sets” and that “a vacuum exists between what I’d really like to say and each of our sparse utterances.” Amidst the cigarettes, half-finished letters, and disjointed phone calls that make up *Ich’s* days, we get a palpable sense of the sadistic drabness that hovers over all of Vienna—indeed, this is a stupor that could only occur within a male-dominated society, and one senses that boredom could give way to violence at any point.

When, one evening, Ivan discovers a manuscript of *Ich’s* entitled “Todesarten,” he asks her why she doesn’t write something with a happy ending, a demand that induces an arch daydream about a novel that will make people “writhe with laughter after just one page . . . and when they sit down by the window and read still further they’ll begin to throw confetti to the pedestrians on the street.” A few scenes later, *Ich’s* attention turns to a fantasy much closer to her true sensibility, one about the young and beautiful Princess of Kagran who rides horseback through a land in which “no borders yet existed.” After being taken captive, the princess is freed by a stranger wearing a long, black cloak that conceals his face; charmed, she asks him his name, but he presses two fingers to her mouth, urging her to be silent. Some have read this passage, set in an enchanting and dangerous borderless territory, as Bachmann’s homage to Celan, noting the way her language reflects his. One could also read it as a tribute to the poetry the two of them envisioned, a beautiful, haunting song forged in silence.

A different, more horrific struggle with words occurs in the ensuing section of the novel, which unfurls as a relentless series of nightmares featuring *Ich’s* father, a former Nazi. Urged onwards by Malina, *Ich* plunges into lurid memories of torture, rape, and verbal abuse delivered to her by a man who should have been her protector. “I can’t say anything,” *Ich* notes during one especially vile episode, “but in another language I say: Ne! Ne! And in many languages: No! No! Non! Non! Nyet! Nyet! . . . I have to smile, since my father is reaching for my tongue and wants to pull it out to stop anyone here from hearing my no.”

As this sequence progresses, *Ich’s* recollections are punctuated by conversations with Malina, with whom she becomes more and more inextricable. “Why do you always have to anticipate my thoughts?” she asks him, completely subsumed by the only man in her life who has provided any emotional stability. By the novel’s close, *Ich* has withered away completely, and as she lies on her living room floor, she thinks of how “I can no longer write the beautiful book” she had promised to

Ivan: "No day will come, poetry will never and they will never, people will have black, dark eyes, their hands will wreak destruction, the plague will come . . . It will be the end."

In 1976, Gregor von Rezzori published *The Death of My Brother Abel*, a novel propelled by the same postwar malaise that Bachmann scrutinized in *Malina*. Though a contemporary of Bachmann's, von Rezzori's taste was a little more old-fashioned, and *Abel* is markedly similar to Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* in terms of its scope, tone, and hopeless ambition. Like Musil, von Rezzori died before he could finish his opus, and the partial manuscript of his follow-up *Cain* was published posthumously in Germany in 2000. This year, thanks to New York Review Books, von Rezzori's diptych has finally been published as a single novel, *Abel and Cain*.<sup>3</sup>

Presented in folders marked "Pneuma," "A," "B," and "C," *Abel and Cain* is framed as the incomplete masterpiece of a fictional globe-trotting Don Juan named Aristides Subicz. Born in Bessarabia in 1919, just after its annexation to Romania, Subicz is the son of an Austro-Dalmatian woman who has spent the bulk of her life scampering between lovers scattered across Continental Europe. Though these men are powerful and wealthy—"I had been able to witness the ambassadors of the great cities lay their patterned splendors before my mother," Subicz readily mentions—they are so numerous that it is unclear which of them is Aristides' father. Both fatherless and officially stateless, Subicz tries to use his fuzzy background to his advantage, positioning himself as a consummate European citizen, but his attempts to emulate the noblemen from his mother's past belie a nagging insecurity.

