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The Isolated Protagonist: Three Novels by Orhan Pamuk, Jenny McPhee, and Laura Stevenson

THE PROTAGONISTS OF THESE THREE RECENT NOVELS are people who live on the periphery of society, and so seem also to live on the outskirts of their own lives, observing, commenting, never really engaging—with one exception. Though there is a lot of sex in these books, strenuously and even fearlessly depicted, the exceptional moment is oddly enough just a kiss. Orhan Pamuk's celebrated new novel, *The Museum of Innocence,* follows the obsessive and ultimately tragic love of the wealthy Istanbul heir Kemal for his impoverished cousin Füsun.[1] Jenny McPhee's *A Man of No Moon,* originally and sketchily evoked by Cesare Pavese's romance with an American actress against the glamorous background of the post-World War II film industry in Italy, shows the poet Dante Omero Sabato conducting affairs concurrently with two sisters; his duplicity allows him to stay far away, no matter how close he comes to each of them.[2] Laura C. Stevenson's second novel (for adults—she has written two more for adolescents) *Return in Kind* re-creates a New England town in which Eleanor Randall Klimowski manages to touch the lives of all the main characters while remaining profoundly out of touch herself.[3] But whereas Kemal Bey (Bey is an honorific: Mr. Kemal) and Dante Sabato are self-enclosed because of their characters, Eleanor Randall is sealed off because of deafness, and so she is the character who finally hearkens.

During the past year, I have read heaps of novels: while returning one sub-heap to the AAUW recycling bin in my town, I reflected that the three novels under discussion were the only ones that left me haunted, whose revenants commanded my attention. The main characters are complex and surprising, despite the neurotic repetitiveness of their behavior; they breathe and grow enough to warrant the reader's third-person affection. And they are embedded in detailed worlds, worlds worth visiting for their views, their lovely textures, their fugitive scents and fragments of music: late twentieth century Istanbul, post-World War

[1] THE MUSEUM OF INNOCENCE, by *Orhan Pamuk.* Trans. by *Maureen Freely.* Alfred A. Knopf, $28.95; Vintage, $15.95.
[2] A MAN OF NO MOON, by *Jenny McPhee.* Counterpoint. $14.95p.
[3] RETURN IN KIND, by *Laura C. Stevenson.* Separate Star. $15.00p.

II Rome and Tuscany (with brief excursions to Venice, Lisbon and Capri!), and a couple of sleepy towns in Massachusetts and Vermont. Yet those same stories also manage to be romantic in Robert Louis Stevenson's sense: their characters are universal and empty-open enough, I discovered, to let me identify with the role of the main character and live through its action, first person. Here is what Stevenson wrote in "A Gossip on Romance":

> No art produces illusion; in the theatre we never forget that we are in the theatre; and while we read a story, we sit wavering between two minds, now merely clapping our hands at the merit of the performance, now condescending to take an active part in fancy with the characters. This last is the triumph of romantic story-telling: when the reader consciously plays at being the hero, the scene is a good scene. Now, in character-studies the pleasure that we take is critical; we watch, we approve, we smile at incongruities, we are moved to sudden heats of sympathy with courage, suffering, or virtue. But the characters are still themselves, they are not us; the more clearly they are depicted, the more widely do they stand away from us, the more imperiously do they thrust us back into our place as a spectator. I cannot identify myself with Rawdon Crawley or with Eugène de Rastignac, for I have scarce a hope or fear in common with them. It is not character but incident that woos us out of our reserve. Something happens as we desire to have it happen to ourselves; some situation, that we have long dallied with in fancy, is realized in the story with enticing and appropriate details. Then we forget the characters; then we push the hero aside; then we plunge into the tale in our own person and bathe in fresh experience; and then, and then only, do we say we have been reading a romance.[4]

These novels offer a rush of incident that carries us away, as well as character-study.

All three books deal with love triangles, sometimes more than one; in each case there is a happy dyad into which the triangle could resolve, but the self-enclosures of Kemal, Dante and Eleanor stand in the way. Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* opens with Kemal engaged to (and already sleeping with) Sibel, a girl who is aristocratic if not rich, and who has spent a number of years studying in France, which has given her "modern" ideas about premarital sex. While buying a handbag for Sibel, he encounters his distant cousin Füsun; it is love at first sight, and a few days later Kemal has invited Füsun to a derelict apartment his mother keeps as a kind of attic, stocked with old furniture and castaways, including the tricycle they'd both ridden as children. There he eventually deflowers her, and they both fall in love. Clearly, the love triangle should collapse to a line, the shortest path between Kemal and

[4] *Essays by Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. by William Lyon Phelps (New York, 1918), pp. 220–234.

