

War as a Rhizome

Fredric Jameson on Ben Pastor's Martin Bora novels

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T hird Reich detective stories are required to be politically correct. It

is obligatory for the protagonist to register his distance from the regime somehow. Otherwise, on the reader's part, no identification, no complicity! Something in the fine print – anti-Bolshevism, perhaps, or indignation at the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles – must give us licence to distinguish him from those who are National Socialists out of conviction. The historian Geoffrey Barraclough pointed out, long ago, that Hitler's was Germany's first genuine bourgeois revolution. So, perhaps it's a matter of class?

The reason, Martin-Heinz Douglas *Freiherr* von Bora, is that you are all that we're striving to leave behind, the kind of Germany of lords and ladies and generals' sons and estates ... I'm not even sure you are fighting for the same Germany I'm fighting for.

The quotation is from *The Road to Ithaca* (2014), one of thirteen novels published so far in the Martin Bora series by Ben Pastor, a pseudonym for the Italian-born author Maria Verbena Volpi.* The man speaking is the son of a family working on Bora's ancestral estate (*Freiherr* means 'baron'); and he himself is a 'real' Nazi, that is a proletarian thug driven by class *ressentiment*. Both men are in the army, but between them is all the difference there is between an NCO and an officer – which may remind us of Gottfried Benn's remark that during the *Nazizeit* joining the army was the only elegant form of 'inner emigration'. So it was that long after the war an aristocratic Wehrmacht clung to the self-serving myth that the crimes and excesses of the SS had nothing to do with them or their mission. Bora's own excuse is also a familiar one:

My aggressiveness ... is a reaction. Against the wrongs done to our Fatherland after the Great War, against those nations that smother our vital space, and against demands that we keep justifying ourselves to the world as Germans.

He omits his own most striking virtue: fidelity. (After 1934 the army pledge to the constitution was rewritten: Bora is thereby bound by an oath of allegiance to his Führer.)

In the end, however, our discomfort with this protagonist, who is not an antisemite, may lie elsewhere. Bora isn't merely a professional soldier, he loves war:

Ever since Spain I've had seven years of great fighting. The *glory* of it, the bloody idea of it ... Spain, Poland, Russia – I volunteered for all. Being in war is as much fun as being in love, when the want's in it.

And perhaps even more incriminating:

I long to be the first one to see the Volga. I dream of it after dark, wide as a lake, an artery in the great body of Russia. Still, even at the gates of Stalingrad and its river, 3200 kilometres away from Berlin, we Germans stand on a mere southwestern sliver of the endless Euro-Asiatic plain. It helps to consider that all of us, ancestrally, hail from here. We belong here more than we know, much more than the enemy wants to admit.

Before we deal further with the *Schuldfrage*, however, we should note that these novels are not only detective stories, they are also historical novels; and this suggests that Bora will have to play two distinct generic roles, occupy two distinct narrative agencies, simultaneously. The detective solves crimes; the protagonist of the historical novel, by contrast, passively receives and observes History. The sleuth who, operating in a tense wartime situation, is assigned by his superiors to ferret out the truth of this or that potentially scandalous mystery, must also assume the status of what György Lukács in his classic work on the historical novel called the average or 'mediocre' (*mittelmässig*) hero, Waverley or Fabrice, who observes great historical collisions from the sidelines. Lukács recommends that the historical novelist never allow history's inevitable 'world-historical individuals' to be central to a novel (although they must necessarily be so in the historical drama). Indeed, Tolstoy's caricature of Napoleon was not his most successful literary decision. Bora, though scarcely a mediocre hero, never interacts with world-historical figures directly – never sees

Mussolini in the flesh in Salò, for example – but only registers his presence in a mediated way:

He also read expected but unnerving details about the deep antipathy among fascist leaders and corps, of Denzo's antagonism towards the RNG and vice versa, of Marshal Graziani's outbursts and Mussolini's resentful silence with almost everyone.

It's true that another of the novels is concerned with the Duce's compromising letters, and his suicide attempt before the spectacular rescue from Gran Sasso; but these events too are mediated, given to us as a story within the story.

There is a more serious problem, and Aristotle supplies its formulation: 'The unity of a plot does not consist, as some suppose, in its having one man as its subject. An infinity of things befall that one man, some of which it is impossible to reduce to unity; and in like manner there are many actions of one man which cannot be made to form one action.' A biographical existence is not a complete action, not a single event; it does not have closure (although its conclusion may ultimately be considered a 'destiny'). This excellent advice is, however, vitiated by a presupposition we may no longer share, namely that on the collective or the individual level, there exist 'events' which it is possible to 'reduce to unity', or whose actions 'can be made to form one action'. In our present context, History itself is no longer a functional category of closure. The unity of 'the Second World War', or 'the Eastern Front', or even 'the Battle of Stalingrad', must be constructed by the individual, in this case by Bora's existential experience, and is lent an appearance of geographical unity in the

protagonist's displacements, from Civil War Spain to Barbarossa or an Italian peninsula invaded by Allied forces.

But, despite biographical logic, there remains a certain contingency in these displacements, as though the novelist had simply decided it would be useful to have Bora present at key sites and moments in the unfolding of the war, at places of atrocity (Katyn Forest, or Rome for the Ardeatine massacre) or crucial developments (such as the Republic of Salò or the Battle of Stalingrad). It is a contingency which haunts all representations of history.

Take, for example, Kubrick's splendid historical film *Barry Lyndon* (1975), an adaptation of Thackeray's not exactly famous novel. Its craftsmanship and power aren't enough to rescue it from a lingering feeling of gratuitousness. Why this resurrection of an 18th-century battle now? Unlike the Second World War, we cannot say that it is an abiding subject of interest. A passionate denunciation of war in general? A veiled comment on Vietnam, then? An illustration of the techniques of pre-motorised warfare? An object lesson in the treatment of veterans? A rehearsal and finally a substitute for the Napoleon film Kubrick never made? None of these extra-artistic justifications takes us very far in accounting for the necessity of this artwork, though they do open onto fields of inquiry in their own right. And in general our interest in historical works always seems dependent on something extra-aesthetic: on the questions posed by the history books, for example (what were Hitler or Stalin really like?); on this or that current fad (Nazi materials, of course, exert a seemingly perennial fascination); on our historicity in general as it has developed since the French Revolution, and been sated by offerings from Walter Scott to Ken Burns, Tolstoy to

Margaret Mitchell, Hilary Mantel to Ben Pastor. Pastor seems to have invented a new way of combining the whole and the part in what TV producers might call the limited series.

Yet it might chasten us to remember that as a result of our increased historicity today all novels are historical (when not, indeed, science-fictional): all carry with them the fatal chronological questions 'Before what?' and 'After what?' Perhaps, then, it might be preferable to shift from the horizontal to the vertical: to see what it is that Bora's 'history' is made of, what it offers us. For novels are put together out of all kinds of raw material; they don't really have the purity of the older genres. Rather than thinking in terms of linear narrative, we might do better to imagine a pile of separate and uneven strata, geological layers, irregular laminates, each one like an encyclopedic relief map, tactile as braille: each novel is a unique conjuncture of these, momentarily co-ordinated as with a tacking nail, and just as easily disjoined into a scattered pile of themes waiting for the conjuncture of a new event, a new novel.

What we call the War, then, fans out into a set of geographical, institutional, chronological constellations which translate our general categories into specific perceptions and encounters. We stumble, to be sure, over a great deal of military hardware – weaponry, tanks, aircraft – about which we are given a degree of technical information above and beyond what the garden variety policeman needs to know. Landscapes, meanwhile, return Europe to a bewildering multiplicity of topographies:

It took them close to forty minutes to negotiate the seamed, cleft terrain skirting the bottom of the cliff. Once out of the ravine they faced an incline in full sun, hairy with drying grass and like the hump of a great albino bison. It was from this north

side that Agias Irinis could be reached, by a natural ramp that sloped gradually into baldness; its foot instead was bushy, filled with cicadas, pristine. A scent of wild thyme rode the breeze from it.

These are physical and not purely visual landscapes: they engage the straining body and its fatigue and sweat, but also arouse affect in its most unpredictable forms:

Everything was blooming early this year. In the fields around the cavalry camp, sunflowers had begun opening up nearly a month in advance, bright yellow like mass-produced stars on an assembly line. Bora – who'd grown used to seeing endless expanses of them in the East – found them newly jarring, on the threshold of disgust.

But topography also means cities, even though for this Wehrmacht it is peasant villages that predominate. Still, there remains timeless Rome, a vivid presence in these novels at the moment of the Allied advance up the peninsula; and there is Berlin, whose rubble Bora does not care to contemplate from the air. There is even his native Leipzig, to which we are treated during a prewar visit from a Japanese delegation. But above all there is Stalingrad, the eternal Stalingrad of the grain elevator, the tractor factory, the landing ferry, the White House, the brick kiln, even the Unimag, that stubborn department store that hosted Paulus's surrender to the Soviets (one history having here effaced another, the celebrity of the tractor factory as the first great monument to Stalin's collectivisation drive some fifteen years before). Nor are the ghosts to be dispelled from the rubble, the legendary snipers for example:

Only snipers, like deities of Olympus, see and monitor everyone ... truly the sniper is god. Rarely does he miss a shot or cause only a wound ... The sniper is aloof from

the miseries of this earth; he chooses and is the dispenser of fate to anyone who enters the magical circle of his telescope.

Stalingrad pioneers a new kind of warfare:

Inside the city, war has become like a sea battle on paper, of the sort we played as children, drawing our ships on a squared sheet and marking the edges with numbers and alphabet letters as it's done on maps. When we called out 'M3' to the other player, if it turned out that at the intersection of M and 3 a two-square destroyer of his had been struck, we could try to finish it off by calling out L3, N3, M2 or M4. For us today the few surviving buildings and landmarks are like those paper ships on their squares.

It is also the word for a new kind of experience:

They are obliterating everything around us ... The mutilation of the last buildings is ongoing. For the common soldier, the *Landser* who in this and other regards resembles a house cat, this creates psychological problems ... His geography is based on the reliability of landmarks ... And to think that at the beginning of summer, we advanced as through a grassy ocean, confident, brazen, heedless. We had no need of smelling the fragrance of spices to know that on our exotic course lay the islands we sought.

In these landscapes, silence becomes not merely the language of nature but also a sixth sense:

Ever since Spain, and more so after the Polish campaign, Bora had been hypersensitive to sounds. The faintest noise, barely alive at the level of hearing, did not escape him, a plus for a soldier on reconnaissance duty. It implied a predator-like quality of stillness, outwardly stolid but in fact so keen that other senses were involved, as if he could smell or touch the source of the sound.

They are also occupied landscapes, landscapes of alertness and suspicion; and we need another map, another overlay, to fit them out with the networks of interpersonal tension, the geographies of vigilant distrust, that extend from vulnerable peasant huts to the offices of competing intelligence agencies and personal rivalries. It should be remembered that besides the local police forces (the Gestapo started out as one of these, in Göring's Prussian state), each of the services has its own secret information bureau (not to speak of those of foreign allies – Italy, Romania – as well as the local police forces of the occupied countries). None of these 'sister organisations' are exempt from the surveillance of the SS, whose most formidable rival, however, is that still aristocratic Wehrmacht in which Bora is an officer. Indeed he comes under additional suspicion by virtue of his position in the army's own independent intelligence service (yet another one), the so-called Abwehr (which will be dissolved later in the war). The map of these innumerable spy networks and their hostile intersections with one another turns out to be more complex than the actual battles themselves (of which, as we know, many maps exist). This makes for a record of contacts between the characters which, besides being almost exclusively male, is also a combination of competing and mutual investigations.

Bora's professional duties are in fact those of an interrogator, an ominous métier indeed, whose modulations range from torture to the wiles of a Dostoevskian examiner, and are not always limited to enemy officers or partisans. Here, as elsewhere, Bora's role is ambiguous, hovering at the blurred boundary between detective and inquisitor. (A certain generic tradition persists here, as Bora's resistance to his enemies in the SS – he is for the moment protected by high-placed friends and mentors –

reproduces the classic fictional policeman's struggle with obtuse or complicit superiors.)

