

The Uncontemporary: Reading Markus Werner

Alex Andriesse

Markus Werner
On the Edge
Haus Publishing, 2012

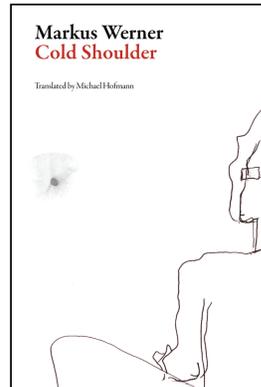
Zündel's Exit
Dalkey Archive Press, 2014

Cold Shoulder
Dalkey Archive Press, 2016

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

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

All of Werner's fiction is characterized by an extreme, borderline



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

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

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

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

Zündel himself would find both the phrase “gives new meaning” and “painfully self-conscious” excruciating to read.

Like many of Werner's characters, Zündel would like to be a citizen of the world, a man among men; yet he is always butting up against his own inalterable prejudices and peculiarities. Arriving in a new city, he buys a newspaper (“after all I'm not an ostrich.

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

I know there are more current things than me”), but no sooner has he ordered a Campari and started reading than he notes that all the “sentences and terms didn't bore him so much as simply disgust him.” “The words stink and the sentences stink, as if they'd slipped out of the hemorrhoid-wreathed intestines of pest-infected morons.” A fairly lively definition of *journalaise*.

To say the least, Werner has a gift for the well-turned vitriolic phrase. *Zündel's Exit* abounds with examples, as does

Cold Shoulder, in which the protagonist, Wenk, a didactic man, always lecturing, is asked why he hasn't become a teacher: “He lacked the belief, he said casually, in the educability of the species.” Werner, like Bernhard before him, isn't averse to taking his characters' crankiness to extremes. The aging widower Thomas Loos, one of two main characters in *On the Edge*, launches into a particularly inspired diatribe on the state of men's underthings:

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

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

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

CLUMB UP
FELL DOON
DONE FER

And he finds himself delighted. “Was there a swifter way of formulating a life,” he wonders. “No, this was the fate not just of one individual, but of

An Interview with Carlos Maleno

Eric Kurtzke

all mankind, even though the villagers might disagree and prefer their dismal 'Released.'"

Werner has so far been a slight presence in English, although he has been extraordinarily well served by his translators—above all by Michael Hofmann,

“Much of Werner’s writing depends on just this kind of ironic rhetorical turn. The state of men’s underthings becomes synecdochic for the state of the world.”

who has lent his hand (and inimitable ear) to both of the novels published by Dalkey Archive. Probably Werner is not destined to reach a *much* wider audience. His irony is too subtle, his humor too black to make him a writer fit for mass consumption. But his books are well worth the time of any reader who harbors misgivings about the march of human progress. He is a connoisseur—to borrow a few words from Hofmann’s foreword to *Zündel’s Exit*—of “the highly evolved, the uncontemporary, the thoughtful, the delicate, the unlikely.” A connoisseur of everything that today’s reductive literary consumerism would have us pass over in silence. ■



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

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

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

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

CM: Humanity has been quite exalted, leading even to a humanization of certain species of mammals. Intelligence gets taken for humanity. In that

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

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

CM: On the one hand, a nostalgia for somewhere I’d never been, for a certain imagined light, acted as the book’s driving force. But it’s also true that *The Irish Sea* was a kind of private investigation of what I am and what I’ve been, and maybe during the writing of it a nostalgia for what I could have been also began to develop. During that

period, I wanted to be able to spend all my time reading, writing, and feeling, instead of spending endless workdays at a job I didn’t like. Still don’t. Sitting down to write after all those hours at work is almost a fight against all odds.

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

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

Writers	&	Critics...
Paul Auster	Y	Walter Benjamin
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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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