Myself, ourselves, others
by Andrew Stuttaford

On Interior, by Thomas Clerc; The Sweet Indifference of the World, by Peter Stamm; the short-story collection Machines in the Head, by Anna Kavan; and Beyond the Sea, by Paul Lynch.

When the French writer Thomas Clerc’s Interior (Intérieur, 2013) was released in Jeffrey Zuckerman’s English translation in 2018 (the writer for its New York Times review asked whether literature?” Well, yes. An accurate accumulation of “stuff” (I prefer “possessions” although Clerc lets slip a handful of “stuffs” himself), so much the better: I was thrilled and I should disclose that I was a stamp collector. For decades.

In Nicholson Baker’s pointillist masterpiece, The Mezzanine (1988), the narrator’s fascination with “stuff” runs through the book such as when (to rummage through its riches) he celebrates the evolution of consumer products (“Perforation! Shout it out!”) and returns repeatedly to the topic of shoelaces. The fact that many of these objects are, to the superficial, banal only adds to that book’s strange, flat charm.

The treasures discussed in Interior also often lack much in the way of surface glamour: “Let’s deal with the dish rack properly.”

But if there’s anything interesting about them, Clerc will dig it up. Often, it’s nothing more than how they relate to their owner, the narrator, a “Thomas Clerc” with a great deal of Thomas Clerc about him (generally referred to as “I,” but sometimes as “he”). Clerc’s admission that he is (somewhat) defined by his possessions is, by the time it comes, not much of a revelation.

Interior may be about three times as long, but almost nothing happens.

Interior, as its title suggests, is more confined both spatially and as a narrative than The Mezzanine. In the latter, the hero not only leaves his workspace (the visit to
the men’s room is something of a highlight), but exits the office itself, journeys on escalators, and, in an action-packed lunch hour, buys shoelaces, a cookie, a half-pint of milk, popcorn, and a hot dog with sauerkraut. Interior may be about three times as long, but almost nothing happens: compared with its stillness, The Mezzanine is Ben-Hur. Instead Interior revolves around an exquisitely detailed description (“between fiction and document”) of Clerc’s modest (five hundred square feet) Parisian apartment, “this sanctuary in the heart of the city, this warm or cool oasis standing sentinel against the street,” and, of course, of the contents of this “museum-of sorts,” which is also, writes Clerc, while rejoicing over his bathroom tiles, an “artwork”.

The apartment’s doorbell rings at the beginning of the book and it rings at the end, and at several times in between. On each occasion, no one is there. There are mentions of the board game Clue, but the only reference to a murder, via a piece of furniture that once belonged to him, is to the killing, in 1912, of Auguste Clerc, Clerc’s great-grandfather, to whom Interior is dedicated. Then again, as the great-grandson notes, Clue is a “game whose board reproduces the layout of a house,” as does his book, which (naturally!) includes floor plans.

Clerc tells us that he bought the apartment on September 11, 2001, precision unremarkable in a book in which dates run rampant among the minutiae. Whether Clerc believed the significance of this particular date was so well known that no further discussion was required, or whether the absence of any elaboration upon it was designed to underline the way that this book looks in, not out, is unclear. Or is it evidence of some deeper subtext? Interestingly or not, Clerc, a man of the Left, as emerges occasionally in Interior, wrote some dimwitted comments in the wake of the terror attacks in Paris in 2015. Of course, it may signify nothing at all. The same might be said of the book as a whole. Clerc describes it as an “over-inflated recreation of Voyage Around My Room,” Xavier de Maistre’s delightful account of six weeks spent in (involuntary) social isolation in Turin in 1790. But is it “about” something else, something more profound? Clerc is, after all, a French intellectual.

1 wall switch mounted on the left controls the room’s lighting, so that anyone entering the apartment is temporarily refused entry to the kingdom of light. This instrument, which manages to merge technology and poetry, execution and idea, is, in French, called an interrupteur: it interrupts the Darkness in which we dwell, and within which we must search for the Light.

That passage, however, is found in a section headed “Fiat Luxury.”

Beyond the sporadically appearing slivers of autobiography, often contained within the descriptions of items Clerc portrays, is Interior just a joke or jeu d’esprit?

