

the relative efficacy of its formal innovations just as easily as they refer to Tony's passing: "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us[.]" The fact of loss can resist compensation through form. Johnson arrives at this skeptical conclusion about form through a rigorous experimentation with it; this is to his credit as both a writer and a thinker.

Chris Bench

§

*Best European Fiction 2010*. Edited by Aleksandar Hemon. Preface by Zadie Smith. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010. 421pp. \$15.95

In *Fables of the Novel: French Fiction Since 1990*, Warren Motte commends the latest generation of French writers for being at once innovative and reader-friendly. The reputedly forbidding "writerly" texts of the earlier nouveau roman generation have given way, in this schema, to what Motte describes as an "avant-garde with a human face, an avant-garde that seems to welcome its readers with open arms, while still insisting on innovation."

If Dalkey Archive Press's *Best European Fiction 2010* is indeed what its editor, Sarajevan-born novelist Aleksandar Hemon, claims in the anthology's introduction—"a detailed snapshot of the contemporary European literatures"—then we can say that the French strain identified by Motte has gone viral and infected a continent. A book of snapshots suggests a family album, and Zadie Smith tells us in her preface that we're not wrong to see a "family resemblance" uniting the volume's varied contents, a morphology that sets it apart from the mainstream of current U.S. literary fiction. For Smith and Hemon, this European quality is expressed in the adventurousness of the writing itself—in Smith's words "a strong tendency towards the metafictional"; in Hemon's a "formal diversity" deriving from Europe's history of fragmentation and integration. The volume—the first of an anticipated annual series—brings together thirty-five stories from thirty nations, in a geographic and linguistic range stretching from Iceland to Russia and Finland to Macedonia.

Short fiction in the U.S. continues to be dominated by the "well-made story"—carefully crafted if loosely plotted psychological realism, with a clearly identified conflict at the beginning and an epiphany at the end. While Zadie Smith says that many of *Best European Fiction 2010*'s stories "seem to come from a different family from those long anecdotes ending in epiphany," at least a third of the volume's stories do follow this formula, and could successfully apply for citizenship in *Iowa* or *Missouri* or *Mississippi Review*. This

is not to say that these are not well-written, sensitive treatments of their subjects and successful on their own terms, but the terms themselves are those of familiarity rather than defamiliarization; they tend to ratify rather than challenge our expectations. Dutch author Stephan Enter's "Resistance" and Latvian Inga Ābele's "Ants and Bumblebees" are representative. In the former, a young chess hobbyist experiences the conflict of acceptance versus conformity when a substitute instructor turns out to be gay; in the latter, a dysfunctional family's outing to the cemetery becomes an opportunity for quiet reconciliation with the past. In such stories both art and life cleave to a tidy mean. Even when emotional tempests blow, as in Danish author Naja Marie Aidt's "Bulbjerg," the story's conclusion (the boorish narrator gets a surprise comeuppance from his ill-treated wife and learns to bond with their damaged adoptive child) retrospectively reveals its inner IKEA.

A majority of the anthology's stories do depart, however, from this template of "well-made" psychological realism, although it is equally the case that they rarely strain the bounds of *lisibilité*. Motte's "avant-garde with a human face" remains the preferred mode throughout: the kind of ludic—and lucid—textual gambits of which Italo Calvino and Raymond Queneau are the godfathers. French author Christina Montalbetti's "Hotel Komaba Eminence (with Haruki Murakami)," for example, imagines a breakfast with the Japanese writer at which an incidental detail metastasizes into a hysteria-producing encroachment, while in Serbian author David Albahari's "The Basilica at Lyon," the story itself acquires a gender within the first paragraph and sets off, *ingénue*-style, on a picaresque journey to the landmark of the title. Yet the moral of the story disappoints: "Life, even though it looks as though it only belongs to us, is actually a story being told by someone else." If metafiction has its own reflex of too-convenient closure, it's just this sort of gesture—after all, it's all just stories! More challenging is Giedra Radvilavičiūtė's "The Allure of the Text," in which the Lithuanian writer pairs a trip to an academic forum on contemporary literature with a detour to meet a distant relative. The story confronts subjectivity with the literariness of its own conventions, as the narrator's own epiphany, during an on-camera interview at the conference, turns out to be lifted from a prior text:

After mentioning the year, I realized that I wasn't speaking my own words. They had come from a passage in the notebooks of Lieutenant Thomas Glahn, which, in turn, came from the first page of [Knut Hamsun's] *Pan*—the book Emilia's sister was holding in her hands when she was buried here in this town.

