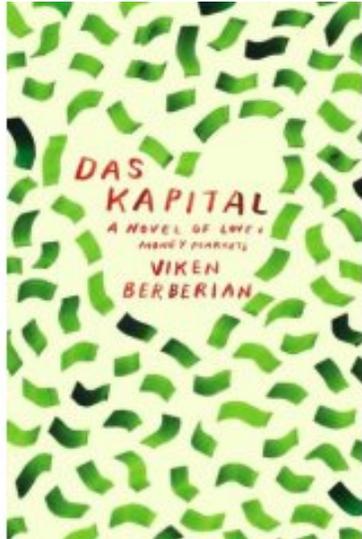


Critics' Forum

Literature

**Viken Berberian's *Das Kapital: A Post-Script***

By Hovig Tchalian



This article about Viken Berberian's second and well-publicized novel, *Das Kapital: A Novel of Love + Money Markets* (Simon and Schuster, 2007) is a post-script in two related ways: it appears just after a flurry of articles about the novel, both in Armenian and international periodicals; and it is about a novel that is itself a post-modern homage to Karl Marx's monumental work of the same name.

The novel tells the tale of an unlikely love triangle composed of Wayne, a successful Wall Street hedge fund manager who bets against the market (and helps his own cause by funding terrorist disasters around the world); an unnamed "Corsican," who believes in environmental causes and is paid by Wayne to commit acts of terrorism; and Alix, a French architecture student living in Marseille, who has a relationship with the Corsican and, through him, inadvertently meets and falls in love with Wayne.

And there you have it – the makings of a smart and often insightful but ultimately unsatisfying ironic novel. Berberian pokes fun at a whole host of modern foibles and felonies – from our over-reliance on the adrenaline rush of modernity to our gradual incapacity to feel pain for the sufferings of our fellow human beings.

This Berberian manages through a series of twists and reversals: the Corsican begins by touting the environmental slogans of his youth and ends by seeking the radical solution of global destruction (as his lieutenant, Figolu, says on p. 135, "nature has struck back"), all to the familiar-sounding but ultimately meaningless torrent of financial reports from his various bases of operations; the novel's other anti-hero, Wayne, begins by espousing "a

theory of deterministic disaster,” the calculated certainty of doom in the financial markets (an eerie reminder of Marx’s parallel prognostication) and ends by seeking nature and art; and Alix sends Wayne a series of JPG images and reports on some of her beloved architectural monuments, which, unbeknownst to her, further the cause of Wayne’s terrorist cronies.

Initially in the novel, such reversals convey considerable depth and subtlety. Wayne’s early doomsday scenarios sound like the musings of a twisted, if mathematically gifted, terrorist with an ear for existentialist philosophy (67):

Wayne waited patiently for the next global failure, a so-called ten-sigma event: a statistical freak occurring one in every ten to twenty-fourth power times. The ten-sigma was imminent, if not today then tomorrow, if not tomorrow then in a year, if not in a year then in a century or an even a later point in time. It did not matter when. Sooner or later the mother of all disasters would strike, and if it did not happen during his life, then that was okay. There would be many disasters in between that he would witness. Yet even this reassuring thought did not make him feel better.

Such reversals are interesting, perhaps most compellingly in two extended descriptions that blend art and fatalism. The first appears early in the novel, as Wayne sends Alix an email that describes the Venetian Basilica that he has just helped destroy, laced with equal parts lyricism and irony (52):

I think you asked how I became interested in the structural aspects of buildings. It started with the Basilica. I first visited the Basilica and the campanile next to it as a university student. The Bell Tower was said to be the highest structure in Venice. Everything has come down now . . . . I did not have to turn on the radio. I knew that this would happen. I was prepared for it. I am trying to remain calm now, opportunistic. I still remember the glittering façade of the church, the exotic Byzantine architecture, the gold mosaics covering the ceilings and walls, the marble floors, the five vaulted domes, which formed the roof in the form of a Greek cross. All of it gone now, and in place of the dome is a gaping hole.

The second instance appears near the novel’s end, as the Corsican and his lieutenant scan sketches of buildings they are targeting (132):

Figolu flipped open the sketchbook. It contained architectural renderings of vital structures, the regulating lines of commercial buildings rising in tiers, one behind another. They measured their dimension, length, width and angles. At the bottom of each sketch were her initials.