In addition to these narrative strata, there is a further set of points of

concentration, which, although never wholly absorbed into the action, is never far from our attention. Bora's religion of monogamy will strike the reader, as it does Bora himself, as a matter apart from the rest, a kind of momentary transcendence. I hesitate to quote any of these passages, which are a kind of luminous pornography – Petrarchan evocations of the carnal, out-of-body experiences as it were, in which the body itself, in these very physical books, is beyond materiality.

Bora's wife, Dikta, is a character in her own right, far more striking and self-willed, more unpredictable, than Bora himself. Rather than a wife, it seems preferable to think of her as a partner in a conspiracy:

Deep down, he too regarded his marriage as an extended love affair; he and Dikta were each other's passionate bookmarks in life, looking for no one else as long as they had each other.

This last qualification is significant, especially if you read 'had' in terms of physical proximity. Divorce in wartime is no small thing, particularly when, like one of Bora's unhappy comrades, you get a note that simply reads: 'I found another, all good wishes.'

But do such erotic interludes – obligatory today in most popular fiction and enhanced by the now permissible and explicit physical details – deserve a separate rubric in our list of the truly heterogeneous raw materials out of which the Bora novels are constructed? If the question is strange, it is made stranger still by compounding it with a reference to the phenomenon of courtly love, which has been the esoteric interest of thinkers from Pound and Rougemont to Bataille, Klossowski and Lacan (not to speak of Dante and *il dolce stil novo*), where it is often linked with transgression. Courtly love has indeed always been associated with asceticism, continence and abstention, things wholly absent from these books, which do, however, insist on the uniqueness and self-control of Bora's sexual experience ('Everything that had ever opened before him, or been answered, revealed, given, had been preparation for this'). These are techniques, not for satisfying desire but for intensifying and at the same time sublimating it; for approaching that material transcendence Lacan calls *jouissance*. The purity and intensity of these sexual interludes – containable in a detective or war story only as one layer within a heterogeneous *agencement* – transcend desire or love itself, and assail Bora from the stolen painting of Titian it is his task to locate:

At once Bora's attention fastened on it. There, languidly twisted to one side, the slick female body emerged in fleshy half-seen surfaces from the shadow, as if pouring out of nothingness in order to bloom before him ... The Venus stared out of the murkiness of the canvas ... When he stepped away from the Venus, blood drove hard through him, making him anxious for an ennoblement of desire and the impossibility to fulfil it – a solitary lucidity of want.

This effect isn't simply to be attributed to the gendered qualities of the text, the omnipresent male physicality of a landscape at war, which reminds one

of the pre-mechanised topography of the First World War, in which the movement of the great armies was signalled by an immense smell of sweat preceding them for miles and miles. There is here certainly from time to time the disgust with same-sex physicality, but not the nausea of the male other to be found in Bloom's exposure to a crowded pub at lunchtime ('Men. Men. Men.') or the disgust of the Nabokovian hero at the evidence left behind by his rival (a cigarette butt floating in the urine of an unflushed toilet). Omnipresent here is rather the physicality of the soldier – heat, chills, fever, sweat, showers, hyper-alertness – whose unremitting vulnerability stands as an inescapable ground bass to the immense spatio-temporal phenomenology, from Spain to the Volga, which is the Second World War:

Flies everywhere ... Skin food excrement wounds rubbish are to them all the same, all appetising. Chasing them makes no difference: they're like a noxious thought you can wave off but not eliminate. Not even cleanliness keeps them away, just like virtue isn't enough to keep away evil thoughts. I can see why Satan is called Lord of the Flies. This is, and always was, war. We are, in the year of Our Lord 1943, like our counterparts in the year 1943 before Christ was born, in Sumer or Egypt, chasing flies and killing lice.