Füsun. However, it soon becomes clear that this collapse is unthinkable to Kemal, whose engagement to Sibel is held in place by his entire social world: his parent, her parents, all their friends, the economic-social caste structure. His fantasy is that he can marry Sibel and maintain Füsun on the side as a mistress; after all, she is only a shopgirl.

However, she turns out to be a singularly tough-minded shopgirl. When she discovers that he won't break off the engagement, she disappears. This disappearance is the beginning of Kemal's lifelong obsession with the love of his life, whom he cannot have ever again—except once, the exception that proves the rule. The chapter titles evoke his predicament: "The Agony of Waiting," "An Anatomical Chart of Love Pains," "Don't Lean Back That Way, You Might Fall," "The Consolation of Objects," "By Now There Was Not a Moment When I Wasn't Thinking of Her," "Füsun Doesn't Live Here Any More," "The Streets That Reminded Me of Her," "The Shadows and Ghosts I Mistook for Füsun." After a number of months, still hopeless, Kemal breaks off his engagement. Very few people take the pain of lost love to such extremes, and yet Kemal's obsession is just (writ large) a universal human trait—finding consolation in objects—about which the great anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote at length. A gift is permeated by the person who offers it; this is why we find ourselves under obligation to someone from whom we accept a gift (and feel that later on we must reciprocate), and also why we cannot throw a gift away without internal conflict, nor even give it away. If we inherit furniture or pictures or carpets, our houses are also populated by the shades of those to whom they used to belong. Things have souls.

Kemal's secondhand apartment begins to become a museum, The Museum of Innocence, a shrine to his lost love. The reader, patiently turning no fewer than 730 pages, has to make a commitment; she is left with the sense that the novel itself is a shrine to lost love, and that by reading all the way through it she discovers her own losses there, enshrined. But this is far from the whole story. Oddly, soon after Kemal's broken engagement, Füsun reappears; but she is married. Kemal then begins a masquerade that everyone involved (Füsun, her forlorn husband, her parents—with whom they live, his newly widowed mother) can see through, but which the customs of Turkish society allow him to going on playing: he pretends to be an older relative who just drops in from time to time for dinner. He loves her so much, he simply wants to look at her and hear the sound of her voice: but he does this almost every night "for seven years and ten months exactly." Meanwhile, he is adding to the contents of his museum, stealing salt cellars and china dogs, spoons and playing cards, all of which he conscientiously later replaces. He uses them for a while as sexual fetishes, and then they take their place in his museum; and again, his bizarre behavior is really just a potentiation of ordinary human habits, like gluing photographs into the family album or holding onto the library of a beloved aunt, books one will never read.

Kemal is nuts; there is no doubt about that. The strictures of mid-

twentieth-century Turkish society, and his internalization of them, have ruined his life and turned him in on himself. Moreover, his obsession in the long run also ruins Füsun. She has ambitions to become an actress (based quite realistically on her own striking physical beauty) that she can never realize because of the way they become entangled with Kemal's masquerade. More tragically, she once really loved him; but seven years of masquerade, like seven years in Elfland, has left that possibility of love hollow, poisoned, ghostly, fatal. The beloved objects have become more real than the people who owned them. Thus once Füsun dies under mysterious circumstances which the reader must persevere past 700 pages to discover, Kemal can only plan his museum on Çukurcuma Avenue, near the Galatasaray Lycée in Istanbul. The museum is partly imaginary, partly real, as Pamuk's voiceover becomes one melodic line in an elaborate counterpoint that also includes the last avowal of Kemal on the final page: "Let everyone know, I lived a very happy life." It is the happiness of the artist, the novelist, more universally any human being who remembers and recounts. But pity the lovely creatures fixed in the amber of speech.

Dante Omero Sabato is a great man of letters who specializes in betrayal and kinky sex and elaborate plans for his own demise: he is A Man of No Moon. The characters in this novel constantly discuss the film industry and works of literature; walking along the Grand Canal, Dante and the two American sisters Prudence and Gladys admire the full moon reflected in the canal, and Prudence remarks that in *The Return of the Native*, Thomas Hardy revives the old superstition that if a male is born on a night with no moon, he will remain loveless, melancholy, and suicidal. Prudence and Gladys Godfrey are in Italy to make something more of their careers as third-tier film stars, to cash in on the postwar boom of the Italian film industry where Visconti, Rossellini, De Sica and Fellini are working their celluloid magic.

