

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Max Winter

Matters II

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As Guy Standing explains, the precariat is the first class in history whose qualifications far exceed the requirements of the monotonous, overly simplified, and mentally and physically exhausting work they must do in order to survive. *Matters II* takes up the task of portraying this paradox: to represent the universal through the individual. This is a novel of the individualized precariat – but not merely a literary depiction of precarity in personal terms. By the end of the book, we come to know the Matters – Grete and Gregor – from the inside: through their feelings, thoughts, and the suffering they endure amid mundane routines and tragic turns of fate. Yet through them, the text reaches beyond the individual to offer insight into the inner logic of millions born into, or pushed into, similar lives.

The central contradiction lies in the fact that the main characters are socially invisible, and yet the novel speaks of them – thus rendering them visible. *Matters* stages this contradiction performatively: the patchwork of protocols falls victim to the shredder page by page; even the sound of the machine echoes in the reader's ears. While its characters can be called individuals in terms of biography, their behaviors, lives, and routines exhibit the typical traits of the declassified. This type – the invisible, discarded human – is symbolically shredded immediately after death, as the society to which they belonged has no interest in them; to many, they appear only as noise, as excess.

The novel is experimental in form: philosophical and lyrical interludes, streams of consciousness, and multiply refracted narratives in the style of a protocol – presented in several versions – define its texture. This is the mode of reading the author offers the reader: deeply ironic in the Romantic sense, and layered with ambiguity.

The protagonists, a couple living the precarious life of the underclass, transcend gender: whether their existence is male or female is almost irrelevant. Their identity is captured better in terms like Billigjobber (cheap laborer), Verrechnungseinheit (billing unit), Bedienstetenfleischpuppe (flesh puppet in service), or service-sector prole.

The first-person narrator who performs the act of reading and destroying is not the writer – just a random reader of what remains legible on paper. They do not produce these stories; they erase them – stories written by others, the protocol keepers, and the Matters themselves. And the narrative chain being obliterated is doubly invisible: not only are the characters – the precariat, who make up the backbone and mass of today's globalized societies – rendered unseen, but so too is the very infrastructure of social and economic systems that condemn the many to a life of anonymity and insignificance. The novel therefore draws attention not just to class, but to the deep forces shaping contemporary life.

It also reflects on other central social phenomena of our time: the propaganda press functioning as “marketing agencies of rage,” the dominance of leisure by flat screens and smartphones, the politics of migration and collective responses to it (the “sacrificial feast”) – all of these flash briefly but vividly in the narrative of precarious everyday life.

The critique of global capitalism unfolds through the objects screaming in Grete's mind – expressed in the language of other disciplines like chemistry or mining. From isolated commodities – the sole of a sneaker, granite gravestones, aluminum packaging – the narrative plunges into the hidden structures of global commodity flows, from molecular compounds to the complex geographies of labor and extraction.

In addition to its first paradox – making the “swallowed” and forgotten members of society (in)visible – the novel grapples with a second: the book is declared an (un)product by being published in only 101 numbered copies. In taking its own material form seriously, it becomes a model for its theme: a radical critique of the global market and the commodity form.

Yet as a text, it too rides the winds of globalization. At the time of its first publication, it had already been translated into American English and Hungarian. The author's intention was not merely to have the text linguistically translated, but also to adapt it to the specific conditions of global capitalism in the respective society. Winter's aim was a transnational narrative, one that would not simply “live in translation,” but exist between worlds – through transposition rather than mere translation.

LANGUAGE: German / Deutsch

CENSORSHIP STATUS: