

Hermann Ungar, *Boys & Murderers: Collected Short Fiction*. Translated by Isabel Fargo Cole. Prague: Twisted Spoon, 2006. 243pp. \$15

In a 1930 preface to a collection of Hermann Ungar's short stories, Thomas Mann praised Ungar for all the wrong virtues. Mann quotes from Ungar's "The Wine Traveler":

In old wine is the scent of all flowers, the rays of the sun, children's laughter, men's sweat, the vision of the summer landscape, all ripe and heavy as the breast of a nursing mother.

Mann calls this Ungar's "song of life," and mistakenly proclaims it characteristic of Ungar's art.

But Ungar falls into such thinly realized rhapsody only when he deviates from his truest subject—humiliating the father in the person of the son—or from his surest narrative technique, suspense. Reading Ungar is less a matter of overhearing the song of life than of experiencing the terror (and pleasure) of waiting. In his best works, Ungar's characters do little more than wait for the blow they know is coming.

Hermann Ungar was born in 1848 in the Jewish quarter of Boskovice, a Czech town in what was then the Austro-Hungarian empire. He should be considered not only in the context of other Czech German writers (Rilke, Werfel, Paul Leppin) and not only as a lesser or lesser-known Kafka, but also alongside the Austrian Leopold von Sacher Masoch. Many of Ungar's motifs could justly be called masochistic—strippings, beatings, humiliations—but a more important point of comparison is Ungar's and Masoch's use of suspense.

"Formally speaking, masochism is a state of waiting," Gilles Deleuze wrote in his 1967 book about Sacher Masoch, *Coldness and Cruelty*, the first study to consider Sacher Masoch in literary and philosophical (rather than psychological or sexological) terms. It is Deleuze's Sacher Masoch more than Sacher Masoch himself who provides the key to understanding Ungar: "The anxiety of the masochist divides therefore into an indefinite awaiting of pleasure and an intense expectation of pain."

Sacher Masoch's suspense gestures toward awaited pleasures that never quite arrive (or are described so vaguely that the effect is of frozenness and fetishism). His suspense halts on the cusp of awaited, painful pleasures, as if the story itself were bound and hung in an agonized condition of waiting. In Ungar's fiction, however, the long dread—the intense expectation of pain—is invariably followed by the dreaded events themselves. Mid-way through Ungar's novel *The Maimed*, the character Franz Polzer realizes that all he has feared is now upon him:

Everything Polzer had dreaded began to come true. The door had opened. Now that order had been destroyed, only lawlessness could follow. A gap had been created, and the unforeseen broke through it, spreading fear.

Even just a few pages shy of the end of the novel we learn that “nothing was over” and “it had not ended.” If there is a formula for Ungar’s suspense, it is that the very worst event whipsaws between having already happened and still threatening to occur: “What he had been afraid of had happened. Franz Polzer breathed calmly. They would punish him.”

Masochism, as a set of sexual practices, is obscure in Sacher Masoch’s novels, and not only for the obvious reason that he preceded masochism’s “discovery” as a psychosexual syndrome. Deleuze notes that

Sacher Masoch had no difficulty in presenting masochistic fantasies as though they were instances of national custom and folklore, or the innocent games of children, or the frolics of a loving woman, or even the demands of morality and patriotism.

If Sacher Masoch decently obscures the motives behind the motifs, one can still very easily suppose an “implied delectator” (as literary criticism once spoke of an implied author) subtending Sacher Masoch’s fictions of kneeling men and cruel women. Or rather, Sacher Masoch’s implied delectator and his male characters are very close; they take an identical pleasure in humiliation.

Ungar makes such pleasure impossible. It’s in this light that we should view the writer Ludwig Winder’s recollections of Ungar (quoted in *Boys & Murderers*). Winder recalls that at one point Ungar stalled, unable to go on writing in the first person: “‘It’s impossible,’ [Ungar] insisted; ‘I can’t take the risk of having people think I’m always writing about myself; the thought so paralyzes me that I cannot go on working.’” Such a statement would be invaluable if we wanted to read Ungar’s fiction biographically; all manner of secret desires might be hinted at here. But the statement can also be understood as an aesthetic program. In the end, Ungar did not reject first-person narration, but he did reject any link between the masochistic motifs and the pleasure one might take in assembling such motifs. An implied author who seems to delight in retailing his own fantasies—an implied delectator—would have punctured Ungar’s otherwise perfectly suffocating, exitless suspense.

The perpetual humiliation machine in Ungar’s fiction never winds down; it blocks both pleasure and resolution, ratcheting ever further into horror. In “Story of a Murder,” events so transpire that the protagonist finds himself (through no wish of his own) tied down, stripped, and humiliated by his father’s mistress in the presence of his father and another man. The story’s affects are terror and disgust—not pleasure. This is not a judgment

of taste regarding Ungar's subject, as when one says that Sade is "too boring" or "too repetitive" or "too focused on coprophagy" to be sexy. It is a matter of form. Whenever the incidents in Ungar's fiction begin to resemble masochistic fantasy, as they often do, the descriptions become simultaneously desexualized and obscene. In "Story of a Murder," just moments after abusing the protagonist, the mistress abruptly gives birth: "A filthy bloody gob lay between her feet in a puddle of blood and foul-smelling liquid."

This filthy, foul, birth-giving woman appears in all of Ungar's best works. She has no place in the Deleuze's account of masochism, where the objective is to submit to a cold woman whose body scarcely exists except as a series of fetishes—boots, furs, corsets. If only the women in Ungar's fiction had the decency to be cold, or to conceal their bodies within fetish objects, they would be less horrifying.

When Ungar leaves out this horrifying woman—this "soft" "warm" "haired" body, as it is variously described—or when Ungar's male protagonists neglect the task of humiliating their father's likeness within themselves, the writing falls into that curiously saccharine register praised by Thomas Mann. In the early story "A Man and a Maid," a son obeys his father perfectly; the result is a strained epiphany in which the father feels that "tears washed the hatred from my soul...as if gentle light were shining within me." At such moments, it is as though Ungar's work had not yet found its signature. When he strains toward "souls" and "light," Ungar fails. But in a minor arena of sexual horror, Ungar is unsurpassable.

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Gabriel Pomerand, *Saint Ghetto of the Loans: Grimoire*. Translated by Michael Kasper. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2006. 118pp. \$14

Gabriel Pomerand's *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* is one of the seminal works of Lettrism, a short-lived art movement born in 1945, when Pomerand met Isidore Isou at a soup kitchen for Jewish orphans. The book, reprinted by Ugly Duckling Presse with Michael Kasper's translation of the French text, is a rambling narrative of bohemian and criminal life in Saint Germain des Prés, the denizens of which include celebrity existentialists and stock characters sprung from bestselling noir novels. Pomerand lived out the same disjunctive existence his text describes, mixing anonymity and fame, squalor and riches. Homeless, he performed his sound poems to ritzy, slumming nightclub audiences under the stage name Saint Gabriel.

Most striking about *Saint Ghetto of the Loans* are the elaborate rebuses that stand opposite Pomerand's prose poems. Filled with occult symbols,