The question of the priority of sign or referent is here left undecided. The narrator feels a sudden compulsion to tell her interviewer about this long-

dead relative of hers, insisting “it would have been a truly personal impression and anecdote—from prior years,” but opts instead for the inscrutable gesture of smearing locally produced honey on the camera’s lens.

Stories such as Radvilavičiūtė’s circumscribe the horizon of difficulty in the volume, within whose compass the reader’s experience will be rather like a nice European vacation—sufficiently “different,” but not too taxing or disorienting. All the locals speak some English, the signs are bilingual, and most of the restaurants have menus you can read without consulting the phrasebook. It is a literary economy geared for the visitor, to the extent that a number of the stories appear to have been selected for the very familiarity of their “foreign” formal idioms or topical themes. The sunny Iberian peninsula, for instance, yields stories in identifiably “Latin” modes: Valter Hugo Mãe’s “dona malva and senhor José Ferreira” features a magical-realist ghost, and Julián Ríos’s “Revelation on the Boulevard of Crime” bears a clearly Borgesian stamp. The Victor Pelevin tale chosen as the Russian offering is a brilliant absurdist spoof on what is most people’s idea of Russia, i.e., oligarchs and organized crime. The volume includes a trio of dystopian fables dominated by familiar contemporary themes—Slovakian Peter Kristúfek’s “The Prompter” depicts the *reductio ad absurdum* of a European capital locked down and torted up for an international G8-style summit, while both Bulgarian Georgi Gospodinov’s “And All Turned Moon” and Dutch–Belgian Peter Terrin’s excerpt from *The Murderer*, in their different ways, respond to issues of environmental catastrophe and demographic decline (the so-called “graying” of Europe). There are in fact a relatively high number of “issues” stories—sex trafficking and deindustrialization also find room—but the sensibility governing their presentation is largely that of the educated, liberal urban professional—the same cohort likely to read such a volume on this side of the Atlantic.

The book does provide a limited critique of the assumptions of its likely readership. Estonian Elo Viiding’s memoiristic “Foreign Women,” for example, recounts the condescending patronage of “progressive” female visitors from the West during the Soviet era who failed to grasp how privilege conditioned their own cherished liberties. Croatian writer Neven Ušumović’s “Veres” and Polish writer Michał Witkowski’s “Didi,” on the other hand, offer disquietingly contemporary glimpses of a Europe seen “from below,” with the latter story, in particular, standing out for its focus on a truly abject figure. Europe’s literature of abjection is a distinct strain, but in this anthology it emerges only in “Didi,” with its echoes of Céline and Genet. Witkowski’s character is a runaway from Slovakia trying to survive by hustling on the streets in Vienna. A “rent-boy” whose professional name is Milan, Didi’s identity remains in question throughout; in her world an

ostensibly stable and unified identity (and by implication “identity politics” itself) is a middle-class luxury item. From the literal underground of the filthy metro men’s room where she turns tricks, Didi/Milan surveys a Grand Hotel Europe of migrants and vagrants—Polish, Russian, Czech, Romanian—pitted against each other at the lowest reaches of the economic food chain. Higher up are the Austrians themselves, who all strike Didi as “deformed by wealth.” At the nadir of her trials, writes Witkowski,

Didi realized that the entire West was like an electric amusement park wired on high-voltage. The little lights kept blinking regardless, whether you were having fun or biting the dust in the metro, dear Milan, you lovely, beautiful angel. Perfectly indifferent. Forever happy. As long as the plug stays in its socket. And Didi was a hair’s breadth from turning into a Socialist that night.

“Perfectly indifferent” and “forever happy” refer to the wired West, but the immediate antecedent is Didi/Milan, who is neither. This syntactical confusion effectively reproduces the disconnect that both constitutes and rends her existence. Epiphany’s ideological function is the ratification of “human” interiority, yet here humanity is precisely what is denied: in Didi’s realization, the only way to participate in Western society is as a commodity (Milan). The alternative, remaining Didi, entails not humanity but the garbage heap. The evocation of socialism is similarly equivocal: as a specter, it is historically defunct in its “really existing” version; yet as a utopian horizon, it continues to haunt.

