

Breda Smolnikar. *The Ballad of the Wild Milk.* (English version prepared by DEKS d.o.o. from a translation by Erica Johnson Debeljak). Depela Vas: author, 2009. 182 pp. ISBN: 978-961-90963-7-6.

This novel invites the reader to contemplate Slovene society in transition over the course of the first half of the twentieth century. It consists of two intertwined narratives, one (evidently) by a woman about a woman named Marija and the other by a man, about the community shared by all figures in the story. The story alternates, more or less, through over forty mostly short chapters, producing a read that is mildly challenging but far from obscure. Indeed, the overall effect of the book is that the story is poignant and its construction deft. The book does not turn the reader's head with stylistic pyrotechnics and lapidary or disturbing imagery, except in a very few scenes of crucial importance to the narrative; these deal with lactation, the partial decomposition of a baby's corpse due to heat, and a beloved, flayed dog. The "wild milk" of the title is a potent symbol of feminist analysis of patriarchal society with its medical and pseudo-medical judgments and its hierarchy of relative power: a breastfeeding mother must not be allowed to be too emotional or overwrought lest she poison her child. The presence of the term "ballad" in the title seems appropriate, even though there is no poetry and just a little singing in the book: what we do have here is lyrical and straightforward writing, bringing us a dramatic story.

The Ballad opens with a brief semi-archival note from the parish records, presumably in the voice of the male narrator responsible for the "official" part of this story. It concerns a madwoman named Jerca, who roams the region; her reason had been blasted by the death of her infant, but she was not considered "dangerous." A second appearance of Jerca at the end of the volume, this time in the voice of the other narrator, frames the tale; there, a grieving Marija encounters her in a park in the town and goes with her to the nearby Bistrica River. The rebellious and earthy Jerca, who is indeed very willful, is portrayed as "all bent and gray, old and free" (162). She talks of the death of her beloved dog, and of the unique way she used its fur to make a creative memorial—and Marija, now mad and suicidal herself, wants to adopt this procedure for her daughter Špelca. The book ends with the dog dead and in the river, and Marija is there, too (or is she?), in a scene reminiscent of Endre Ady's tale of "white Olga," a grief-stricken woman who took her own life in the Danube.

The twin narratives link these two scenes with Jerca. The more extensive of the narratives concerns a woman named Marija. She lives in post-World War II Yugoslavia, as we pick up from context; although she is married and has children, we never learn the name of her husband and her son. It is her newborn daughter, Špelca, however, who shares center stage with Marija. The narrator of this "side" of the story seems to be a woman, but the evidence is circumstantial: she is very deferential towards the

second, male narrator, she regards lists of the Great War dead with naiveté, and she insists on a new method of storytelling that privileges process over result.

Like the second narrator—the parish chronicler—the first has long been a part of the community. She now aspires to be the primary chronicler. She is awaiting a kind of intellectual “changing of the guard,” just as her subject, Marija, is described as “waiting for her time to come” (15), evidently in order to be a woman or a mother. The narrator begins by recalling an accidental meeting, now distant, between Marija’s family and the chronicler. Marija’s life was “well ordered” amidst the natural beauty and kind souls of her home village. Ultimately we learn little about Marija beyond the scope of her maternal involvement, but there are vignettes involving her erstwhile suitor, Andrej, and her former lover, Jernej.

She bears two children, but the second, a girl she names Špelca, has major medical problems and is never to leave the hospital. During Marija’s long stays in the intensive care ward with her baby, she witnesses other women’s excruciating deliveries and parents’ receiving tragic diagnoses of their children’s illnesses; she has also known of many other children who died or were stillborn. And, almost right from the beginning, the nurses and doctors tell her, “Think of your milk.” Thus feelings of guilt accompany the intense love and fear that Marija feels for Špelca; if her milk should dry up, or spoil in her breast due to anguish or “pessimism”—in other words, if it should become “wild”—the clear assumption is that the baby’s illness is the mother’s fault.

One of the nurses, with great care, touchingly knits little socks for the babies. Marija breastfeeds Špelca every day, and she witnesses the comings and goings of the ward. She observes a hermaphroditic baby, one with hydrocephaly, another with Down syndrome in danger of being rejected by his father, a mute Albanian woman whose baby is dying as a result of a fire, a Roma mother rocking on the floor with one dead twin and one live one, and a moribund five-year old boy with leukemia. These cases, and Špelca’s nursing, and Marija’s preparations for nursing (her full breasts, expressing the milk, obtaining sterilized bottles, etc.) are depicted in vibrant descriptions, although the mother-daughter relationship is drawn in the most detail.

