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## A Post-Punk Prose Milieu

*Law of Desire*, by Andrej Blatnik, translated by Tamara M. Soban.  
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Once upon a time, in a fantastical Cold War Central and Eastern Europe, which only existed within the imaginations of outsiders nourished on foreign books and music, nothing transmitted the spirit of freedom like rock and prose. The artists who'd created these works knew something about liberation—or so the narrative went, anyway—that we in our permissive Western societies did not: their songs and stories bespoke a tacit understanding which held out within the same generation in the same place, despite threatening forces. But then a 2010 novel by Christa Wolf entitled *City of Angels, or The Overcoat of Dr. Freud* exploded this cliché of heroic artists under Communism once and for all, in favor of a nuanced and skeptical vision of the creative life, by fictionalizing its East German author's Getty fellowship in Los Angeles at the time of the 1992 uprising, during which she'd begun writing down her long-suppressed memories of informing on an acquaintance, a process that had been brought on by reading her declassified Stasi file back home. The final work by a celebrated veteran author, *City of Angels* was published in Damion Searls's English translation by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux (an American subsidiary of the German publishing conglomerate The Georg von Holtzbrinck Publishing Group) in 2013, a mere three years after the first German edition appeared. A warm reception for this difficult text had arguably been in preparation for many years, in the U.S. at least, courtesy of a broad spectrum of German cultural imports (a fact of which Wolf shows keen awareness, by frequently alluding to the lives and works of German intellectuals abroad), including Berthold Brecht, the Frankfurt School, Josef and Anni Albers, Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 film *The Lives of Others*, and Nena's hit song "99 Red Balloons" (which got a lot of airplay in the original German, as anyone who listened to F.M. radio in 1983 will remember), to name only a few. Wolf, we may be excused for inferring, questioned the mythic-hero status of the litterateur under Communism because she'd inherited a tradi-

tion of expatriate German-language writing, and she could afford to break with that tradition at specific points because she went to great lengths to adhere to it in general. It seems reasonable to suppose that the tradition of emigrant DDR-era culture not only sustained Wolf in her courageous work, but also provided FSG with detailed market research data, according to which its executives could decide whether or not the book was bankable. And bodies of literature-in-translation from other Eastern Bloc nations also fall into this pattern whereby authors have achieved global marketability by donning the mantle of cultural authority: one thinks of late-twentieth-century Polish, Lithuanian, and Russian writing-in-exile, for example. The Slovenian writer Andrej Blatnik's short story collection *Law of Desire*, meanwhile, first appeared in 2000, and has now come out in English translation fourteen years later, thanks to the Dalkey Archive, as part of the Illinois publishing house's Slovenian Literature Series. Besides being the only such series in the U.S., this endeavor provides the devoted reader of Central and Eastern European writing with an all-too-rare chance to read a (bestselling, as it happens) Slovenian writer's work, in a complete collection, as he intended it to be read.

The Iron Curtain fell in 1989 and Blatnik's home country, the Republic of Slovenia (formerly the *Soviet Republic of Slovenia*), officially gained independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 after passing democratic legislation and electing officials who favored political autonomy. Societal changes had led to the introduction of reforms, and with increased liberty people not only read and evaluated books differently, but also found that the content of books was changing as writers rediscovered the craft (the assignment of status to authors underwent changes as well). A once-latent individualism—whose public expression had been confined to conventional calls for liberty—now became the norm, and took shape in literary circles following the lead of newly available foreign-language literature on one hand, and local and foreign popular music on the other. The effect was censorship by other means. Blatnik characterizes this change in the following remarks from a 1995 interview in *The Dominion Review*:

No, it was not as if their work was being read, it was just that these people were known as writers, as public figures who opposed the regime. Now, because everyone has the right to say what he or she wants, writers have lost that attention. Writers now are under the pressure of having to express themselves solely on the basis of their writing alone. This so-called freedom has proved to be an irony: before there was

ensorship—everybody fought against it—and literature was one of the rare voices of otherness, of difference, but now it seems that these times of "great stories," of ruling ideologies which are to be fought against, are over, and the so-called Eastern European literature, strangely enough, seems to find itself in an empty, vast space [. . .] Our economic censorship is more complex than censorship of the regime.

Today demographics determines the availability of translations and original works alike. The degree to which globalization decides content is hardly an open question.

