

REVIEW ESSAY

Slowenische Bibliothek: First Cluster of Novels

Vladimir Bartol. *Zwischen Idylle und Grauen. Novellen.* Translated by Erwin Köstler. Afterword by Jelka Kernev Štrajn. Klagenfurt: Drava/Mohorjeva-Hermagoras/Wieser, 2013. 424 pp., € 25 [= \$33.81] (hardcover). ISBN: 978-3-9902906-1-3.

Zofka Kveder. *Ihr Leben. Roman.* Translated by Daniela Kocmut. Afterword by Katja Mihurko-Poniž. Klagenfurt: Drava/Mohorjeva-Hermagoras/Wieser, 2013. 256 pp., € 21 [= \$28.40] (hardcover). ISBN: 978-3-9902905-9-0.

Ivan Pregelj. *Plebanus Ioannes. Thabiti kumi. Roman. Novelle.* Translated by Johann Strutz. Afterword by Matjaž Kmecl. Klagenfurt: Drava/Mohorjeva-Hermagoras/Wieser, 2013. 224 pp., € 21 [= \$28.40] (hardcover). ISBN: 978-3-9902906-0-6.

Marjan Rožanc. *Liebe. Roman.* Translated by Metka Wakounig. Afterword by Tomo Virk. Klagenfurt: Drava/Mohorjeva-Hermagoras/Wieser, 2013. 192 pp., € 21 [= \$28.40] (hardcover). ISBN: 978-3-9902906-3-7.

Vitomil Zupan. *Reise ans Ende des Frühlings. Blitz in vier Farben. Roman.* Translated by Aleksander Studen-Kirchner. Afterword by Alenka Koron. Klagenfurt: Drava/Mohorjeva-Hermagoras/Wieser, 2013. 248 pp., € 21 [= \$28.40] (hardcover). ISBN: 978-3-9902906-2-0.

A literary undertaking of rare scope and depth has recently been launched, with Slovene help, in Vienna and Klagenfurt. The name of this scholarly publishing project is the *Slowenische Bibliothek* (Slovene Library) and, if it is fully realized, it will comprise far and away the largest set of high-quality translations of Slovene literature in any Western language. The purpose of

this review essay is to introduce both the series and the individual works and analyze their importance and impact in terms of content and translation.

The editor and founder of the book series, Dr. Erwin Koestler, a literary specialist living in Vienna who has brought out a remarkable number of Cankar translations dating back to 1995, reports that the goal of publications is twofold: first, to give German-speaking scholars and reviewers critical editions to spur their research, and, second, to start to anchor, in the minds of all kinds of readers living outside Slovenia, the awareness that Slovenia is not a “nation without a history” but has a meaningful literary tradition. The idea for this project dates back to 2009, when a round-table discussion at the Slovenska matica in Ljubljana focused attention on issues of Slovene-German and German-Slovene literary translation.

The process of commissioning the attached critical essays, translating the works, and publishing them involves contributions and cooperation from the government of Slovenia, the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts, and the three venerable Slovene-related publishing houses in Austria (Drava, Mohorjeva-Hermagoras, and Wieser). The original plan was to publish by the end of this decade quite a large number of translations: six sets of five books each. Five books appeared in 2013, but funding is now uncertain for the remainder.

The design of the “Slovene Library” follows several scholarly criteria. All the books must be prose, they must have originated in the years between the 1850s and 1980s, and they must have not yet been published in German translation. In addition, each round or tranche must contain at least one female writer, and all volumes will undergo intensive proof-reading, fact-checking, and editorial work to insure that the editions are of very high quality. In addition, Koestler has arranged for an afterword by a Slovene scholar or artist to be appended to each translation. Last but not least, preference is being given to authors important in Slovene literature but underrepresented in German translation. Future publications should include works by Berta Bojetu, Alma Karlin, Marija Kmet, Milena Mohorič, Ljuba Prenner, Franc Finžgar, Edvard Kocbek, Lojze Kovačič, Janez Trdina, and Pavel Zidar.

Zofka Kveder’s *Her Life* (1914) is a harsh story of a family’s self-destruction. It is told in a graceful, if straightforward, way from the point of view of a Slovene woman, Tilda Ribic, who suffers greatly through a marriage to a wastrel named Roman Sterle. Their children all meet sad ends, and both parents die in the story as well. Kveder describes Tilda’s own family in spare, touching language (brought to readers of German in a delightfully smooth translation by Daniela Kocmut); her parents are conscientious and thoughtful, if not intellectual, people, exemplars of a caring, orderly, bi-national, if joyless, home. Tilda is described as having “a

golden soul” (11). This is an attribute that contrasts harshly with her delinquent son Rajko’s disastrous quest for an adventure- and wealth-filled “golden future” at the end of the novel (220).

The first shadow cast over the narrative appears, almost Thomas Hardy-like, when Tilda’s family goes to a local fair, which turns into a kind of ritual procession of unmarried girls. The event is “light” for the debutantes, but ignominiously “dark” for the overlooked maidens who are beyond age twenty, still unmarried, and gnawed by doubt and marred by anxiety. Tilda is “dewfresh and lissome” (15) and leads the procession, but she has begun to feel that her body is too statuesque and her mind too noble for her to be “plucked” in this market town in this little valley. Is her “springtime” blooming in vain?

Alas, a visitor at the fair, Roman Sterle, vaguely acquainted with the Ribic family, is hunting for just such a treasure - with the right dowry, of course. Sterle comes on strong, confuses Tilda, and wins over her parents. When her father gets her mother to agree to the marriage (“Yes, I’m also of the opinion that even an unhappy marriage is better for a girl than an empty life, the bleak and sad years of spinsterhood” [23]), then Tilda is about to be launched into the hustle and bustle of the outside world about which she has long been curious.

