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Review

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Source: *World Literature Today*, Vol. 64, No. 3, O.U. Centennial Issue (Summer, 1990), pp. 493-494

Published by: Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40146759>

Accessed: 24-06-2016 17:53 UTC

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Toma Longinović. *Moment of Silence*. San Francisco. Burning Books. 1990. 134 pages.

Toma Longinović belongs to a generation of young Serbian writers who started pushing the frontiers of literary imagination in Yugoslavia in the early eighties. They resolutely set out to reestablish the fantastic and metafictional aspects of the hitherto neglected realm of the short story. Much, albeit not all, of this rebellious enterprise was carried out under the influence of the American “renaissance” of this elusive genre, led by such writers as John Barth and Donald Barthelme. Whereas the majority of the “Belgrade metafictionists” wrote their best pieces only in *spiritual* correspondence with their foreign masters, Longinović, at the time little known outside underground circles, was lucky enough to get an American fellowship and left behind his post on the editorial board of the important magazine *Vidici*. At the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program (see *WLT* 61:3, pp. 365–409), which he joined in 1982, he had the chance to engage *personally* in a dialogue with some of the admired champions of the (by now canonized) literary movement. He has stayed in Iowa ever since. The pursuit of a doctorate in comparative literature became his main academic preoccupation, although he did not neglect his first love. *Moment of Silence* is the fruit of that love’s labors.

The collection is a good example of a literary mix that could easily have passed for postmodern, had not the term become shopworn. The text bespeaks its author’s emotional allegiance to his obsession with cartoons in his childhood, to Belgrade’s dusty streets and poverty-stricken yet joyful backyards, as well as the enchantment with poststructuralist literary theories that bears witness to his years in graduate school. To Longinović’s credit, his struggle to invent his own distinctive voice in the flood of innumerable look-alike books in the metafictional vein bore results. The plot, of course, has little significance here. The reader is invited instead to follow the well-crafted set of short passages, which in form and content re-create the anesthesia of television images. To a certain extent, that is the most obvious accomplishment of the author’s endeavor. The experience of watching television not only rests on the here and now, allowing the writer to dodge comfortably the traditional narrative’s beginning and end, but also epitomizes the all-pervasive influence of mass media on the work of imagination. In a slapdash style that is sometimes even too conspicuously indebted to the eclectic logic of television, Longinović successfully juxtaposes cartoon characters and popular movie figures, urban marginals and politicians, in order to demonstrate the fragility of unique human existence and local traditions in the era of global “repressive tolerance.” His ironic humbling of the highbrow culture which nevertheless paradoxically frames the text (Artaud, Borges, Hesse, et cetera) is arguably American, whereas his heavy drawing on the mythological, hermetic, and esoteric traditions points out his welcome recovering of European nihilism.

Sometimes, true enough, Longinović’s focus on the self-reflexive moments makes his text resemble an exercise in the history of ideas. For the most part, however, he is able to maintain control over the narrative meanderings, demonstrating how desperately the contemporary culture is waiting for a message of one sort or another. The concomitant existential angst, apocalyptic sentiments, and stam-

mering human attempts to articulate a truly individual voice in the media-generated image storm are here rendered with passion and remarkable talent.

Aleš Debeljak  
Syracuse University

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Vladimir Miličić. *Pesme*. Bellingham, Wa. Privately printed. 1989. 89 pages.

With his first collection Vladimir Miličić shows himself to be a rather sophisticated poet. Unlike many others in the diaspora, who are clinging to traditional verse, he strikes a path that leads him to the mainstream of poetry written in Yugoslavia, indeed in modern world poetry. It is not surprising, therefore, that some entries in *Pesme* (Poems) are dedicated to the leading Serbian poets and literary figures—Vasko Popa, Matija Bečković, Predrag Palavestra—as well as to a leading poet in the diaspora, George Vid Tomashevich. A linguist by profession, Miličić approaches poetry very much like a structuralist, letting the inspiration come to him but harnessing it toward well-defined, consciously devised and controlled purposes. The result is some of the most craftsmanlike poetry written in Serbian today.

The scope of *Pesme* is wide. Miličić moves with equal facility and conviction from personal concerns and manifestations of devotion to his homeland and its sacred tongue as well as to his friends. The sincerity of his avowals is underscored by the solemnity of his approach. At the same time, the poet is playful and curious, like a (grown) child in a garden full of exotic flowers. No wonder that one of the chapters is entitled “Igrarije” (Playfulness). The tone of the entire collection is set by the introductory poem, which can be considered programmatic.

With a strike at marble  
The move of a pen  
The stroke of a brush—  
With one sweep  
One sigh  
The shortest of flights;  
Through human desire  
The will of love—  
And accursed hatred:  
The soul rises  
Superficiality sinks  
Beauty sculpts  
The thought writes  
Art breathes  
Sadness wanes  
The ordinary ceases.

The poet displays such faith in the human experience throughout the collection, despite his full awareness of the shadow side of the moon.

The rich content of Miličić’s poems is accompanied by an equally rich variety of forms. As if to underscore a point, he employs both the Ekavian and the Ijekavian dialect. He rhymes (though rarely) and uses free verse. He forms his stanzas in fanciful ways, creating in one a graphic picture of a vase (“Stari i novi”) and in another a cascading effect à la Mayakovsky (“Brojanice 3”). He mixes languages. Most strikingly, he revels in the creation of neologisms (*usrecenje*, *ocovecenje*, *probudilka*, *nadkokot*, *levonozni*), recalling such word masters as Laza Kostić, Momčilo Nastasijević, and Vasko Popa. Bold experimentation is perhaps

the strongest qualification by which Miličić secures himself a rightful place among contemporary Serbian poets.