As someone with bathophobic tendencies, I had no great desire to find out. Instead, I enjoyed this book purely on the basis of its sly, drolly inconsequential, and obsessively constructed surface. The digressive and discursive text (a nod to de Maistre’s meandering Voyage) is entertainingly aphoristic (taxidermy—Clerc has a stuffed squirrel—is an art that “makes me think less of dying than of merely keeping up appearances”), zanily petty (bar soap or liquid?), and erudite in a way more endearing than erudition often turns out to be. Some of the usual suspects—Henry James,
Walter Benjamin, Titian, Columbo, not to speak of a series of Frenchmen of greater or lesser renown—show up, but so do the curios who make scholarship fun, whether it’s Francis Ponge, “the poet of things,” and good for a jeer, or (in an indirect reference) Leopoldo Fregoli, an actor and quick-change artist of such skill that he gave his name to fregolism, a useful but sadly neglected term.

The humor in this book, like just about everything else in it, is understated and deadpan. A “Corsican proverb” is dropped gently into the Seine:

“Better a house filled with people than of things.” Not necessarily.

There’s a cleverness that can come across as just a little too self-congratulatory, until a page or two later, when it’s still with you: “A huge deep ocher Basque plate . . . holds more than its 4 adjectives . . .”

Other adjectives find themselves in unexpected places. A doorknob is “jaunty,” a sponge “old, wizened, threadbare, hunchbacked.” Clerc turns bathos in on itself. Left anxious by the expiry of the warranty on his gas pipe, his “eyes sweep over the object like a vulture over a carcass, and with a heavy silence” he ponders “just how long it really has left.” Some flawed flooring both “terrifies and excites” him. Nouns and verbs are conscripted into a world that is both inventive game and invented reality. There is a “deep-seated rivalry between the bed and the armoire for control” of the bedroom. A filing cabinet “sneers” at everyone who enters the apartment.

And yet amid all the marginalia that Clerc has pushed center-stage, the author somehow emerges, albeit in mosaic rather than outline, and not without some misdirection. In the course of a meditation on the joys of a gas burner, Clerc observes that sometimes it is “a melancholic joy: The single lit burner of the lifelong bachelor,” an image in which mournfulness is amplified by concision. A comment that Clerc does not receive visitors “often” comes as no surprise. The impression of a man alone is bolstered by the way Clerc can, a little alarmingly, detect the sexual allure in both a chair and a bottle. Admittedly, the latter was “gorgeously sheathed in brown wicker [bringing] to mind a woman tied up with rope for some erotic game.”

But he has a girlfriend, although the two do not live together: “With 2 people in this apartment, I’d go mad; alone, I yearn.”
“2”? I have no idea. In Interior, numbers don’t get letters.

There are times—his regrets at his failure to hang on to his old telephone books—when Clerc is either tipping over into self-parody or is stretching “Clerc” further than comedy should go. As he correctly notes, however, his book that preceded Interior “was devoted to annotating every street in Paris’s 10th arrondissement,” making it credible that Clerc does indeed have a tablecloth collection. When he admits to being mildly obsessive-compulsive, I’d question only that “mildly.” That he is a hypochondriac fits the Clerc who is coming gradually, if incompletely, into view. Thus, there are a few allusions to his father’s downfall, but, disappointingly, no explanation of its nature. We are told about Clerc’s diaries, but not what’s in them.

Perhaps he was worried that his omphaloskeptic (a word he uses) odyssey had gone on too long. Earlier on he had expressed concern for the reader “worn out by our slow meticulous progress.”

Worn out? I wanted to know more.

Thomas Clerc, author, is not (entirely) “Thomas Clerc,” subject, but Christoph, the hero and narrator of The Sweet Indifference of the World, a misty and melancholic novel by the Swiss writer Peter Stamm, has to contend with what may be a doppelgänger, a manifestation of a distinctly tenuous grasp on reality, or something else altogether.2 First published in 2018 in German as Die sanfte Gleichgültigkeit der Welt and now available in English in a fine translation by the ubiquitous Michael Hofmann, The Sweet Indifference is atmospheric, puzzling, and easy to review without putting in too many spoilers. Having read the book twice, I still cannot be sure what actually happened. Indeed, the concluding paragraph adds another twist to a riddle that the author may wish the reader to interpret in his or her way.

If anything, the uncertainty is only intensified by the simplicity of Stamm’s clean, blunt prose, marred only by a curious aversion to quotation marks.

Finally, just as we stepped between the first trees, I stopped and said, I’d like to tell you my story. She didn’t reply but turned towards me and gave me a look that wasn’t so much curious as utterly open.

I am a writer, I said, or rather I used to be a writer. I published a book fifteen years ago. My boyfriend’s a writer, she said, or hopes to be. I know, I said, that’s why I want to tell you my story.

We walked slowly along the gravel path that led in a straight line through the wood, and I told Lena of the strange encounter fourteen years before which had led to my abandoning writing.