The style that Subicz employs—alternately ornate, manic, gossipy, and hilarious—suggests a diary entry as much as an attempt at literary immortality, though he takes pains to refer to himself as "the potential author of *the* novel of the era and the future Nobel laureate." Unsurprisingly, the life story that he spends hundreds upon hundreds of pages unspooling is in many ways that of Gregor von Rezzori himself. Born in 1914 in Czernowitz, which was then in the Duchy of Bukovina but was soon subsumed by Romania and later the Ukraine, von Rezzori was a descendant of an aristocratic Sicilian family who served as Habsburg officials. Like Subicz, he spent World War II fighting in the Romanian army before decamping to Berlin thanks to "dubious papers"; afterwards, he wrote novels and memoirs that were largely overlooked and—again like his fictional counterpart—penned scripts for film and television.

*The Death of My Brother Abel* could be read as an attempted affront to the "movie piglets" that have devoured Subicz's time and energy. Though Subicz claims that he has been working on his novel for nineteen years ("two more years than Joyce spent completing *Finnegans*

<sup>3</sup> ABEL AND CAIN, by Gregor von Rezzori, trans. by David Dollenmayer, Joachim Neugroschel, and Marshall Yarbrough. New York Review Books. \$24.95p.

*Wake*”), it reads as if it had been written in one furious sitting, much of it being addressed to an American film executive named J. G. Brodny, who has had the nerve to ask the great writer to sum up his book in three sentences. While this meeting with Brodny takes place in 1968, Subicz has been receiving advances on the novel for the better part of two decades despite not submitting a single page of his manuscript.

Much of *The Death of My Brother Abel* is made up of the aesthetic jousting matches that Subicz conducts with his beleaguered editor and best friend, Johannes Schwab, an alcoholic and failed writer who may or may not actually *be* Subicz (this potential fusion is emphasized throughout *Cain*, as when, in an editor’s note, Schwab confesses that Subicz is “the spitting image of the me I dream up in literature”). Though they are prone to disagreement, Subicz recalls that “there was one thing we did agree on, though, Schwab and I: it was no longer possible not to include the author when writing.”

Indeed, Subicz and his albatross of a novel are more or less inseparable. As he notes,

Whatever I write, it ultimately writes *me*. Whatever I narrate, *it ultimately narrates me*. In other words, it is not *I* who live my life, *my book lives me*. And what I live and how I live are determined by the success or failure of my book.

While *Abel and Cain* is in many ways an attempt to reinvent the novel, Subicz is simultaneously penning an elegy for a form as antiquated as he is (as he admits, “adapting to the reality of the 1960s is not easy for me.”) A citizen of “Yurop—a remote American province” irreparably sanitized by the so-called economic miracle, Subicz shuttles between indistinguishable hotels and movie studios, forever haunted by the life he led before and during the war. “In seeking myself I seek a European continuity,” he remarks in a moment of particularly heightened self-awareness.

But will Subicz be afforded such continuity himself? By acting as a self-appointed historical custodian of a bygone Europe, he tries to afford his statelessness a modicum of glamour, but as any attuned reader can glean, the truth is much messier than our rather unreliable narrator would like us to think. He has quite clearly never recovered from his mother’s suicide during his childhood, after which he spent “a dozen horrible years in Vienna” living in a cramped apartment with his petit bourgeois aunt and uncle. Even the next phase of his life, marked by a passionate affair with Stella, the moneyed Jewish wife of his mother’s former lover John, gives way to tragedy after Stella attempts to meet Subicz in Berlin post-Anschluss and is intercepted by the Nazis.