Stories such as these, in which Europe is seen from a vantage point closer to Viiding’s Western progressives or Witkowski’s Austrians, stand out from the rest of the anthology. The story that is most symptomatic of the volume’s strengths and silences in this respect has to be “Zidane’s Melancholy,” Belgian author Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s restaging of the notorious headbutt that capped French footballer Zinedine Zidane’s career in the 2006 World Cup final. Toussaint construes it as a sort of Badiouan “Event,” a break in the historical continuum that defies representation. The narrator’s only access to the “truth” of such an event is to recast it as a fiction, in which Zidane becomes a kind of alter ego whose spasmodic gesture reflects both resistance and resignation to an undertow of the artist’s *Weltschmerz*. The story—originally published as a very short novel—is an intertextual tour de force, mixing narrative, lyrical, and philosophic-essayistic modes, footnoted citations of soccer lore and the European literature on melancholy, and, in a self-reflexive turn, allusions to Toussaint’s own work. “Zidane’s melancholy is my melancholy,” writes Toussaint, and thus his Zidane becomes a form-giving artist in the medium of football.

Readers on Toussaint's side of the Atlantic are familiar with a quite different version of the event, in which the footballer's motivation has been depicted as more choleric than melancholic. A French citizen of Algerian and Muslim descent, Zidane had headbutted his opponent in response to a slur that was quite possibly racist. Toussaint's terse retelling manages rather breathtakingly to avoid this particular content. Among the layered allusions we find no mention of Zidane's ethnicity nor of any insult—racist or otherwise—from a member of the opposing team. In a “World” Cup contest that had already been winnowed down to two European national teams and held on the neutral ground of a third (the match took place in Berlin), a set of references that might have described a fault line through this terrain—evoking the burning of the *banlieues* and the Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy (both of which had occurred less than a year before)—is wholly elided; a metaphysical drama of the lonely artist struggling in an ahistorical void unfolds in their place. As Toussaint explains in an interview excerpted in his contributor's biography at the volume's end, “I invented Zidane, I appropriated Zidane, and what does it matter if that's connected to reality or not?” It wouldn't be the first time someone writing in French has appropriated a North African for a role in an existentialist drama, but in this case there might be a saving ambiguity: the proximity of the two versions in most readers' minds (outside the U.S., at least), suggests that the work can be read as a sly autocritique of its own European narcissism.

Much of the rest of *Best European Fiction 2010*, however, can be read less ambiguously under the sign of this exclusion. Other than the deracinated Zidane, characters of North African or Middle Eastern origin who appear in its pages are limited to a nameless Arab who preys on Didi/Milan in a Vienna washroom and “the motley inhabitants of the alleyways: Armenians, Arabs, Persians, and Turks,” who populate the otherwise wholly Jewish Levant of George Konrád's “Jeremiah's Terrible Tale.” Nor do we find any significant Black presence. (Curiously, if nonwhites appear in a story, they are invariably Asians of the Pacific Rim—Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai.) In its selection of writers and nations, too, the anthology skews heavily north and west; the political capital of this Europe is certainly Brussels (home of the European Union) and its economic capital is the UK (the volume was primarily funded by an Arts Council England grant and contains five stories from the British Isles, all unexceptional save for Julian Gough's send-up of Irish cultural nationalism in “The Orphan and the Mob”). To be given two stories from Belgium, for instance—one by Dutch–Belgian Peter Terrin and the other by the French–Belgian Toussaint—might show admirable respect for the region's multilingual history and current political differences, but when it comes to actual cultural differences a greater span no doubt divides Northern Italy (home of the single Italian in the book, Paduan Giulio Mozzi)

from the Mezzogiorno. The collection does not, in fact, have a particularly Mediterranean feel to it at all: we have a story from Lichtenstein—why not Malta instead, if we are honoring the diminutive principalities?—but no stories from Greece or Cyprus. Moving further east, we find no stories from Moldova, Ukraine, or Belarus, or from the Caucasian republics, such as Georgia and Armenia. A case could be made for the inclusion of a Turkish author—regardless of whether Turkey is a member of the EU.

Of course the makers of anthologies have a built-in riposte to any questioning of their selection—“It would have meant a volume of 1000 pages!” In the case of a collection of European fiction, such questions bear an inevitable relation to those of identity and inclusion that continue to define the continent itself. Fortunately *Best European Fiction 2010* is only the first in what Dalkey Archive Press intends to be an annual series. It will have more opportunities to show its readers that other Europes are possible.

Edmond Caldwell