Even allowing for the bizarre punctuation and the absence of either an antiquarian or a clergyman, there is a trace of M. R. James in that language, an invitation to enter into a world awry, even if, in this case, no ghost or terrible, ancient thing is involved. The duo (Christoph and a woman called Lena) do, however, meet up in a cemetery.
In the course of that rendezvous, the story slips back across the years as Christoph talks of how he used the story of his relationship with an actress called Magdalena as the basis for his first book (territory reminiscent of Agnes, Stamm’s first novel) in a way that had both become detached from reality and anticipated it:

Yes, my girlfriend left me, but if I am to be honest I had left her months before in my imagination, I had slipped into fiction and my artificial world.

And, publicly at least, Christoph left Christoph too, insisting “on the separation between author and narrator,” a separation that may not be as clean he imagines—or pretends to imagine.

His descent into the uncanny begins on the night he gives a reading in his home village. Somewhat the worse for wear (“I was completely drunk”), he returns to his hotel, where he had once worked as a night porter, and cannot find a way in, but finally:

[T]he inner glass door opened, and a young man approached me. While he fiddled around with the lock, I saw his face next to the reflection of my own, but not until he held the door open for me did I realize that he was me.

The young man, however, “appears to have no sense of the resemblance, of the identity,” but in the following year he attends a talk that Christoph is giving. Over the next few days, in a reversal of sorts, Christoph trails him:

I . . . wasn’t at all surprised to see him walk into the building I had once had an attic room in as a student. On the top bell was my name in a script that was the spit of mine.

The impression of that world awry is reinforced by the way that the narrative goes back and forth across time, undermining a natural order that has looked shaky since the first appearance of a doppelgänger, especially one who mimics Christoph’s life almost as much as his looks. The woman Christoph meets in the cemetery may go by “Lena,” but that’s an abbreviation of Magdalena (mercifully, given the complexities of this narrative: two Magdalenas would have been too much). She, like the original Magdalena, is an actress, and she is involved with the doppelgänger, the no less mercifully abbreviated “Chris.” Chris is writing about Lena, just as Christoph wrote, however inaccurately, about Magdalena, a story that became a bestselling novel, a success he was unable to repeat.

A plot in which neither time nor identity may be what they seem will almost inevitably throw up some logical inconsistencies. Lena, not altogether impressed by the notion that she is, in many respects, someone else but with a time delay, highlights the seemingly critical ways in which her life and Chris’s differ from those of their presumed predecessors. Christoph smoothly explains (and by extension Stamm explains to us) that these discrepancies don’t matter:
You keep returning to the proper way. As though the things you do had no effect on what actually happens. It’s like having a play put on by several directors. The scenes look different, even the words can be changed or cut, but the action follows its unvarying course.

After another encounter, Christoph becomes addicted to stalking his doppelgänger:

It wasn’t hard to find him, I could look up my old diaries, and wherever I was sixteen years earlier, he would be now. The world had changed, university syllabuses and train timetables were different, he wore different clothes and had a cellphone instead of a landline, but none of seemed to affect the course of his life particularly.

And he has “endless time” for the chase. Christoph’s first, successful book was “almost forgotten,” his publisher had given up on him, and he was not involved with anyone.

From time to time our eyes might meet, but it seemed he wasn’t aware of it, as though I was invisible or at least of no significance to him.

Occasionally, Christoph is dismayed by his “younger self’s naivety,” but he resists the temptation to offer any advice, “perhaps for fear of the unpredictable consequences of any confrontation.” Eventually it all becomes too much, and he sells everything and decamps to Spain for years, until again he runs into his unnerving opposite number. The two finally talk. Chris shows Christoph something, no, two things, that cast doubt on everything that Christoph will tell Lena about his own past.

The impression of that world awry is reinforced by the way that the narrative goes back and forth across time.
It’s at this point, about halfway through a not very long book, that some readers may, not without irritation, give up. A maze is not worth the effort if it lacks an exit or, even, if it is so overgrown that the way out is, as its designer may have intended, undetectable. That said, abandoning The Sweet Indifference would be an error. Stamm’s previous novel, the wonderful To the Back of Beyond (Weit über das Land, 2016), which I reviewed in this space in November 2018, also played games with reality, but it had a clearer trajectory, and while both books have a turning point after which it becomes difficult to know whether the protagonist has succumbed to fantasy (or in the former case, simply succumbed), the either/or was presented more cleanly and, in the end, more successfully. Nevertheless, if only in the spirit of the late Giulio Andreotti, the serial Italian prime minister and serial criminal defendant who was said to rip out the last few pages of the gialli he devoured, as he was interested in the mystery, not in how it was solved, even skeptics should stick with The Sweet Indifference, as the narrative swerves and spins, stylish, bewildering, constantly dissolving and reforming itself in a way that may reflect the fact that Christoph can no longer keep pace with the reality he himself has created.