After a quick wedding, Tilda’s doubts about Roman immediately begin to multiply. The special wedding gift for her that he first “forgot” and then “misaid” never materializes; their twelve-year age difference starts to register more and more; and when the newlyweds visit Roman’s long-suffering mother in Trieste, Tilda learns that Roman has a history of breaking promises. But, his mother assures her, he has a nice laugh and, oh, he means well!

Roman earns his living as a bailiff on an estate in a Carinthian village called Draga. He has made the place out to be bustling and prosperous, but Tilda recoils at the isolation and shabbiness of the area. Roman drinks, and in one poignant scene, we see Tilda as a seventeen-year old wife, curled up and traumatized under the covers, when her drunken husband comes back from a long night on the town. She has never seen an intoxicated man before, and she takes great pity on Roman, believing that he has come down with a real illness.

Three children are born, in rapid succession, to the increasingly unhappy couple. The first and third are girls: Ela and Mimi. The middle child, a boy, is Mirko. Roman is forever taking a new job in a distant location and, although he often sends modest amounts of money home, he almost never spends time with the family. There is a terrifying sequence about halfway through the novel, when Mirko has taken ill and Tilda sends a telegram to her husband in Carinthia. She urges him to come home, but he

is busy drinking and gambling every night and takes his time returning home. He arrives on the day of the boy's funeral, and as he is sheepishly trying to set things right in their village, the oldest girl, Ela, also dies. Tilda's expressions of grief are uniquely painful and physical: she compares her heart to a worm that Roman has stepped on, and says she can only keep her heart under control "with her fists" and her thoughts by binding them with an "iron ring."

Roman's visit also results in another pregnancy for Tilda. The boy who is born (in a hospital scene rivaled in duration and detail only by the one with a very different outcome in Arnold Zweig's *Woman of 1914*) is Rajko, and he is immediately perceived by his mother as "the chain that bound her to [Roman] and dragged them towards the abyss" (88). Little did she know the grief that lay in store for her, with both son and husband, although she cannot fail to note every year how much more and more Rajko resembles, physically and behaviorally, the unreliable and mostly absent Roman.

Even after the death of two of the children, Tilda has a hard time making a go of it financially. Lena, a live-in housemaid who is like a sister to her, helps provide stability in the house, but Tilda has to appeal to her father, her brothers, and Roman's uncle Robert at various times for financial help. One day Roman comes home and begins acting unexpectedly domestic; shortly thereafter, gendarmes show up and arrest him on serious charges of fraud (forged bank drafts). Although Tilda's father dies of a stroke in a *Kaffeehaus* when he reads of his son-in-law's arrest in the newspaper, Tilda reluctantly accepts that Roman's enforced absence will bring her four years of peace. She feels adrift and exposed without her husband, who is supposed to function as her rock, shield, and safe haven. However, her sense of loss begins its inexorable transformation into anger when Roman dies of tuberculosis in prison, where he is popular and well-liked by all, but steadfastly unrepentant of anything, and almost immediately she notices that her son can now schmooze, fast-talk, slip away, and steal just like his father.

As Rajko grows up, he alternates between fits of dutiful school attendance and smiling, supportive attentiveness to his mother, and disappearances and truculence that reminds her of his ominous paternal inheritance. After Mimi dies of consumption at age sixteen, the twelve-year old Rajko takes up with a nearby family of Panslavs named the Ribices. His sudden interest in poetry, languages and travel seems in keeping with the intellectual currents of the day and seems about to open his mother's horizons up to the broader world. But very quickly Rajko reveals himself as a cynic and a loafer, given to schemes and loose living. When his mother chides him for smugness because of his anti-intellectual stereotypes about women, Rajko merely says: "I value cynicism more than naiveté" (179).

When asked about his career plans, Rajko says he simply wants to be rich, because “[w]hen a man’s a millionaire, he can also be a patriot, in an easy and comfortable way. Without relinquishing even one of his cigarettes to the People... Whoever has a couple of thousand in cash in his pocket can be high-principled and patriotic and so on” (190).

Tilda cannot help but conflate Rajko with her deceased husband more and more, but she continues to let him live with her and she tries everything she can think of to help him find a foothold in life. She sends him off to a boarding school for a while; she sets him up as a photographer’s apprentice and then even enrolls him in a commercial school and takes courses with him. But he sells the family books for money to spend in taverns, and he pawns all of his nice clothes, assaults a professor, and finally disappears for a long while after threatening to go to New York or China to seek his fortune.

She is worried sick when he returns, but he is as scornful as ever. After telling his mother that he has spent the preceding weeks in a whorehouse, spending the life savings of the family friend Lena Prekar, whom he has shamelessly robbed, Tilda grabs a revolver that she stores in the living room to ward off burglars. She fires once at her son - and strikes him. He dies a painful death, and Tilda flees to the rocky coast and hurls herself into the Adriatic. With that, the entire family has vanished. But the memory of pain and injustice lingers, because of the final, universal questions that the desperate Tilda asks herself as she falls apart after killing her son. “Why all of this, to what end?” she cries. “Where, how had this all started?” And most tellingly: “Where did this start, and when?” The answer lies outside of Tilda’s own life. The answer lies at the very least in the social structures that conditioned the lives of Tilda, Roman and Rajko, if not in the very “nature” of their world.