But perhaps it is time to look at Bora himself, as yet another of these thematic bands or unities of which the book is composed, with a short detour through what is perhaps even somewhat extraneous to him, namely his class background. The family, descended from Martin Luther's wife (despite which it is firmly Roman Catholic) includes (like Kant's lineage) a Scottish heritage, with a military ancestor boasting the glory of having been killed alongside Gordon in the Battle of Khartoum. Although Saxon and raised in Leipzig, he knows holidays in Rome as well as summers in

East Prussia. Martin's natural father had been a world-famous orchestra conductor (and sometime composer – in Proustian fashion, we owe the suite called the *Gypsy Synagogue* to him), with a glorious career that extended all the way to imperial St Petersburg. The son seems just as gifted musically (he is a fine pianist until an injury prevents him from playing), but has instead devoted himself to the same career as his stepfather, a Prussian officer:

How can I explain to my stepfather ... that the reason I chose to attend university before army school was that I wasn't sure that Germany would commit to an army after all, and that the army would commit to *something*? Nation-building is well and good for some; but for those like myself who have heard nothing else but retribution and bitterness for Versailles, there has to be something more than nation-building. A holy goal, a course sanctified by necessity and God's own injunction that we must protect civilisation. As a German, I need to feel civilised, and civilising: wars provide a shortcut to that comfortable feeling of superiority. God keep me from being wrong about any of this, or else show me the way before it's too late.

Bora's relationship with his mother provides the most touching and tender moments in these works, something it is awkward to point out in our post-Freudian age. The aristocratic Almanach-de-Gotha family lines form a web that transects the whole of the Wehrmacht; their mirror-image is the party network that resists, subtends and extends far beyond them.

Bora's psychology is, however, another matter, as it involves us in literary-formal as well as phenomenological problems. From time to time we can see him from the outside: Aryan, as handsome as Stauffenberg (a concession to political correctness which will be expunged by Bora's later intense dislike of the man), authoritarian, unpredictable, without friends

and never fully revealing himself, whose very self-control is controlled; yet beloved of his troops, who appreciate his extraordinary luck in battle. Despite his nightly confessions (to us) in his journal, however, none of these external traits and forms of subjective confidence seem to cohere. Bora remains an enigma; we never completely identify with him, notwithstanding any number of exciting adventures and deductions.

There are ways of accounting for this lack of identification; though one of them – the author's awkwardness in multiplying Bora's character traits – we can immediately put aside. It is possible to entertain the illusion that these are, against all expectations, novels of ideas. In that case, Bora becomes an exemplar or illustration of Ernst Jünger's 'archon', the survivor in the midst of institutional repression, a true inner emigrant, the one available hero for totalitarian times. This is not to say that the philosophical interpretation is implausible; but it does tend to reduce the work to the status of a thesis novel, with those overtones of militarism with which, rightly or wrongly, Jünger's own work is associated ('war as an inner experience'). Jünger is himself a character in one of Pastor's novels.

It would perhaps be even more of a stretch to associate Bora's story with the teachings of his old professor Martin Heidegger. At best, this might clarify his relationship to death, for Heidegger's *Sein-zum-Tode* or being-unto-death is less a call to death anxiety than a way of grasping death, not as my disappearance but as that of my 'world'. 'Capitano, surely you've thought out what you'd like to be watching when you die.' In these novels, death is always a matter of place: in every wartime city or landscape Bora asks himself whether these will be his last surroundings, his final glimpses of the life world. (Meanwhile, it appears to be irrelevant that both Jünger

and Heidegger ended their lives as Roman Catholics; but some readers may think otherwise.)

Character traits – of which Bora has so many excellent ones – are qualities observed from the outside and as it were reified; whether Bora's thoughts about himself (as narrated, for example, in his journals) are any more reliable, any less objectified, is a literary or psychological question. But there are other kinds of trait – the 'control of his self-control', for example – which are more likely to seem regulative rather than substantive: what might normally be called 'reserve'. 'By upbringing and from habit, physical contact was for him an extreme resort, necessarily aggressive or sexual.' Is this a characteristic – related, for instance, to his athleticism as it manifests itself in horsemanship – or the repression of a characteristic?