Then comes the final chapter, the thirty-seventh in a story that only covers 123 pages, a proportion that has its own herky-jerky effect on the rhythm of the novel and contributes to the sense of disorientation that Stamm conveys so well. If any of Andreotti’s disciples who have persevered this far are still tempted to tear out the concluding passage they should hold off. Beautifully written, eerie, and moving, the book boasts a gorgeous, unforgettable closing paragraph that either adds to the mystery or clears it up. Your choice.

Thomas Clerc was writing about a Thomas Clerc, probably not so far removed from the Thomas Clerc. Stamm’s Christoph had to deal with a doppelgänger who may or may not have been the embodiment of a failed literary career. In a way, the British writer Helen Ferguson (1901–68) took the question of the relationship between an author and her creations even further. The year 1930 saw the publication of her (partly) autobiographical novel, Let Me Alone, in which the leading protagonist was called Anna Kavan. A decade later, Ferguson dyed her hair blonde and took Anna Kavan as her nom de plume and, indeed, nom.

In her excellent introduction to Machines in the Head, a collection of Kavan’s short stories published in February by the ever-reliable New York Review Books Classics, Victoria Walker, who teaches at the University of London, sees the change of name “from literary character to living writer” as a reflection of both Kavan’s creative restlessness (“I can’t keep on all my life writing in the same way”) and her preoccupation with “the complexity of the relationship between reality and fiction.”

Kavan herself cannot be said to have led the simplest of lives. On the one hand, she had a complicated relationship with the opposite sex and, for that matter, with her own psyche; tormented by depression, she attempted suicide (a feat her father managed successfully) twice and was institutionalized on several occasions. On the other hand, she had a straightforward relationship with heroin, taking the drug for some three decades: “There’s only one way of escape
that I’ve ever discovered,” says a character in one of the stories who has hung on to her syringe. What she’s trying to escape is “this abominable, disgusting world.”

In another story, a doctor, conceivably based on Karl Bluth, the psychiatrist who, in the days when such things were, reasonably enough, easier, prescribed Kavan (who was possibly also his lover) heroin, tells “Julia” (whose painful childhood clearly refers back to Kavan’s) that, so long as she is careful with dosages and doesn’t experiment with new drugs, “she is quite right to use the syringe”:

[I]t is essential to her as insulin to a diabetic. Without it she could not lead a normal existence, her life would be a shambles, but with its support she is conscientious and energetic, intelligent, friendly.

Contrary to the legend, spread presumably by those who prefer a tragic end for their literary idols or a stern reckoning for junkies, Kavan died, not of an overdose, but of a heart attack in her late sixties.

There’s more than a suggestion of Kafka about Kavan.

Kavan may be on the edge of a moment, as scholars scrabble around for allegedly neglected female writers. Ice (1967), her late-in-life dystopian masterpiece, was recently republished to mark its fiftieth anniversary. A quick Google search will reveal a flurry of interest. But, despite some weaker items written in the 1960s, Machines in the Heart shows that Kavan’s is no affirmative action rediscovery. Written between 1940 and her death, these stories are dark, strikingly written (“the street has . . . a sour smell, with spite in it”), occasionally hallucinatory, sometimes paranoid, giving a glimpse of a universe that is malevolent rather than reassuringly indifferent. Some have much of the fantastic about them. Mid-century unease over totalitarianism—there’s more than a suggestion of Kafka about Kavan—and its ghastly apparatus, as well as her experience of wartime London, vie with echoes of her own psychological agonies.

In many of the stories, the narrator is a victim, rejected, say, by overlords who live far above the city, or conspired against by a mysterious, implacable adversary, or arrested for an unknown offense by the unnamed officials of some authoritarian state. She might be in an asylum, or, as in “At Night,” be plagued by insomnia:

How slowly the minutes pass in the winter night, and yet the hours themselves do not seem so long. Already the church clock is calling the hour again in its dull country voice that sounds half stupefied with the cold. I lie in bed, and like a well-drilled prisoner, an old-timer, I resign myself to the familiar pattern of sleeplessness. It is a routine I know only too well.

With victimhood comes a sense of powerlessness. A person receives a notice of her sentence in a letter that comes through the post but is still free to go about her life in the ordinary way before the “final blow.” She goes to an inn for a drink where she sees people that she knows making their
plans for the summer:

How could I stay and listen to their talk, knowing that while they are carrying out the plans made so carelessly, I shall be far from every activity?