Marija’s baby soon dies, and she and her husband must make funeral arrangements that move from the grotesque to the surreal. Little Špelca’s body has begun to deteriorate because the mortuary lacks air conditioning and her parents have not followed some of the rules of this Kafkaesque bureaucracy. Marija is still producing a great deal of milk, but no one wants it. She is unhinged after the funeral of her daughter, and she drifts towards the final meeting with Jerca.

The second narrator we know to be a man, and his reports—dealing mostly with parish and governmental issues and beginning in late Habsburg times—at first seem more clinical and objective. However, they too evince an essential subjectivity. The names of chapels, the lists of war dead, and the latitude and longitude of villages leave no room for debate, but the many characterizations of groups of people as virtuous, food and landscapes as pleasing, and visiting ecclesiastical leaders with their many titles and privileges as admirable obviously do reflect the interests of certain gender or class groups. There is, in the ethnographic sense, another function of the second narration: many village customs, rituals, and holidays are recorded, documented as it were, for those who may wish to know about them after a century of change. Even if these accounts do not represent a truly objective or “scientific” form of history—could they, if they accept unquestioningly the value of miracles and relics?—they seem to be credited with doing so by many contemporaries.

Gradually the contemporary narrator begins to horn in on the chapters devoted to the older narrator. In the story of Jerca, ultimately, they merge in content, just as the older narrator appears to be dying. However, before this occurs, the contemporary passages that crop up in the older chapters take the form of queries or challenges, with the new narrator almost meekly suggesting that distaste for her style of chronicling should give way to a recognition that non-linearity and a tone of emotionality are necessary for any good story.

In addition to merging in the person of Jerca, it turns out that the two “sides” of the narration have other things in common. Their chroniclers know each other, for instance. Most important is the human toll, the institutional violence, the quotient of implacable death and injustice afflicting society in both their accounts. Add to this the overt, if variously expressed, patriarchy in both narrations, and we have a chilling set of continuities. The older narrative lionizing the Catholic Church’s role in the community is mightily pro-male, from the fact that men fill all the positions of power depicted to the repeated cloying, fantasy- and complex-ridden portrayal of the joy, modesty, patience, and simple piety of the region’s girls and women, who are as clean and beautiful and ready for use as any other natural resource! If the modern women are the outcasts, the bad mothers, the infertile ones, the heartless doctors, and the upstarts in the book, it is true that boys meet sad fates, too. And sometimes men die, as in war, and a number of them love children. But much more common are images of men as rapacious (old Herman the apple thief on p. 41), or lustful, or violent (the young man who shoots his girlfriend by the railroad tracks on p. 88), or sociopathic (the greedy mortician on p. 138), or fanatical in the face of pain and loss (as in the grandfather who intones a Christmas hymn while watching his house burn down on p. 82).

The translation of this novel is smooth, accurate, and generally quite well suited to the voices of the various narrators. Gauging these voices was probably most challenging for the translator(s) in the case of the older, male narrator, but these chapters are accurate and come off naturally in English. As with any translation, one can invite discussion over some choices in diction. For instance, many readers will frown at the fairly frequent use of *that* as a relative pronoun for people. A rare instance of a translated sentence that could stand some revision is the following: “I must tell you to prepare yourself,’ she said” (107). The original is: “Moram vam povedati, da boste pripravljeni . . .’ je rekla,” and this could easily be translated as “‘And I have to tell you to be prepared,’ she said.” A little more latitude would make the conclusion of the same paragraph an easier fit into the strained but colloquial atmosphere of this encounter in the intensive-care ward between the chief physician and Špelca’s extremely anxious parents. Instead of “There have been a number of signs that allow no other outcome,” one could translate “Bilo je nekaj znakov, ki ne dopuščajo nikakršne možnosti . . .” as “There have been a number of signs that point to no other possibilities . . .” Despite such minor issues, the translation is very good and very much allows the story to speak for itself.

The release of this work, which unfortunately might be difficult for readers in North America to obtain because it is self-published, comes at a time when the publication of contemporary Slovene fiction is picking up steam. This is a happy trend. Readers interested in keeping up with the Slovene scene can also consult Maja Novak’s *The Feline Plague* and Boris Pintar’s *Family Parables*, and Andrew Wachtel has also recently translated a selection of stories by Drago Jančar, entitled *The Prophecy and Other Stories*. If modernism’s literary mission is to represent reality with psychological and emotional tools that were not found in the classicists’ or the naturalists’ toolbox, and if post-modernism’s mission is to toy with the experience of reading for its own sake and to revel more in the text as recreation than re-creation, then Smolnikar’s novel is situated somewhere on the spectrum between these two famous endpoints. Whatever its classification, one hopes for more translations of her work because *The Ballad of the Wild Milk* is both satisfying and thought-provoking.

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