The apparent structure of the novel is geographical: the chapter titles are: Rome, Castiglioncello, Rome, Capri, Venice, Castiglioncello, Rome, The Aeolians, Rome, Castiglioncello, Lisbon, Castiglioncello. Castiglioncello (a seaside resort just south of Livorno) is Dante's refuge, where he retires to a house left to him by his great aunt Pia, a Roman who disapproved of his Florentine father, and to whom his parents sent him when his infant brother died. He never manages to forgive himself for wishing that the usurper baby would die or his mother for refusing to give up her subsequent grief. Rome is where he lives as a man of letters. Capri, Venice, the Aeolian islands and Lisbon are real-life movie sets to which he is drawn by the two sisters, places where acting and human action become thoroughly confounded. He has women tucked away in most of these places, servants and shopgirls, and beds them in between the two sisters, in an elaborate dance of betrayal and rough sex. If this were all there were to the novel, it would be merely an elegant, literary form of pornography.

But beneath all this structural hither and yon is a more complex

temporal structure, flashbacks to Dante's life before, during and after the war. These flashbacks give him substance and win our sympathy for him; despite all his elaborate plans to kill himself, the reader turns the pages hoping against hope that he will finally accept Prudence's remarkably generous, somehow renewable, offers of love. Chapter Two takes us back to the loss of his brother and to his first taste of violence and betrayal, where he flees and then returns to disrupt (by screaming) an attack on his aunt Pia's caretaker Ubaldo, who is being beaten for his affair with a neighbor's wife. Chapter Six returns us the Rome of his youth, where he befriends a young man with the same name as his lost brother, Giovanni, discovers the world of Roman cinema, and meets Germana, another provincial who takes up with both him and his friend, a fact she makes him conceal for two years. When Germana ultimately becomes pregnant (who is the father?) he rejects her; she is hit by a bus (was it suicide?), and Giovanni is killed soon after he joins the Resistance (did he ever suspect?). Chapter Seven returns us again to pre-war Rome, where he and his friend Tullio (who later introduces him to the Godfrey sisters) plan to travel to Hollywood; just as they are about to leave, Dante's father dies, so Tullio departs without him. In Chapter Eight we find him interrogating, torturing and killing German soldiers as he works for the Italian Resistance undercover from his villa in Castiglioncello. Chapter Nine revisits his affair with a young Jewish shopgirl before and after the war, and in Chapter Ten his mother dies in Aunt Pia's villa, in a cholera epidemic.

Why are we so willing to forgive Dante, to hope that he will survive himself, to hope that he will finally be able to love? Here, I think, the universal insight is that all love involves betrayal; there is no such thing as purity in human relations. But love is possible because we human beings are able to tell the truth, apologize, and forgive. The irony of Dante's situation is that he is able to tell the truth in his writing, in his novels and in the ghostwriting of this novel (which he narrates), which explains why the Italian public recognizes his greatness. Yet he cannot tell the truth in his life: the only time he levels with someone is when he is sure that the relationship is over. Intimacy is more terrifying to him than death. Jenny McPhee goes to great pains to make this book a beautiful artifact: the plot is closely constructed, the characters always bring other works of art into their conversation and so insist on the analogy with their own actions, the sex is cinematic, and the writing is often very poetic: "The sea in winter is a study in rejection. The water ice cold, the air bitter, the wind slapping you away with its wide blustery hands. 'Don't come near me,' the sea commands." But beauty after all is not enough, and despite what Keats wrote, it is not truth. The author, wiser than Dante, gives us her judgment on what this fruitless project of beautification leads to at the end of the book, when the ghost-voice must become hers.

Laura Stevenson's *Return in Kind* begins with a death, the death of Letty Hendrickson, who was Nathaniel Brantford's ward; Nathaniel

Brantford proves to have been the *genius loci* of Mather College, somewhere in western Massachusetts. Her death is registered in the thoughts of Helena Woodhouse (a Vermont resident and trustee of the college, who will herself have died by the end of the novel), Eleanor Randall Klimowski (who is deaf, and the protagonist, though it takes many pages for her central role to emerge), Charlie (Charlotte) Reynolds (a young horsewoman just going off to college, and daughter of David Reynolds, a divorced professor at Mather), and Joel Hendrickson (Letty's widower, Nathaniel's former protégé and a colleague of David's). Unlike the two prior novels, the narration here is carried by many different voices. This multiplicity of characters and voices is initially confusing, but if the reader will be patient and stay with them, the tangled meadow starts to look more like a garden, with raised beds and sunken channels and slowly revealed footpaths. Indeed, after reading those other two fiercely single-minded narratives, I found the somewhat inharmonious, clamoring, unreconciled chorus in this book refreshing.