Despite the elaborate fantasies of its fictional “author,” *Abel and Cain* is, more than anything, a novel about loss. Amidst all the asides about

four-course meals and shade-dappled beaches on the Cote d'Azur, the body count keeps piling up, and one of those bodies—metaphorically speaking—is that of Europe itself. Luckily for readers, Aristides Subicz's wondrous vision, whether he realizes it or not, is induced by his perpetual state of mourning. Deep into the novel, as he drives away from Hamburg at twilight, Subicz loses himself in self-reflection, exhibiting a lucidity that makes his dreams of literary immortality seem realistic:

I . . . plunged into the denser and denser texture of evening, which, after a few precarious minutes of sharply dividing sky and land, caught them both in its veil and let them blur into each other. . . . The sagging darkness trussed up the scattered beams of my headlights, squeezed them into two intersecting cones in the house of the road, ripped out a hollow space, at the end of which they were swallowed by the pent-up blackness. . . . But I was not alone. I had invited a friend in: Schwab, who was dead now.

*Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*,<sup>4</sup> the latest novel from the Hungarian luminary László Krasznahorkai, features a different sort of attempt to recover a home as much imagined as real. Intended as the capstone to a loosely linked quartet of novels that Krasznahorkai began in 1985 with his debut, *Satantango*, it traces the titular baron's return to the village of his birth. Like von Rezzori's *Abel and Cain*, it is the sort of story that can only end in a bloodbath, though the carnage it contains is biblically apocalyptic more than historically metaphorical.

Krasznahorkai's fiction is typified by his taste for structural exploration—the jumbled chronology of *Satantango*, for example, mimics the back and forth movements of the dance from which the novel takes its title. A master of peripatetic, never-ending sentences that brim over with vacillations, qualifications, and false epiphanies, Krasznahorkai has famously described his fiction as “reality examined to the point of madness.” Quite often, individual sentences will make up entire chapters; paragraph breaks are entirely eschewed.

Yet while *Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming* is likewise assembled from daunting blocks of uninterrupted text, it is in many ways an astonishing departure. Throughout his career, Krasznahorkai has fashioned stories that are timelessly eerie, using the style of a fairy tale subtly to engage political reality. This is certainly true of the three novels in the same sequence as *Homecoming*: in *Satantango*, which is inspired by Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, a criminal who may very well be Satan brings chaos to a rain-soaked hamlet; *The Melancholy of Resistance*, set during the Communist era, features a similarly anonymous Hungarian village that

<sup>4</sup> BARON WENCKHEIM'S HOMECOMING, by László Krasznahorkai, trans. by Otilie Mulzet. New Directions. \$29.95.

is visited by a travelling circus exhibiting a massive whale and nothing else; *War & War*, the most contemporary of the three, tells the story of a slightly crazed writer who becomes obsessed with a potentially imagined manuscript from the 1940s and attempts to publish it on the internet.

*Baron Wenckheim's Homecoming*, on the other hand, is set more or less in the present, unfolding in a Hungary overrun by far-right politics and the barrenness of late capitalism. Having frittered away his inheritance in the casinos of Buenos Aires, the disgraced Baron Béla Wenckheim sets out for his provincial hometown in an effort to win back Marika, the woman he likes to imagine he was in love with in high school. Considering the level of intrigue that surrounds the Baron's every move—each step of his journey is covered by TV stations and gossip magazines—it is a bit jarring how listless his story feels. In a sense, this may be intentional, for the true pleasure of this *Homecoming* has to do with the seemingly limitless ensemble cast of villagers who await his arrival.

A hapless mayor, an irritable scientist, a Nazi biker gang, two youths who have left said biker gang to become rappers in Budapest: as the novel progresses, Krasznahorkai moves more and more quickly between the voices of different characters, attempting to capture the contemporary spirit of a nation amidst a torrent of inexhaustible sentences. As one character notes,

This entire country has gone to the dogs . . . how could we show anyone anything here, because please tell me what has become of this town, everywhere there are those horrible piles of garbage, the streets are all dark because all the light bulbs have been stolen from the streetlamps, then there are those hundreds and hundreds of plastic bags constantly being blown everywhere by the wind, and all those Albanian vagrants, then the beggar children who work for the mafia, everyone knows about it, but nobody does anything about it . . .