Ever since Spain, Bora had taken inordinate care in the practice of storing anxiety deeply within, as safely as an army trunk was organised, with the heaviest objects at the bottom, tucked away in the corners.

Nor is this the only way of dealing with potentially uncontrollable psychic reactions:

He remembered each instance of great fear as a precise scenario comprised of layers, circumscribed horizons, dimensions unforgiving and eternally set. The room where he stood was instantly transformed into a paradigm of itself, so that for ever – in the moment it took for an SS officer to dismount from his vehicle – this wall and doorway, that slice of winter light across the desk and flaws in the tile floor would be associated with fear.

Repression, aestheticisation – if one cares to psychologise, these can clearly be thought of as defence mechanisms. But I continue to feel that Bora's 'consciousness' – that black hole with which the reader is invited to

identify – is a good deal more inscrutable and enigmatic than the adjectives psychology gives us, a good deal closer, in other words, to some phenomenological account of an empty ('purely intentional') consciousness than most novelists, intent on the business of producing 'believable' yet idiosyncratic 'characters', would be willing to endorse.

Yet what if 'character' were something like this:

His wholeness was scattered all over, as far as his mind could go – strands of him, loose ends, strange pieces, and he would need to pick them up and braid them back together to reshape his balance.

What used to be called the self is a heterogeneity about which it is best to take the stoic's advice: 'But the parts which are beset by pain, allow them, if they can, to give their own opinion about it.'

There is, finally, the matter of guilt:

A round-up was in progress there, Bora couldn't say he wasn't used to the scene. He wished he could say it troubled him; in fact nothing seemed to trouble him anymore. It was all already seen, done, experienced. Crowds lost individuality; it came down to shoves and rifle butts pushing or dividing or striking, quick turns on the feet as someone sprinted to get away and the weapon was righted, aimed and fired without missing. Everyone played their role perfectly, victims included. Bodies lay around, blood pooled under them. Only his anger (which was something other than a feeling of pity) was stirred, like a thick liquid that needed mixing and scooping but in the end agitated on its own. Principle, not people; not feeling what he didn't feel. Virtue had nothing to do with it.

This visceral disgust should not, I think, be read as moral indignation, but as some more immediate perception of the stupidity and brutality of just

such programmed killings. Bora's mind does not move on the level of policy or philosophical ethics – a level, for example, on which the Reich's official antisemitism takes the form of a state religion, whose true believers are, in Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones* (2006), characterised as 'idealists'. No doubt he has arguments with his eminent teachers on these subjects; but we do better to see them in terms of narrative and behavioural concreteness than abstract moral theses. His relations with the SS are not ideological but rather the precautions one takes with respect to the danger posed by a variety of malevolent officials ranging from the brutal to the efficiently hostile.

The War is a rhizome, striated by encyclopedic information, and delivered in intelligent sentences, the like of which, as Chandler observed long ago, always exasperate the readers of airport paperbacks: boundaries expanding and contracting and the series delivering unpredictable spots of time. There is of course a satisfaction in the solution of the local problem – the disappearance of two Italian physicists in a Ukrainian battlefield; the murder of a celebrated Weimar performer and confidence man; Mussolini's missing letters; the theft of a priceless Titian Venus – whose conclusion is timed to coincide with this or that world-historical event or battle. But the series is neither a chronology nor a Bildungsroman. Each novel affords a glimpse into a unique and heterogeneous intensity in the stream of time.

Bora is carried forward in it like the War itself, and the jumbled chronology of the publications – Salò followed by Barbarossa, the attempt on Hitler by the battle of Stalingrad – distracts us from any question about his ultimate fate. Perhaps, indeed, as we have grown attached to him over this seemingly immense period of time and space, we would rather not know;

and it is as hard to imagine him in the rubble of Germany year zero as to think of his corpse on the Eastern Front (or in the prisons of the SS). Best, then, to let his fate remain as indeterminate for us as it is for him.

Meanwhile, Maria Verbena Volpi is to be credited with having invented him; but perhaps, even more, to be congratulated on her creation of his author, 'Ben Pastor', whose imagination seems indeed to have invented the Second World War itself.

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