Western readers have their own reasons for buying books by Central and Eastern European writers, and the purchasing power of this group justifies lucrative publishing ventures—a market trend which is doubtless what Blatnik means by the phrase "economic censorship." He acknowledges this circumstance in the *Dominion Review* interview:

Most of the writers from Eastern Europe who are known in the USA or in the West in general are known as the victims of a regime: communism, lack of freedom, or censorship. This is also the reason they are published in the West. Their capability to write a story or a poem seems to be of minor importance. Sometimes it looks like the general aspect is: if you weren't imprisoned in your home country, your writing can't really be important [. . .] Ja, but someone ironic or cynical enough would say that the West is expressing a certain voyeurism on that point: the world that does not know much about suffering will import it from the countries that have a surplus. It's easy to submit yourself to the general demand and repeat the repression episodes from someone's life again and again (or even make them up; writers should have imagination!) in order to get a few seconds of public attention (which is very hard to get nowadays), but it is much more difficult to explain the difference between the two systems in words other than black-and-white oppositions such as democracy and tyranny, freedom and repression, etc., let alone to capture or even to explain the differences of one person, the passions and desires that move the world and lead eventually to the historical events we are used to categorizing as political.

This interview dates from 1995, four years after Slovenia's independence from Yugoslavia, and five years before *Law of Desire* appeared.

We might reasonably presume that these considerations were on the author's mind while he was writing the stories in this collection. We might also imagine that while writing his book, Blatnik took it upon himself to show how totalitarianism and pluralism differ, even as his nation stood poised between them. If this strikes the anglophone reader as a perverse task for a youngish Slovenian writer to set for himself, we may reply that, in all likelihood, it was the only possible theme to address, no matter the subject.

But what the devoted English-language reader of Slavic and Eastern European writing will realize is that Blatnik makes a bold statement in the above excerpt, setting himself apart from those who dwell upon the suffering endured under Communism, and aligning his project with others that portray life as it's being lived right now in the new order of things. In light of the prefabricated Central and Eastern European writerly role of author-as-cultural-authority, Blatnik's sour note of dispraise for the Western book-buying public's suspected motives lends his image a nonheroic realness. It is not inappropriate to observe here that before Blatnik became a writer he played bass in a punk band—a fact which illuminates *Law of Desire's* inscription, a couplet by Ian Curtis from "Disorder" off of *Unknown Pleasures*, the first Joy Division album:

I've been waiting for a guide to come and take me by the  
hand  
Could these sensations make me feel the pleasures of a  
normal man?

Blatnik's "new" stories conserve the spirit of their time and place but omit incidental detail, and this makes them accessible to any reader at any time in any place. Unlike the characters in his previous collection *Skinswaps* (1990, English translation 1998), who represent abstractions, the ones in *Law of Desire* are types, and the author's treatment of them is neither mythical nor naturalistic; they're generalized from particulars and presented with a figural realism. Imagination and empathy bring them into being.

Rather than resort to melodrama, the stories in this collection address the passional secret places of life, the flow and recoil of our sympathetic consciousness, the tide of our sensitive awareness. Having testified in court, the protagonist of "Key Witness" steps outside amid the stunned onlookers excitedly murmuring to each other, and with no self-righteousness or self-pity, considers the irony in his situation:

I am not the same as them, he thought and joined the hustle and bustle, thinking about the tobacconist in the side street who must still have plenty of matches since hardly anyone passes by at this time of day. All the men in raincoats followed him, as though they too were craving a smoke. Now I truly stand no chance, he thought, of dying in the fashion of a Biedermeier picture: wrapped in a woolen shawl, reclining in a worn armchair, a grandchild in my lap.

While portraying the tendency of world-altering events to divide life into *before* and *after*, Blatnik has taken care not to forget those whose choices belong in the past—the tense émigrés of “Too Close Together” for example:

The soldier motions for him to drive on. The man smiles. He knows you have to smile; that way everything’s easier. Beads of sweat trickle down his face.

The woman looks at him through slit eyes.

“I don’t like your shirt,” she says finally. It has too many stripes. Too close together. No, I don’t like it. When we finally get out of this hellhole you’ll get yourself a new one in the first town.”

Politics and history exist in *Law of Desire* as currents of thought; emotion, sensation, spirit, and action flowing through the private life of this or that person during the course of a day, even when what’s happening is extraordinary.