Home, where her little girl, oblivious, chatters of the summer to come, is no better.

The thought of resistance, of escape, does not occur to her. Like so many of those consumed by the rage of the state during that era’s totalitarian nightmares, she would remain a part of society until she was cut out from it, her only hope that someone would realize that it was all a mistake. Surely Comrade Stalin cannot know.

There are tales, too, from the asylum:

Outside my window there is a garden where nobody ever walks, a garden without seasons, for the trees are all evergreens. At certain times of the day I can hear the clatter of footsteps on the concrete covered ways which intersect the lawns, but the garden is always deserted, set for the casual appreciation of strangers, or else for the remote and solitary contemplation of eyes defeated like mine.

In November 2012, a Salvadoran deep-sea fisherman, José Salvador Alvarenga, set off to sea from a small town on Mexico’s west coast, accompanied only by an inexperienced youngster, Ezequiel Córdoba. Their boat weathered a massive storm, but barely. Fourteen months later, Alvarenga was found, thousands of miles away, on one of the Marshall Islands, specks in the middle of the Pacific, an astounding feat of survival, which, despite some initial skepticism, appears to check out. Córdoba didn’t make it. His family later accused Alvarenga of having eaten him, and they sued. The claim may or may not owe something to the royalties that Alvarenga received from a book about his ordeal. Córdoba died, retorted Alvarenga, of starvation and despair and was nobody’s meal.

The Irish writer Paul Lynch has, even if he doesn’t explicitly acknowledge it, taken up Alvarenga’s story and used it as the basis for Beyond the Sea, an epic with, as epics should have, more than a touch of poetry about it, and possibly the grimmest, but also most beautifully written, novel set at sea that I have read since William Golding’s Pincher Martin. It is the tale of Bolivar, a veteran fisherman who ignores warnings of a storm, and, accompanied only by Hector, a rookie, or too close to it for comfort (the more seasoned fisherman for whom Bolivar is looking is nowhere to be found), heads for the ocean and then:

In a skim of sleep he hears it. The maddened wind. Tunneling out of dark to reach another dark more true than dream. He rolls the cap from his eyes, looks to where the moon should be. The sea is twisting the wrong way.

An epic with, as epics should
Hector panics. It’s hard to blame him, but Bolivar does, just as Hector blames Bolivar for taking him out into what became this storm. These are early installments in Lynch’s forensic examination of the relationship between the two men, which evolves from mutual antagonism, Bolivar’s contempt and Hector’s resentment. Confronted with a youth who seems to have given up, the older man is increasingly alarmed but does what he can to ensure their survival, frequently with impressive ingenuity. He finds food (fish, turtles) from below and (birds, including, oh dear, an albatross) above. The duo is also helped by the “great tangle of debris” floating around the ocean. There is a broader ecological message that surfaces occasionally in this book, if in this case somewhat counterproductively: humanity’s refuse helps keep the two alive. Hector, meanwhile, to Bolivar’s amazement, carves a figurine of the Virgin Mary. The two men draw closer, for a while at least, until Hector fades away amid recrimination, resignation, and Bolivar’s best efforts to keep him going. If he’s eaten, it’s only by the fishes, but Bolivar’s “mind screams within [his] body”: “They will say that you killed him and ate him. How can you prove that you did not?”

Bolivar is alone, and Lynch’s account of how he copes with loneliness—and how he doesn’t—is a depiction of another voyage, the one that Bolivar takes through his own interior.

And as he must, Lynch describes the immensity of the world in which the crippled boat is drifting, an immensity it cannot escape:

[Bolivar] lifts his eyes towards the horizon but again the waters and the sky begin to meet, his eyes now seized by what he sees—a wall of single colour closing in, a wall rising until it seems he is trapped in the bottom of a hole, a prison of single colour risen above him, towering towards infinity.

Civilization comes close, but not close enough: “A distant light on dark sea. Passing by, unreachable, a ship.”

At one point, Bolivar thinks of other fishermen he has known who have not come home:

Perhaps they were not lost at all, but lived on like this, adrift for years, adrift into old age, drifting farther and farther out to sea yet keeping themselves alive, a simple life lived on rainwater and fish. Perhaps this is so. Perhaps they are alive still.

As I read that, the tune of that grand old Victorian hymn sometimes known as “For Those in Peril on the Sea” came into my head. This book will do that to you.


---

Andrew Stuttaford is the editor of *National Review*’s Capital Matters.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 38 Number 9, on page 64

Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2020/5/myself-ourselves-others