Vasa D. Mihailovich  
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## Slovene

Janko Ferk. *Buried in the Sands of Time*. Herbert Kuhner, tr. Riverside, Ca. Ariadne. 1989. 62 pages.

A small American publishing house and the Austrian Ministry of Education and Art jointly produced the handsomely designed trilingual (English, Slovene, German) collection of verse *Buried in the Sands of Time* by Janko Ferk, a prominent young author from the Carinthia region in southern Austria. Ferk (b. 1958), who experienced the trials and tribulations of being Slovene by origin and ethnic conscience yet educated in German-language schools, is an intriguing writer because of his movement between two languages. His first book of fiction, *Der verurteilte Klager* (The Condemned Accuser; 1981), which brought him to the forefront of young Austrian literati, was a very powerful novel, written in German. Later he focused on poetry and has produced a few books of verse in Slovene, which have been routinely reviewed and on occasion praised in Slovenia.

Ferk's work is nevertheless rather hard to assess, since it is difficult to determine in the context of which national literary tradition his writings should be read. On the other hand, that kind of shift from one culture to another may reveal tremendous potential for furthering awareness of individual identity. This particular condition appears to bear little importance for Ferk's poetic strategies. He is concerned with a different division of self altogether. Rather than troubling himself with ethnicity, he is obsessed with the ultimate question of the human condition: mortality of the body and possibilities of the soul. It should perhaps be welcomed that he implicitly takes to task the ethnic topics that are the prime preoccupation of writers of the Slovene minority in restive Carinthia. While complimenting him on this self-liberation from the straitjacket of defensive traditionalism, which is by no means a small accomplishment, one cannot help but note that what remain in his verses, alas, are well-crafted and erudite yet essentially vacuous exercises in ironic style and worn-out subject matter. Better yet: the subject of mortality itself is challenging, but Ferk's delivery does not rise to the occasion. True, the reader is invited to participate in some haunting and poignant moments when Ferk sheds the burden of principle of modernist experimentation at all costs. Then he gets really worked up, producing a moving personal account of the transience of human beings. It is in the plain yet intense renditions that Ferk's purity of language and intelligence generate original poems.

What is missing, for the most part, is the growing complexity and significance of the interface between conventional ways of living and the deep-seated human "illness

unto death." Instead we get a good survey of modernist poetic techniques, ranging from ironic twists to juxtapositions of dramatically divergent words. At a time when world poetry, including Slovene, is rapidly moving away from compulsory defiance of traditional concerns and is paying increased attention to the issues of concrete characters of flesh and blood, Ferk seems to be perfectly content with philosophical, abstract, and ultimately anemic meditations that derive from reflection rather than from worldly experience. If one decides to stay in this mode, one must undoubtedly write against the high standards of poetic modernism. That is not at all an easy task. Janko Ferk has evidently tried to do his best. I fear, however, that his attempts are not quite up to the mark.

Aleš Debeljak  
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## Noted

Marian Pankowski. *Le thé au citron*. Marie-Madeleine Castro, tr. Arles, Fr. Actes Sud. 1989. 120 pages. 75 F.

The five short stories of *Le thé au citron* are a must. The Polish-born novelist and dramatist Marian Pankowski shows great sensitivity and deftness in handling the most painful situations and evinces considerable humor and joy in describing people who meet, converse, and slowly transcend time/space categories to find themselves in dimensionless climes of memory.

Although written in prose, the selections contained in *Le thé au citron* are sheer poetry. Emerging from the narratives is the deeply troubled world of the Polish refugee who, in addition to his tragic sufferings during World War II, has contracted tuberculosis. Never maudlin or sentimental, Pankowski proceeds via metaphors and images to draw the reader into his haunting world, there to hold him by means of a drama of interlacing rhythms and phonemic tonalities. The title story begins as the narrator, aboard a ship, looks down at the water around him and personifies it: "Quelle étrange créature, ce lac." While meditating, questioning, and attempting to understand the reasons for the war and the killings it brought, he meets an elderly lady, and in the course of conversation, weaving past and present to and fro in an eternal present, he learns that she too survived the ghetto, Auschwitz, and the gas chambers. Gently, tenderly, he confides his need to travel: while journeying, he seems able to ferret out some meaning to his life; on land, however, all seems over and done with.

"Lida" opens on a conversation between an Australian and a European concerning acacias and chestnut trees and why one is preferable to the other. From that stepping-off point the two find their way back into other eras, other times when sensual impulses aroused their ways and adventures between the two motivated their actions. The rhythms in "La veuve du receveur" are no longer slow and languishing; rather, they are marked by rapidity, as a working girl runs in the street like a thief or someone crazed. Why? To celebrate a birth. Scenes of interiors, of joy and sorrow, want and greed, reminiscent of Greuze and Chardin paintings, disclose the preoccupations and daily activities of those trying to discern meaning in God's mysterious and frequently devastatingly cruel ways. "Les chocolats" and "Bisque, bisque, Binche" close Pankowski's most innovative group of tales, replete with tragedy but not without humor and irony as well as nostalgia and feeling. Highly recommended.

Bettina L. Knapp