Building upon “The Day Tito Died” in *Skinswaps*, the story in this book that most explicitly intertwines and disentangles the collective and the passional is “Day of Independence,” a soliloquy spoken by someone who was conceived on the day the nation gained its freedom (one thinks happily of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*)—which also happens to be the day his or her parents met and fell in love:

This is the story Papa will tell me when I ask how I came into this world, and he’ll tell it to me softly, as though embarrassed about things being the way they were, about his palm bleeding and about not finding anything when he reached in his pocket. And I won’t understand why he’s embarrassed, just as you don’t understand why I’m embarrassed when I tell you this story, and just as your children won’t understand you when the time comes for them to know about it.

This family's legacy of embarrassment signals the presence in *Law of Desire* of delicate feelings, which arise for Blatnik's characters at the intersection of liberation (and/or oppression), familial ties, sex, love, music, and writing. To take another example, the courage of Liza, the young protagonist of "Total Recall"—anticipating the faintheartedness of the speaker of "And Since I Couldn't Sleep" in *You Do Understand* (2009, English translation 2010)—consists in the way she safeguards within herself a precious quantity of tenderness, even as she acknowledges the truth about Mark, the first boy she has had sex with:

Actually, thinks Liza, I may have had it quite good with Mark Novak. It could have been worse; some of the girls who dared talk about these things told stories which to Liza seemed far worse. Mark picked up her clothes afterwards and dusted them off; Mark gave her a hand up; after, Mark said they'd go for a soft drink or a coffee; Mark said okay, some other time then, when she said she couldn't go for a soft drink or a coffee because she had to go home straight away; Mark said he'd call, though he didn't, but at least he said he would—she heard from her friends that some guys really were like that, maybe nearly all of them were, except Mark.

A troubled heterosexuality, centered on male characters even when the protagonists are female, is a major burden of *Law of Desire*, and Liza's tenderness resonates all the more given her jaded girlfriends' testimony that the fractured relationships of the older generation are being visited upon the youth of today.

The writing life, as a subject, makes for the loveliest work in the book. The narrator of "Nora's Face" relates an imaginary visit he regularly pays to James and Nora Joyce where they remain forever stranded overnight at the Ljubljana railroad station in 1904, about to spend the night in a public park, having missed the last train to Trieste. The writer becomes a neo-Joycean protagonist, looking on at an epiphany that his aesthetic commitments bar him from experiencing for himself:

The man bends to the woman sitting next to a suitcase. A young woman, looking at him as a wife does at the husband she has wanted her entire life and also wants the very next moment. (Yes, this is the way it would be written in a novel the man would refuse to read.)

There is humor in the narrator's status of artist-as-young-man:

I come here often. I watch. I think of places I could go.  
Some day. I'm in training. I practice a lot. On my machine. I  
buy all the new software.

The story's conclusion lifts this lonely figure out of caricature and into character à la *Dubliners*, as, in a vulnerable moment, within the abandoned urban bazaar of postmodernity, he divulges the reason for his interest in the couple, and by doing so has an epiphany of his own at last:

What else is there to tell? Sometimes, sometimes I seem to see Nora's face among the silicon dummies in store windows. I rush there, but, as you know, the faces change like holograms—what you see depends on where you watch them from. And I can never again find the spot from which I'd seen Nora's face. Then I press my lips to the glass and for a long time taste the traces of neon rain.

The dramatic irony with which Blatnik reveals his character introduces a note of pathos that's intrinsic to his subject.

And yet in *Law of Desire's* longest story, "What We Talk About," the author exchanges such emotional ambience for a different ambition: the metafictional representation of the relationship between a writer and his people. Blatnik's achievement with this piece is to have formulated in colloquial terms a grand and complex statement of artistic intent. The narrator-protagonist is a writer who has written the same books as Blatnik (he translated Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* into Slovene, for example). As the story opens, he has gone to the American Center in Ljubljana to return a copy of Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. There he notices a young woman reading *Esquire* with a book called *Female Criticism* closed on the table before her. A delightfully understated intimation of allegory dawns on the reader, as the pair's chat (flirtatious on his part, inscrutable on hers) turns to a subject that's important to them both—aesthetics:

She said it was too sad, that all the characters talked past one another. I said something foolish, I said: But that's what life is like!

"Right," she said. "That's why."

They go out for coffee and run out of things to say to each other. He asks her what she does for a living and she says she doesn't know. He drives her home. They go up to her apartment for more coffee and converse awkwardly. She evades his curiosity as to what she does for work, saying only that she talks on the phone a lot. He leaves, memorizing her phone number on his way out the door (it's taped up by the phone). Back at home, he works on a story. It isn't going well:

Typing none other than the stupid story about what one can talk about. Understandably enough, what kept occurring to me now was that we not only can, but also must, talk about everything, even about things we used to only do, and talked about only sparingly or, if possible, not at all. But by following that line of thinking I upset the entire structure of little hints I'd been dropping laboriously throughout the text, and the whole thing was now leading nowhere.