At the very beginning of the novel *Plebanus Ioannes* (1921) by Ivan Pregelj, we meet a seminarian in Italy named Janez Geiler. The title is Latin for “Janez the country priest,” and we see him celebrate his first mass in Sveti Vrh and then rise to the position of Vicar of Tolmin. As a student he became fed up with the sinfulness of the world as he witnessed it in Florence and Rome, and he returned to “his mountains” near Cividale/Čedad to make his career. Pregelj’s religious expressionism is in high gear in this book: short, often declamatory, sentences, dialogue that bounces from stormy emotion to stormy emotion, and plenty of dreams, distant thunder and hallucinatory scenes with a talking crucifix. As choppy and confusing as prose in this style can be (something that is especially true of the novella discussed below), it is admirably translated by Johann Strutz and well suited for portrayal of the signs and symbols of misery and doom that every minor character seems to bring into Geiler’s life. At one very

telling point the Vicar even chides Christ about the dimness of the light that He supposedly brought into the world.

Geiler's parish is awash in poverty, disease, and prostitution, while cripples and single mothers abound and the atmosphere crawls with spleen and petulance. His slovenly sister, Polona, has a baby boy who is sick with diphtheria. Geiler helps take care of the boy, Peter, for years; he will grow up to be a good-natured, profligate student. But most of the Vicar's time is spent in rivalries with other priests from nearby parishes, and in tugs-of-war with regional secular authorities. When an old pal of his, who dropped out of religious life, comes to visit, Geiler is confronted with the fact that one can indeed find happiness in a secular or "profane" lifestyle.

Geiler is attracted to a beautiful young woman, Katrica, but is put into a very bad mood when his nephew, Peter, takes up with her during a vacation. Geiler gives thunderous, ill-tempered and very specific sermons, in which he names names of local sinners, excoriates other parishes as nests of vipers, lashes out at both German and Italian culture, and refers to the human soul as a cloaca. At the closing dinner of a visitation tour by his archbishop, Geiler starts a fistfight. Peter gets Katrica pregnant, and the two of them run away after being chastised by Geiler. The vicar must go to a judicial proceeding against him in Cividale, and along the way he meets some horribly afflicted victims of the plague. Peter is one of them, although Geiler does not know it. Peter dies, as does the priest's housekeeper Magdalena, and Katrica and her baby son move in with Geiler. The story closes in 1538 with other clerics discussing what a hard-headed and prickly character he is; it is not so much that he "serves two masters" as that he serves "his own Lord" (180).

Thabiti Kumi, the 1934 novella also included in this collection, picks up again with the story of the priest, Janez Geiler, who is vicar in Tolmin in 1556. He has a ward or charge, a nine-year old boy named Boštjan, who is a somewhat more formal parallel to his sister Polona's son Peter in the novel. He is teaching Boštjan how to ring the church bell and perform basic chores around the church. Geiler is plagued by bad dreams and arguments with God (extensively delineated in Latin and Greek) and pleads with the Lord to let him have one final desire.

A parishioner brings him to a very sick young woman, Neža, whom he cures and then attempts to lead in confession. At one point he utters to her the words that Christ used in one of his miracles: "Open your eyes. Stand up." (These two verbs provide the title of this story and appear in their Aramaic form in the description of the raising of the daughter of Jairus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.) While leaning over Neža, she embraces him and he gives in to "beautiful, otherworldly feelings of desire." He is convinced that "through him, God will work a miracle with His mighty, holy word—the touch of his hand will do it, and the power that

will flow from his body into the sick woman now, in this terrible new sacrament” (221).

At the end of the story, the vicar emerges from the sick woman’s room to a confrontation with thunderstruck visitors who suspect what has happened. He soon collapses in a permanent nervous breakdown. As an aside we are also told that young Boštjan will also end in a swamp of debauchery by his thirtieth year.

In another magisterial translation by Köstler, Vladimir Bartol’s collection (written between 1935 and 1940), begins with “A Summer Idyll.” It is the story of a young composer from Ljubljana, Trstenjak, who pays a couple of visits to the Slovene countryside. The first time is to give a concert of his own works, and the second is because an attractive young high school student, Metka Golar, has invited him to spend a few days of his vacation in her parents’ inn. Metka has a boyfriend, the star athlete Boris Lovšin, who studies in Ljubljana, but he and the composer move in completely different circles. Indeed, Boris is rather boorish and inattentive to her; Metka, though, is surprisingly modern—she is a materialist and an atheist—and intends to soon move to the big city to study. She is attracted to both men, loyal to Boris, and perfectly happy with the maelstrom of multilateral flirting that goes into high gear when the wealthy, sophisticated local noblewoman, Lady Jarmila, joins their ranks during Trstenjak’s brief second visit. A series of long meals and walks provide the setting for conversations about love, eroticism, and art. Trstenjak is at the center of the tale, which proceeds and concludes in almost cinematic fashion, with short, crisp scenes and clear delineations of the conclusions the four individuals draw from their encounters. The composer is also strangely smug, or perhaps omniscient and a bit otherworldly: he smiles and chuckles knowingly to himself very frequently, and he dispenses advice and maxims in slangy, oddly abbreviated dialogues.