“Look. The Crystal Palace. This is cast iron, that’s glass. It’s all prefabricated material.”

“I recognize it,” he said.

“Mid-nineteenth century. Joseph Praxton.”

“Human capacity?”

“There is no literature on that.”

“Where is it?”

“Hyde Park, London.”

Figolu turned the page to a drawing entitled *Chicago*.

“Recognize it?”

“Yes, she told me about it. I like the scale.”

“Turn of the century. Louis Sullivan.”

“What is it?”

“Department store, I think. It’s the first time a metallic frame was used on the exterior of the edifice.”

“Original,” he said.

“If you like that, take a look at this one.”

...

The two terrorists review their targets the way art students would survey Frank Gehry mock-ups. They appreciate the architectural elements of the drawings, which Berberian makes sure to mention bear Alix’s initials, like those at the bottom of paintings on display.

Wayne’s email to Alix quoted earlier and this exchange between the terrorists together neatly encapsulate both the bizarre love triangle at the center of the novel and Berberian’s method in elaborating it: Wayne mimics Alix’s own love for the buildings in his email in order to create an authentic response that she will recognize (because it is, strictly speaking, her own); while the Corsican tries to recreate in her sketches the faint traces of her vanished love for him. Wayne’s description and Alix’s images act as convenient illusions of the many criss-crossing desires in the novel, centered in Alix’s mind but ultimately not originating in her own will.

Such insights about the world the characters – and by extension, all of us – inhabit give *Das Kapital* weight and substance. But in its relentless pursuit of irony, the novel ultimately falls a bit flat. A representative instance occurs midway through the novel, as the Corsican and Alix watch the harbor from a Marseille hotel balcony (106):

The harbor bustled with the mad rush of people dispersed in a multitude of directions. The anchored boats creaked and groaned as if suffering from a chronic arthritic condition. The summer light descended on the Notre Dame de la Garde perched on top of a hill facing their table. The cathedral basked in the glory of the afternoon sun.

No sooner have we read this description than we get the following (106):

It was a majestic and uncomplicated view, yet for the Corsican it was no more than a marketing image, fundamentally spectacular by nature, a visual representation that aimed at nothing other than itself. He wondered how many tourists climbed up the hill today to take a closer look at the cathedral, this

hallowed confusion, which to him was a material reconstruction of the religious illusion.

This cynical, if lyrical, description serves a purpose. The Corsican refers to the scene as a “spectacle,” a word he will use elsewhere to describe his terrorist deeds. Its use here reminds us that the scene aims at “nothing other than itself” in large part because it is a “spectacle” of the Corsican’s own making. And yet, the sheer repetition of such reversals up until this point and throughout the novel weakens their meaning and the novel’s larger impact. The reversals come off sounding a bit too glib, almost smug.

*Das Kapital* concludes in a similar vein and somewhat predictably, with what amounts to an ideological swap – Wayne and the Corsican essentially switch allegiances, with the Corsican asking for more and more money to wreak havoc with studied efficiency, while Wayne discovers a love for nature in Alix’s arms in Marseilles. The eventuality is hinted at it a few pages before the end, as we witness the global markets regain their equilibrium, in a kind of return to primordial economic conditions (154):

The good old days were back again. At least that was what the headlines said. Religions no longer split us. Politics no longer polarized us. Incompatible technologies no longer came between us.

By the time this final reversal takes place, however, the stage has already been set for something of a letdown. The unfortunate result of describing a world made hollow with false desires, it seems, is the creation of a novel that ends up in part recreating it. Like Alix’s innocent question to Wayne at one of their meetings, the novel gets what it asks for (101):

“You’re going to think that I sound like a little girl in a floral dress, but I keep thinking of the Basilica bombing,” she said. “Who would do such a thing?”

“I’m not sure you should pursue that line of questioning,” Wayne said. “Why don’t we walk up to Elizabeth Street and talk about something else?”

The ultimate irony of a novel such as *Das Kapital* that relentlessly pursues irony, then, may very well be its own inability of escaping it. That may not be an all too pleasant post-script. But it is, I think, a fitting one.

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