The relevance for the narrator of what has been transpiring begins to become clear: his art has not caught up with his life, so to speak; and the story he is writing, formerly tightly controlled, now takes on the implications of experience, and turns against itself. He watches the Robert Altman film *Short Cuts*, based on Carver's short stories, with its homemaker mom who works for a phone sex service; then he dials the mysterious young woman's number. She answers, requests his payment code, and hangs up when he says he doesn't have one, telling him, "Then we won't talk." This impasse drives our hero out of the house to a movie premiere he has tickets to: and whom should he encounter while in line outside the theater but the mysterious young woman—who happens to need a ticket. They sit together at the movie and go out for drinks afterwards, the man growing cheekier the more rounds they put away. Delightful graces go flitting across the surface of these depths; for example, an amusing play upon the stereotypical male tendency to explain the perfectly obvious to any woman unfortunate enough to be standing within earshot. They walk to his car, and still she will not tell him what she does for work. Two men approach, threatening the woman; after getting hit a few times, the man beats them up with a steering wheel lock. The two enter the man's apartment. She tends his cuts and finally describes her job: she provides an anonymous service whereby clients tell her true stories over the phone and pick up her written versions of them at a secure location afterwards. Here is the story's climax:

"But why do they tell them to you? Why not to some answering machine? Or, even better, to a tape-recorder on their own desk?"

"Because then the story would remain the same. The way they tell it. And they don't like it that way. The way it is, it weighs down on their chests."

"And if they tell it to you, then what?"

"Then I write it down my way. And when they read it, it's a different story. Somebody else's story. And then it's easier for them to decide whether they were justified in letting it weigh on them. Or whether it might be possible, or even more reasonable, to simply forget it."

Yes, there was a logic to her explanation. A slightly bizarre logic perhaps, but then I increasingly find that all logic is bizarre, although it may not seem so at first.

"How do they get to read it?"

"I write it in a kind of third-person narrative. I don't make anything up, I don't embellish. My style's realist, even hyper-realist. All their self-accusations, justified or exaggerated, and all their cheap self-pity and regrets—I leave all that out. What remains is just the story such as it happened. No interpretation. And when they evaluate such a skeleton, their judgment can easily turn out to be different from the one they'd passed before."

By this point it has occurred to the reader—if not to the narrator—that the nameless woman is none other than the muse of prose fiction. As she yields to her strange attraction to the protagonist and tells him *her* story, the beauty of Blatnik's conception washes over us, and we luxuriate in a sparsely elegant allegory of creation. Now that he finds himself without a confidante, the man, addressing no one in particular, poses these unanswerable questions—the very ones which give rise to the fiction-writing impulse:

I considered explaining the scientific theory of how a measurement itself has an effect on the measured quantity and asking whether she didn't think that, when telling a story, even to a total stranger, people adapt it to such an extent that talking about objectivity was completely out of the question. But I was cut short in my musings by the realization that if things were the way she was saying they were, then I could not possibly do what I had been contemplating doing for the

last couple of minutes: I could not tell her my story. The one that weighed on my chest.

So, then, I thought, what on earth can we talk about? About everything, okay, but does that have any sense at all now?

In clean uncluttered prose, Blatnik relates an encounter between a mildly narcissistic writer and his muse, a freelance Narration Processor who contracts with an undisclosed firm to present human lives as they would be if they existed in a state of ataraxy, emancipated from both tranquility and emotion. Her labor becomes a metaphor for our condition. The law of desire states that what we talk about is not the same thing as the way we talk about it. Warm dry humor, and an appreciation for frailties, peccadilloes, and misdemeanors lighten this collection whose themes emerge from subjects that dwell in the shadow of an immense brutality.

If a reliable measure of the achievement of a written work is the degree to which it has expanded the resources of imaginative literature in its original language, then by the same token a translation's success might reliably be assessed according to how far it expands the resources of its destination language. Tamara M. Soban's efforts in her field are on a par with Blatnik's in his. She has created an English tone for these Slovenian stories that fills an absence which one had not known was there, but which now seems always to have called out for this strangely familiar articulacy to echo throughout its passages. Reading *Law of Desire* we recognize an aspect of human life that is not time-factored.