The attractive Metka, who despite her junior status is well written and not a victim or supplicant, has something in common with the main woman character in the next story, “The Marriage of Dr. Grom,” which is arguably the finest story in this collection. Miha Grom is a dentist and a playboy who resides in a city that seems to be Ljubljana. He has lived a very, shall we say, “unexamined” life for many years, pausing from wine and women only long enough to drum up business, take care of his patients, and modernize his practice. In this story, a series of trips, two to Vienna and one to the countryside, push him in brutally short order to a series of realizations and a horrific decision. First, after a business trip to the Austrian capital, he realizes how much debt he has amassed. With great urgency he decides he must marry a rich woman to push the chaos of bankruptcy out of his life and to retain his standard of living—he calls this “cleaning up” or “ordering” his life. He breaks things off with his two

mistresses and decides to return to a small town where he had previously worked. There he had enjoyed a dalliance with the beautiful daughter of a wealthy farmer, and he is determined to exploit his friendship with that family to secure her hand in marriage and arrange for a dowry big enough to pay all his debts. His friend in the city, a notary public named Fajdiga, alternately assists him and counsels caution, but Grom plows ahead. Young Marta is overwhelmed. She is, however, not stupid, and her family is attentive to her needs and wishes. After the engagement, she sees through Grom's tricks and forthrightly tells her parents she will not marry that man. But when he reappears in the village, obviously not well but keeping his stomach cancer (recently diagnosed on a second visit to Vienna) a secret, she is buffeted by pity and a desire to be merciful. Bartol's description of the evolution of her thoughts and of Grom's decision to take his own life is masterfully sensitive and articulate. The swirl of life goes on above Grom's grave, but he is disintegrating under the earth exactly as the new medicines he had brought from Vienna were used to break down caries.

In "Dangerous Idylls," a traveler from the city, Janko Verbnik, has arranged a stay in a quiet provincial spa in order to rendezvous with his mistress, a wealthy married woman named Vanda. Before she arrives, Verbnik runs into a beautiful teenage girl, Julija Bradna, who completely mesmerizes and disarms him. She seems as pure and robust as the landscape, but she also seems to have an entire pack of local boys and gentlemen visitors wrapped around her finger. She is as refined as a Renaissance model while also being a dutiful daughter and a pantheistic temptress. Verbnik rediscovers the mysteries of the profuse natural world around him, even as he decides to throw caution to the winds and have an affair with the girl. Though he cannot shake the thought that it's all "nonsense," he feels his carefully ordered, "positivistic" world threatened. Vanda must not know of the affair.

As in many of these stories, there is a lot of talk, by the narrator and the characters, about love and attraction and marriage—especially about what makes them "tick" for men. When an eccentric old man turns up as a guest at the spa, Verbnik is further unsettled. This man, a powerful and well-known figure named Inspektor Stari, exercises considerable influence over people in a manner combining equal parts patriarchy and sleaziness. As Vanda's arrival date approaches, Verbnik falls very much under Julija's spell, and is teased and titillated almost to the point of explosion by her antics. For instance, she shows up in the middle of the day in his room, naked and needy but refusing to consummate—and then promptly disappears into her crowd of admirers. She continues to find time for him amidst the crowded artificial "social life" of the remote spa, even if only for a kiss by their favorite pond. He and Vanda continue as lovers, but a dim awareness of danger and discomfort arises in both of them. Still, the city holds their other life, or rather, their other lives, and despite the essential

mendacity of their hidden affairs and sublimated anxieties there, they both long to leave the spa. Vanda departs, and Verbnik attempts to rekindle the romance with the beautiful, Diana-like (or perhaps demonic) Julija. But she is indignant and condemns him for dishonesty. When the weary Verbnik observes the enormous scandal that rocks the spa when Stari's wife shows up and catches Julija in bed with the inspector, he is beyond any more lust or calculation. Feeling many years older, he leaves and catches his train.

“The End of the Walk on the Wild Side” amplifies the themes and formal tendencies of other stories in the collection and raises them to an insistent, almost overwhelming intensity. The reader could be forgiven for feeling at times that he or she is trapped in the sodden pages of the erotic diary, or the too-rigid folds of the hormone-drenched brain, of a twenty-something Don Juan. In this, the longest story here by far, the sexual escapades of a young man burn with singular intensity and shine with derring-do. We also find articulate, independent women (who, Bartol might be saying, ought to know better?); a smooth narrative that flows along with short, predictable snatches of dialogue; clear expositions of the characters' mental states; and set, orchestrated scenes. The combined effect of these features is to impart a sense of fatefulness or inevitability to the proceedings. But the story also has a pronounced cinematic feel and shows off considerable authorial skill in its smooth crafting.

The narrative thrust of the piece is the amatory adventures of a young engineer named Robert Breščak. He is a man torn between at least four lovers, all attractive women who are powerfully drawn to him and who display, in Bartol's heated but not vulgar prose, considerable sensuality and lack of inhibition towards the protagonist. At times the plot seems to consist simply of embraces, couplings, and sexual encounters fueled by the widest variety of needs: power, escapism, helplessness, lust, hope for material gain, drunkenness, self-deception, relief, relaxation, and provocation. When the story begins to careen towards its cacophonous ending, and Breščak's house of cards starts to collapse, we have a sense of a moralistic comeuppance in the offing, a raw lesson about to be imparted and a set of exploitative delusions about to run out of gas. This sense of collapse joins with the unending intimate partner violence, threatened and actual, to create the dramatic, fateful air of a work by Sacher-Masoch.

A summary of the action in this lengthy tale would revolve around the rather aimless Breščak, his four women, and their three men. His fiancée is Darinka Domjanič. She is also an engineer and owns the construction company that has posted him to the project in the provincial city that is the locus of the story. Darinka's aunt, a sensual and vain widow named Josipina Barany, lives in this same town. To prove her own vitality, she soon seduces, with wild fanfare, Breščak, who quickly proves to be quite fond of drink and quite willing to show up late to work. Barany owns a grocery, and

Breščak, in a paroxysm of wanton power and lust, rapes the gorgeous, sweet young clerk there, after which they both (improbably) fall head over heels in love with each other. Her name is Štefica and she has a radical, tubercular boyfriend named Milan Skubic. About the time that Lucija, the impoverished but status-hungry housemaid, notices what Breščak is up to with the other two women, and uses that information to blackmail him into seducing, humiliating, and dominating (!) her, far-away Darinka notices that her husband-to-be has not visited her in quite a while and is, furthermore, writing ever more effusive but less concrete letters. She comes to visit.