Letty's death at age sixty-two, of cancer, presents Joel with a mystery: she has left most of her possessions (including the valuable books, artwork and furniture bequeathed to her earlier by Nathaniel) to Mather College, but to her husband she has left property he didn't even know she'd owned: the Ward trust, a farmhouse and some land in Vermont ski country. Why hadn't she ever mentioned it to him? He arranges a visit to inspect the place; David Reynolds has always gone up there for summer vacation, so he makes the arrangements. Charlie drives Joel up to Vermont, dazzling him with her youthful allure, and their family friend Eleanor rents him a room in her charming farmhouse. Eleanor is the daughter of a scholar and herself a scholar, but she lost her professorship when she became deaf, soon after she'd lost her concert pianist husband; now she lives full-time in Vermont (in her father's summer place), where she raised her daughter and supports herself by cleaning houses, writing her book on Renaissance literature in the evenings. She never complains, and she has a way with horses, so Charlie goes to her for help and counsel.

One of the most arresting features of this book is the evocation of Eleanor's experience as a deaf person. When the narrative is in her voice, we only hear the fragments of conversation that she hears, and with her we try to guess the rest of the sentences from context. So this is how one of their first encounters proceeds: "Joel stopped as they reached the yard and studied the house. 'David told me *mxmx* your father *mxmx* Robert Randall *mxmx* classicist *mxmx* this place.' She put the statement together and answered cautiously. 'Yes, he bought it in the Fifties; it was run down, but we fixed it up, planted the garden, and mowed the fields." Eleanor has learned to live with reactions of surprise or annoyance from her interlocutors, when she can't guess exactly what they said; she has learned to be a conversational minimalist and retreated into a well-mannered, profound isolation. By the novel's end, after so many *mxmx*'s, we know what this aural isolation feels like.

As Joel looks into the legal and historical documents surrounding the property he has unexpectedly acquired, he learns unimaginable things about his wife. He also learns some history from neighbors and the family burial plot: the first Wards started the farm in the early 1800s; their son Robert built the house around 1840; his son Henry married Alice Boyd who survived until 1911, and her younger son married Mary Bartlett. Mary Bartlett Ward lost her husband and three babies in the influenza epidemic of 1918; she ran the farm with her two brothers and her one surviving child Clara. And Clara, it seems, left behind a diary! Joel discovers it and gives it to Charlie to read, and Charlie shares it with him and Eleanor: it is the record of an unhappy love affair. The brilliant and willful Clara, raised on a farm but in love with books, falls in love with Brent, the sergeant of her brother Asa, back from military service in 1929.

As the chapters unfold, we discover that Charlie's father David is having an affair with a young woman not much older than Charlie, that David is (therefore) worried that Joel has designs on Charlie, that Eleanor is a wonderful person whom everyone depends on, and that Joel's real estate agent has designs on him! Meanwhile, Charlie, Joel and Eleanor are reading through the diary to the unhappy outcome of Clara's love affair and learning about its aftermath from Helena Woodhouse, who knew Mary and Clara and, more to the point, Clara's daughter. That second narrative crosscuts the first, and by the end of the book, explains why Joel has inherited the property, why his marriage to Lettie was so unhappy, why Nathaniel and Lettie's relations were impenetrable, and why Nathaniel ceased to be a productive scholar and never allowed himself to make love to his best friend, Helena. The resolution of all these mysteries allows us to imagine a happy ending for the two people whom we have been rooting for all along: Joel (who learns from Eleanor how to pick up his pencil and start writing again) and Eleanor (who receives the well-deserved kiss I mentioned at the beginning of this review). Among other things, Eleanor learns that words on the page, amber-speech, can become fluid again and flow as a reliable means of communication. Words on the page, handed back and forth between two poeple who care for each other, can serve as a conduit to truth-telling, to friendship, to the creation of novel and world-making declarations. Among those declarations may perhaps be included the exemplary statement which the philosopher J. L. Austin offers first and last to illustrate what he means by "performative utterance," speech that goes far beyond the routine function of description because it *enacts*: I do.