As these successive narratives pile up, the atmosphere of the village moves from disconcerting to outright anarchic. The conclusion of the novel is so cruel that it could have been cribbed from the Old Testament, and it is hard not to think that Krasznahorkai is trying to one-up the chaos that marked the previous novels in his quartet. While his critique of present-day Hungarian nationalism is admirable, his fixation on smartphones, military-grade rifles, and the modern-day media feels somewhat beneath him, diluting the shadowy spell that his previous work so effortlessly casts.

A different spell hovers over the work of Lyn Hejinian, who, in a very different manner than Krasznahorkai, has established herself as a scion of avant-garde literature. One of the founding members of the Language poetry movement, which emerged in the 1970s, Hejinian has made a career of publishing work that rejects formal or narrative conventions in



favor of linguistic experimentation. Like Ingeborg Bachmann, Hejinian is a devotee of Ludwig Wittgenstein, though her inheritance of his legacy is far tidier; for her, his assertion that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” is a direct source of possibility rather than a constraint to push against.

Though Language poetry is customarily anti-confessional, Hejinian is best known for her (admittedly non-traditional) autobiography, *My Life*. Instead of presenting a linear portrait of an individual, Hejinian pays tribute to the multiplicity of the subjective self, crafting a long-form prose poem made up of sentences that fail to establish any sense of continuity. “Only fragments are accurate,” she writes, encouraging the reader to prioritize free association rather than straightforward decoding.

A similar method of narrative disjunction occurs in *Oxota*,<sup>5</sup> a novel in verse that Hejinian wrote in the late 1980s and early 1990s, amidst a series of visits to Moscow and Leningrad, where she stayed with her friend and occasional collaborator, the poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko. Subtitled as “a short Russian novel,” *Oxota* embodies Hejinian’s quest to make sense of Russian life during the glasnost period that saw the dissolution of the Soviet Union—crucially, the Russian word *oxota* can alternately mean “hunt,” “quest,” “huntress,” and even “desire.” Like Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, after which it is (very) loosely modeled, *Oxota* is assembled from individual poems that, like Pushkin’s stanzas, are fourteen lines long, though they are not metered and evade the complicated rhyme scheme that made the Romantic classic famous.

First published in 1991, *Oxota* has been reissued in a new edition by Wesleyan University Press, replete with revisions, reinsertions, and corrections made by the author herself. Hejinian has often worked in this fashion, publishing two updates of *My Life* since its original release in 1980. Like its original iteration—and in the manner of much of Hejinian’s poetry—this updated version of *Oxota* is obsessed with the intersection between global history and personal community, taking place on a scale that is somehow both grand and domestic. While it lacks a Romantic hero like Eugene Onegin—“there is no person,” Hejinian writes in the novel’s first chapter—it is instead peopled by Hejinian’s friends, much of it transpiring in kitchens and living rooms. Take this moment from the beginning of Chapter Eighty-Nine:

Misha should be a major character in the Russian novel  
 Sasha, too, said Nadia  
 You will start with the third chapter, Arkadii said, and the first  
 sentence must be attributed to Emmanuel Kant as follows:  
 everything happens so often that speaking of it makes no sense

<sup>5</sup> OXOTA, by Lyn Hejinian. Wesleyan University Press. \$18.95p.

A playful and collaborative spirit marks this poem and many others, coloring Hejinian's effort to bridge the gap between her culture and that of her hosts. Even when moments of narrative cohesion give way to seemingly unrelated images or aphorisms, Hejinian's poems reach toward an understanding of sorts, as when, later in Chapter Eighty-Nine, she concludes,

Our Russian workers like to dig holes, Arkadii said, while Americans  
prefer machines that scoop  
The coincidence of experiences occurring with experiences already had  
produced identity—but it spilled

Images, identities, cultures: all of these elements spill together as Hejinian fashions her Cubist portrait of an historical period in which anything—even a linguistic revolution—seemed momentarily possible.

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