Despite, or because of, his philandering, and perhaps in light of the rather choice physical assets of his many lovers, Breščak goes to sleep many a night with pious thoughts of Darinka in his head and, more importantly, the conviction that he is “in harmony with his own being and with the cosmic order of things.” Bartol pokes fun at moral and ethical concepts every few pages, touted by the reprobate Breščak, and in quotation marks, to be sure. As Josipina and Lucija seem themselves squeezed out of the picture by Štefica and Darinka, they engineer scenes and scandals to embarrass Robert. Breščak himself grows more violent towards all the women except his fiancée, and sex for them all becomes less a voluptuous, consequence-free act of abandonment and daring and more a kind of manipulation. Finally, on a long, surreal evening out on the town that ends with all four of his lovers descending upon him in the chi-chi dance club “Excelsior,” Breščak has his skull split open on the dance floor by Skubic, who had earlier published a story about a proletarian poet manqué and ailing student who killed a wealthy Casanova whose selfishness robbed innocent young people of love and embodied the class struggle in society.

This story is no doubt entertaining, at least for readers who do not mind seeing youth so extravagantly wasted on the young. Its frank depictions of sexuality are artistically successful. The foregrounding of violence against women is important. Still, one might have wished for, in such a long story, a bit more of a role (or a representation, so that we are shown and not just told) for the “establishment” whose morals Breščak is consciously and unconsciously mocking. More important still would be some clues about the female characters’ motivations. Bartol does not really address why the women are so obsessed with love, or with Breščak in particular. Could it be that they are just having fun or following lascivious instincts, like Robert, or are they empty and unfocused stewards of the property, brains, education, and loyal male affection in their portfolios?

The compact tale entitled “The Radical Cure” is the most unsettling story in the book. Its style is rough, and its repetitive comments on the character of the main character, Simon Krassowitz, along with the uneven pacing of the plot, serve ultimately to focus the reader on the denouement, or actually the fable-like take-away dictum pronounced after

the shattering conclusion of the story. Krassowitz returns to Ljubljana after an absence of about a decade. Like some sort of moral or emotional vampire, he needs to rejuvenate, recover from some sorts of failed enterprises abroad. He will best do this by finding “action” and “once again manipulating the wheelwork of life.” While kicking around in Ljubljana, he stumbles across a number of old companions from his student days. They are actors, actresses, writers, directors, and it is as if they have come into his field of vision and fallen into his hands by design. He was loved and missed by these people, but he is convinced that they, especially a writer named Černigoj, who has found a helpmate, admirer, and pillar of support in the simple but beautiful Julija, must be shown the error of their ways!

Krassowitz seems to have some (trivial) reason to avenge himself on most people in the theater troupe to which he connects Černigoj in the nearby city of Kranj. He helps arrange the premiere of the new play, about the life and loves of the Prophet Muhammad, but he also arranges for some members of the *lumpenproletariat* in the audience to laugh at the climax of the drama. The audience’s propriety completely falls apart, the actors have the artistic rug pulled from under them, and in short order the author dies, mocked and misunderstood, of a heart attack. Krassowitz has a cab and a train ticket waiting, and off he speeds, having “opened their eyes” to the fact that happiness is only possible “when life is founded on blindness and beautiful lies” (273). That would seem to be the end of the story, but Bartol wants us to follow the bread crumbs in the text into two other unsettling discussions: why do audiences feel so uncomfortable when faced with studies of great passions and tragedy that they are happy to give up contemplation of a play like the one about Muhammad and shift to treating it as a comedy, and why would representatives of a “small nation” like the Slovenes think that they have the wherewithal to enter world literature “sub specie aeternitatis” and join in a majestic polemic with Voltaire about a world religion?

“Doctor Late” is another of the three Simon Krassowitz stories in this collection. Its format is predominantly epistolary. A man in a lunatic asylum, calling himself Sardanapal and claiming to be Dr. Krassowitz’s friend, writes him long letters asking for intervention to secure his release. When such intervention is not forthcoming, the letters grow full of more and more details about life inside the ward. It is, not surprisingly, a microcosm of life on the outside, in which pretense, hierarchy, cruelty, and disappointment thrive. But meta-questions keep surfacing, as when the inmates calculate the spread of diagnoses of mental illness in society at large and arrive at the conclusion that by century’s end 90% of society will be judged to be “crazy” and then an interrogation of the in-out dichotomy follows: “normal people” will go into institutions, but these were the folks with inferiority complexes anyway, and today’s inmates will strut the world as megalomaniacal generals, emperors, ideologues, and demi-gods.

Although Sardanapal has come to suspect that his friend is “actually a kind of zoologist of humans who carries out experiments” on our species (290), he still believes him when Krassowitz tells him that it’s best to do away with oneself when the wick of life burns down and begins to sputter. The inmate hangs himself in his room. By this time Krassowitz has already left the institution. He reads about his friend’s death in a restaurant at a distant train station. Despite his pronouncements about the empirical necessity of bodily decomposition and the material foundations of consciousness, psyche, personality, and, by extension, soul, the doctor also entertains at times subjective considerations about dreams and sentiments of an afterlife, both possibly terrifying.

The final tale in the collection, “R&R,” is also quite lengthy. It is at heart the story of a love triangle, but in Bartol’s world such a thing is never divorced from a power struggle. And indeed the story is shot through with such a welter of characteristic Bartol themes and devices that this substantial work, a novella really, emerges as a kind of register of the author’s preoccupations and methods, many of which are also in evidence elsewhere in the collection. One might read into such a pronouncement the judgment that there’s nothing new, nothing added to Bartol’s world for his readers, in this story, but that is not the case. In fact we learn more about Krassowitz himself in this story than in any of the others. Just exactly what the hard-traveling doctor does abroad that so exhausts him is unclear, but when he is physically and spiritually frazzled he comes home to recharge his batteries.

Evidently seeing old drinking buddies and sleeping with old girlfriends is not enough; his nerves need the restoration proffered by a familiar environment where his prestige is secure—but they also need the stimulation of manufactured drama, of games where he “schools” his (former) friends, alternately providing for them, exploiting them, or putting them in their place. If Slovenia is a petri dish, or a hothouse, or a crucible, for his experiments, the ecosystem Krassowitz generates here contains most of the familiar elements from other stories: a closed circle (as at a spa or mental institution in other Bartol tales) serving as an experimental microcosm, lots of sex, “devilish” women who are durable and articulate if maligned, the perils of drunkenness, emotional breakdowns of people who are swamped or “dissolved” by debt or power, jealousy, rage or love—and art. Some of Bartol’s most fascinating constructions are his discussions and plot twists involving art and artists, especially in the world of drama. Perhaps theater is a kind of microcosm within the microcosm of his stories. At any rate Bartol’s most concrete connections to the time and place of his stories are found in his depictions of the world of artists; this might be the most specific testimony about his world that is preserved for us in his works.

The affair at the heart of “R&R” involves Glorija, an attractive but unfulfilled actress, Krassowitz, and Lovro Vrančič, a young would-be professor of philosophy who is the de facto leader of a circle of young theater buffs who fancy themselves radical exponents of “*die Neue Sachlichkeit*.” The ambitious Glorija and awkward Lovro embark on a love affair. The obnoxious attitudes of Lovro’s friends about Glorija’s checkered past—today we would call this “slut-shaming”—are alarming, but equally discomfoting is Krassowitz’s decision to win Glorija back by destroying Lovro’s artistic project. The latter man has written a play and, with the doctor’s help, found a producer and a company; the play is a proud challenge to the realist and romantic traditions and is supposed to herald Lovro’s triumph over his old-fashioned rivals in personal and professional life. But Krassowitz subverts the play and instructs Glorija and the other star on how to perform their roles in the more traditional ways they, and the audience, find pleasing. After the performance, of course, Lovro is crushed. He goes mad, actually, and for a while we have some semi-comic chase scenes in downtown Ljubljana as he ineffectively tries to hunt down his nemesis, Krassowitz. But the doctor sends Glorija away for safekeeping, godlike, in the new world of the theater company of another male friend of his, and casually drops in at his travel agent, browsing brochures and planning his next foray abroad.

Journey to the End of Spring (1972) by Vitomil Zupan is an affable and worthwhile narrative about a self-absorbed, insecure, sinister, even twisted teacher. Novels that take us into the head of another person—be they beholden to psychological realism or modernism—can be very interesting, and, not to put too fine a point on it, but if that person is *weird*, then the results can be very interesting indeed. That’s what is going on in this fine novel by Vitomil Zupan rendered into graceful German by Aleksandar Studen-Kirchner. By way of orientation, imagine the unstable, envious type of person whom you would consider the absolute worst choice to pursue a career as a high school teacher; try to discern whether his caustic characterization of a gifted student who is “devilish” but more talented and more emotionally open than he is accurate or deceptively self-serving; and end by balancing the contentment the reader might well derive from the masterful, fluent narrative and the (underrated!) discussions of art and creativity with the myriad creepy intimations that ghastly aberration would dominate any epilogue to the novel. Why be prudish? Zupan writes as though pederasty and homicide are right around the corner. Sparing us that is not an idle mind-game or a shortcoming on his part, because he has given us other worlds of things to think about already. And just when we think that important lines have already been crossed, the ontological distinctions between the narrator and the object of his fantasy are blurred almost beyond repair.

The unnamed narrator is infatuated with a student named Maks Vernik, who goes by the name Tajsí. Their first real contact is over a portfolio of poems and fiction that the student asks his teacher to comment upon. The narrator at first can only regard his student with scorn and envy, and he invites the boy to a pub to get him drunk and make fun of him. Numerous encounters follow, some of them attended by the teacher's attractive wife Sonja, and a strange friendship-cum-rivalry develops between the two men. At times it takes on phantasmagoric proportions, as when Tajsí explains his lengthy, provocative, synesthesia-sodden dreams to the teacher, and both men are left shattered by the experience, in a state of almost post-coital guilt. Indeed we do seem here to have a love triangle, involving the nihilistic teacher, the "monstrous" and "criminal" neophyte schoolboy who is his Treitschke-like "misfortune," and the refreshingly normal and slightly flirtatious wife whose "sky-blue panties" take on iconic significance for the two men. But that the narrator is highly unreliable in regards to Tajsí soon becomes apparent, and the reader might well remain ambivalent about the younger man's faults: boyish fecklessness and teenage excess or real degeneration? That the teacher is conflating or projecting things onto Tajsí or conflating the boy and himself, or even imagining him out of whole cloth is also possible; the very first sentence of the book is "I very much wish I were Tajsí," and later he claims he is "having an affair with Tajsí's imagination" (70); he sexually harasses Tajsí's girlfriend Jakobina, using the same words Tajsí uses to describe Sonja; and considers the boy "the embodiment of [his] nightmares" (79). Finally the pathetic teacher even feels occupied by Tajsí's dreams, compelled to re-dream them, and finds himself mocked, professionally and personally, by the other man's glowing "indecent appendage" appearing out of a wall.

The teacher's interactions with other people are generally mean-spirited, if sometimes also darkly humorous. He is convinced the school custodian, Žužnik, is out to get him, so he sets out to get Žužnik first; alarmingly, he sets out to impregnate his wife so that she cannot leave him for Tajsí, but then he basically offers her up to the boy as a prurient thrill; he frequently makes tasteless jokes about sexually-transmitted diseases; he delights in pouring the "burning urine" of his pessimism and sarcasm over newlyweds and newborns; and he hates everything aristocratic and bourgeois, because he idly supposes himself smarter than such people can ever be. On a lighter note, he also bluffs his way through a tedious sitting-room conversation with Tajsí's mother and uncle by spouting nonsense about literature and noble lineages and serving up neologisms and makes lots of puns on people's names and thinks and feels in colors. Tajsí is far less active in driving the plot, but his actions and words provide an inexhaustible "volcanic" fount of Freudian pathology. In the second half of the book, Tajsí is indeed almost absent, and the aimless, alcoholic narrator

causes all kinds of trouble amongst his friends, and tells us all about it in a very modern-feeling head trip.

At times the seamy side of student life reminds us of Musil's Törless, and the narrator's endless suspicions of his sensual wife's infidelity put us in mind of *Martin Kačur* by Cankar, while the nighttime ravings of the roving, haunted teacher harken back to Vjenceslav Novak's desperate composer in *A Tale of Two Worlds*. But there is method to the madness in Zupan. Let us take, for example, the fantastical explosion of the narrator's body that he contemplates, and calmly, clinically, elaborates upon, while he is in the midst of one of his "turns." In a graphic but at times whimsical, or at least impatient, digression, the teacher sees his body parts displayed across all the landmarks in town and provides each scene with brief commentary and a moral for the good of the citizens. This lengthy passage is bizarre, but it is also more than solipsistic. When we think of it in light of the teacher's assertion that "Everything is life... and that itself is, of course, barbaric, feral, and wanton," (94) we might be reminded of D.H. Lawrence's desire to un-mechanize life and the brain. Then again, when we know that this quote comes from a bathroom visit when the teacher is imagining Taji's girlfriend with her legs spread as she hunkers on the toilet seat, we might opt for a neurotic and not nature-loving or Romantic explanation. Ultimately, in evaluating the unnamed narrator's personality, we have to weigh, or negotiate between, two sets of passages: the thought-provoking pronouncements on the art of writing and criticism, on the one hand, and the maddening riffs or rants about what kind of drinker he is, why he has writer's block, or whether an outsider would think he loved a certain woman, hated her, or was just pretending all around—all complete with lyrical lists, starring himself, of examples or samples of this aspect of the human condition. In other words, is this guy for real, a thinker and a suffering artist, or is he just a victim of self-pity or pathology?

Even though "the tyranny of the title" does not always provide a useful handhold in interpreting a work of art, in this particular case the novel's name can be helpful in focusing our thoughts. This is at least true in terms of launching our interpretation of the plot of the story in at least two different directions. The narrator mentions that he was married in the spring, and since his miserable marriage is both his chief marker of adulthood and the backdrop for his repressed sexuality built on domination and transgressive eroticism. As the marriage decays, the spring passes; it moves towards its end. Many things in the teacher's life have failed to germinate and flourish; anger and cynicism result, but the hallucinatory repressed sexuality is definitely foregrounded in this novel. We might also think of the motion evoked by the title as a reminder that this is a *Bildungsroman*, albeit of a pronounced sub-variety. It takes place in an atmosphere of *Bildung* (education), but more importantly it tracks the coming of age of two very different men, the teacher and his more talented

but equally haughty charge. Spring is usually beautiful, we know, but *Bildungsromane* need not bring us to any sunny, breezy place, and indeed this one leaves us stranded, somewhere. This is deliberate. On the one hand we can hear the teacher say, (probably) happily: “Tajsi is my friend. It is a most excellent feeling when you abandon yourself to another person. From your grim gothic castle you are transformed into a sunny cabana made of bamboo and cardboard” (187); and by the end of the narrative Sonja is pregnant, the teacher is showing up regularly for work again and watching his tongue (and maybe his other body parts too), and young Maks seems destined to graduate and move on. We even, apparently, learn the teacher’s name in the last page or two. But then again the entire second half of the book has been a long downhill slide, depicting the narrator’s increasingly manic and witless behavior in the pubs and shops and living rooms of the town, marked by incoherence, scatological humor and random, jaded eroticism; even the chapters get shorter so they don’t explode with his vulcanism.

Marjan Rožanc’s *Love* (1979) is an autobiographical novel about growing up in Ljubljana during World War II. The work is a gentle one in terms of style: there’s no radical regime of flashbacks and surging emotions, nothing but muted or blurry transitions, no caustic diet of self-doubt or guilt, a quiet, matter-of-fact manner of describing even traumatic or pivotal occurrences, and a disarming, dutiful litany of proper names of people and places. Underneath it all the pumping blood and watchful eyes of the young narrator, conveyed to us in the melodious and precise prose of Metka Wakounig, do their work; his idealistic, and often a priori doomed, attempts to “love everybody” and show solidarity with all the residents of the neighborhoods of Zelena jama, Moste, and Bežigrad form the emotional spine of the book.

What does a boy remember about growing up in wartime? A lot of the answer to that question depends on which war we mean, and where in relation to the fighting the boy lives. Rožanc’s narrator is growing up in a big city occupied first by Italians and then by Germans and buffeted by encounters with various paramilitary and guerrilla forces, of left and right, from outside the city. The plot is simple and is a reaction to, a reflection of, the course of the multilateral war in Slovenia. Occupations, the experience of the nature of the two regimes, the exodus of city-dwellers “to the forest” to join (mostly) the Partisans, assassinations and retaliations, crackdowns and raids, arrests and deportations, and then a sudden end to the war, with many missing faces returning to their former spots. But not all return.

The Rožanc family is lucky: both Marjan’s brother Edi and his father, Viktor, who had been deported to Mauthausen, return to the family. The family itself is in transition, or crisis, and not just due to the war: the father, a highly-regarded doctor at the local hospital, is seldom home and

apparently very much distant from the lives of Marjan and his brothers, while the mother, a Jehovah's Witness, moves by herself back to her family at the end of the war. Marjan grieves little over his deported father, and seems to have little emotional contact with either parent. In contrast, the depiction of his loss of virginity is as telling about his emotional state as it is out of proportion to the other (brief) confessions in the narrative: Rožanc spins it out to twelve pages, which would be about ten pages too long, I suppose, if there were not two kind-hearted prostitutes involved instead of just one. The scene is well written, but it comes out of the blue in the sequence of our narrator's maturation process. Otherwise, getting to know the world is obviously the aim of the carefully calibrated narrative. Being overwhelmed, succumbing to helplessness or ignorance, seeking acceptance, feeling guilty—these other characteristics of a child's emotional life are handled well.

Two of the scenes in the book stand out for their richness. Early on Marjan describes the children's habit of playing soccer with the Italian troops. The kids are delighted to play against grown-ups on the field behind the Kolinska factory, and, yes, here are human beings from belligerent countries negotiating a coexistence and sharing something commonly human. However, as the author hastens to add: "The game was, nevertheless, never just a game" (43). The boys, mostly apolitical, noticed that the Italians gathered around the cab of their truck in the pauses to laugh over the good news from the Eastern Front, while their bruised and bloodied legs ached from the Italians' kicks, which were harder than they needed to be and inflicted out of retribution and the desire to maintain the hierarchy imperiled by the young men's desire to embarrass the Italians individually in one-on-one play.

In general this novel contributes a needed antidote to the popular wisdom that Mussolini's forces were only good-natured or half-hearted buffoons. The Italian occupation is very serious, complete with well-organized searches and scare tactics, including the secret police patrol that "disappears" Edi, supposedly for laughing at a poster of *Il Duce* from inside a streetcar. One might add that the Italian occupation is *serious business*, because the center of Ljubljana is transformed by new merchants and peddlers and swarms of people from Italy proper. Other vignettes in the book offer thought-provoking insights into life in Slovenia during the war. The politicization of the church is brilliantly depicted, and appropriately done from the eyes of children who are not concerned with homilies and Papal stances but who negotiate the pressures of confession and communion and try to understand why one underground group would desecrate a church and why altar boys from another would shoot an old man in his own home because he "brought two communist pigs into this world." The comparison of the fighting around them to American Westerns they had seen in local movie houses is an unexpected reminder of culture well on its way to

globalization, as the references to Jesse Owens and numerous movie and music stars also remind us. At times Rožanc can even be funny, probably unintentionally. Or is he subtly taking our pulse, or nodding conspiratorially in our direction, when he pokes gentle fun at “Slovene national ornamentation” and symbols that crowd certain houses in his memory: mountain-climbing gear, copies of paintings by Grohar, carnations, asparagus, and fresh-baked *zsemle*? At any rate the narrative’s pace and impact are admirably controlled, moderated, and the *realia* is only incrementally, humanely, advanced into our field of vision. How, for instance, do the residents of Ljubljana react to Italy’s capitulation in 1943? First they pull their bicycles out of the basements and attics where they had been consigned by the Italians’ ban on biking, and then they head to the armories to see what they can find.

These five novels constitute a virtuoso journey through major literary movements and moods of the past one hundred and ten years. First come Kveder’s modernism and Pregelj’s Expressionism, and then we are exposed to the carefully constructed and ironic psychological gamesmanship of Bartol. Zupan is hard to describe after that, but his provocations are definitely part of the postwar atmosphere, even as he delivers to us a careful depiction of the interior life of yet another rebel against bourgeois propriety. Finally, Rožanc’s quiet nostalgia upsets all sorts of taboos and sets up the limited horizons (and mostly goodwill) of youth against the final decade of real existing socialism in Yugoslavia. Kveder’s work will be of great interest to followers of Cankar, while the Catholicism in Pregelj will likely always be a font for earnest discussions. The carefully interlocking narratives of Bartol, rich in ethical dilemmas, gender rivalry, and rural-urban splits are likely to ratchet up the already considerable interest in that fine writer, some of whose work bears comparison to Krleža. Zupan’s menacing squint is as much a relief from presumptuousness as it is a subversion of good order, and fans of Rožanc will find a lot of material linking *Love* to works by Ismail Kadare, Jurij Koch, Danilo Kiš, and many others.

One must hope that this series will be continued as planned. It would also be a great service to the Anglophone world if such a series were to come into existence in English. As things stand today, the Slovene Library contrasts greatly to the only similar collection in English, Dalkey Archive’s Slovene line in its admirable and vast National Literature Series. The Dalkey collection, which includes marvelous volumes by Florjan Lipuš and Boris Pahor (both magnificently translated by Michael Biggins), focuses on the late twentieth century and include poetry. Older Slovene fiction in English is very much a hit-or-miss prospect, and they are mostly missing. When completed, the *Slowenische Bibliothek* may well be a model undertaking, and it will certainly underscore the importance of transnational Central European scholarly initiative, the fundamental importance of

Austrian cultural institutions in our field, and, above all, the resounding brilliance of Slovene literature.

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