

How Kovačič's Fur Coat Is Made: What a Formalist Analysis Reveals about the Great Slovenian Novel

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Abstract

Slovene novelist Lojze Kovačič's long auto-fictional novel *Prišleki* (*Newcomers*), set primarily in Slovenia during the ten years from 1938 to 1948, is widely lauded as one of the most outstanding Slovene novels of the second half of the twentieth century, although no critical studies of it have yet pointed to any fundamental features of its structure or narrative arc that would serve to unify what critics have otherwise often described as its sprawling and "fragmentary" nature. The author of this article, drawing on a number of characteristic sequences from the novel and on formalist literary theory, demonstrates that Kovačič has subtly framed the narrative voice, which is primarily that of his ten- to twenty-year-old alter ego Bubi, to show how his character copes with the onslaught of new, unfamiliar, and often hazardous experiences in the foreign land of his exile by drawing on his previous experience in more familiar circumstances as a means of making cognitive and often metaphorical sense of the new. Deprived, at least temporarily, of the medium of language at the critical developmental stage of late puberty and early adolescence, he becomes acutely attuned to all sorts of subtle visual clues in his new environment in a process that shapes his perceptual and interpretive habits and reveals a previously dormant artistic sensibility and passion. Determined to become a visual artist, but frustrated at the realization that he lacks the necessary dexterity, he seeks for an alternate medium through which to channel his gift. As we, the readers, follow Bubi through the stages of his artistic and personal development, we are less apt to notice the way his more mature self (the meta-narrator) has already incorporated a grand, innovative, and surprising solution to Bubi's dilemma into the very structure of the book we are reading.

Key words: Kovačič, Lojze, 1928–2004. *Prišleki*, Slovenian fiction, autobiographical fiction, formalism, narrative rhetoric, comic books, refugees, twentieth century, WW II

It might seem inexplicable that the most celebrated Slovenian novel of the second half of the twentieth century and possibly of all time—Slovenia's equivalent, in sociocultural terms but on a more modest scale, of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and any number of other modern literary landmarks, has so far occasioned no major critical studies in its homeland, let alone in the world at large. One can hazard

a number of possible explanations for this lack. The author, Lojze Kovačič (b. 1928 in Basel, Switzerland, d. 2004 in Ljubljana, Slovenia), was Slovenia's pioneer in the genre of autobiographical fiction (or auto-fiction), publishing his first auto-fictional short stories as early as 1945. In the course of the six decades that followed, he wrote and published, and then rewrote and republished essentially the same story multiple times, each time approaching his subject—the formative years of his childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—from a different perspective, foregrounding some episodes while backgrounding others, and drawing each time on a different narrative mode to fathom his very personal experience of twentieth-century East Central Europe's most traumatic decades. His masterpiece, *Newcomers* (*Prišleki*, first published in Slovene in three volumes in 1984–85), was the culmination of stories he had already told and would tell yet again, in part or in whole, in at least four other separately published prose works: *Deček in smrt* (Death and the boy 1961, 1968), *Delavnica* (Workshop 1974), later republished as *Šola pisanja* (School of writing, 1997), *Basel* (Basel 1989), and *Otroške stvari* (Childish things 2003). Understandably, published studies of Kovačič have tended to conflate these works into one and treat them as a single, collective work through which the author accomplished a lifelong feat of near-total memory recall. This practice overlooks the fact that the epic-length version of the story as Kovačič told it in *Newcomers* was cast in a radically new form, one that for his readers would prove most memorable of all, but has yet to attract due critical attention. In this article I have outlined the principal elements that I believe constitute this new form.

The eponymous fur coat of the article's title is, of course, the one—or rather, ones, presumably dozens or, even more likely, hundreds of them in the course of his career—fashioned by the auto-fictional narrator's father, Alojz Kovačič, Sr., both as depicted in *Newcomers* and, presumably, in real life before that. As a young man in search of his fortune, the elder Kovačič, we learn gradually in the course of Book One, had emigrated from Slovenian Lower Carniola many decades before when it was still a Habsburg possession, eventually apprenticing himself to tailors in Germany, finally marrying the daughter of one of them, relocating to Switzerland and starting a family. Together the Kovačičes opened a tailor shop in Basel just before the outbreak of WW I, and later diversified their offerings and skills to include furs as a strategy for catering to a more affluent clientele. Like most shop-keeping tradespeople in Europe at the time, the Kovačičes often lived in apartments or rooms contiguous to the shops where they produced and marketed their merchandise. It is, therefore, in the midst of a domestic microcosm filled with a variety of textiles, fabrics, hides, furs and tools for clothes-making, and amidst the continual focused attention of both parents plying their trades for long hours each day that the young Lojze Kovačič experienced the first ten years of his childhood in Switzerland, as well as the following seven years of adolescence, living with his family in their

Slovenian exile. Kovačič, the author of *Newcomers*, allows this domestic context to emerge gradually in the course of an epic narrative spanning well over a thousand pages, until it comes to serve as one of the central metaphors of the novel, providing the model according to which the young protagonist will ultimately fashion himself as an artist and writer, and lending shape, coherence, and meaning to Slovenia's greatest *Bildungs-, Künstler-, and Schelmenroman*¹ all in one.

Establishing the Authenticity of the Narrative Voice

The reader of *Newcomers* is struck almost immediately by the profusion of extremely precise, fresh and significant detail that the book's fifty-six-year-old auto-fictional narrator (at the time of its first publication in 1984) is able to reproduce about scenes and events that he witnessed as a boy between four to five decades before.² Indeed, these descriptions are so vivid that the reader assumes they must be the product either of an exceptionally retentive and focused memory or of a highly inventive imagination, or possibly some hybrid combination of both.³ What becomes evident about them over time, as the reader assimilates dozens and hundreds of instances of them, is the consistency of the points of reference against which they are both descriptively and metaphorically mapped, their anchoring in the juvenile narrator's previously experienced and, hence, necessarily limited reality, and the resulting sense of the fundamental authenticity of the narrative voice that carries them, which acts subtly to counterbalance the skeptical reader's temptation either to dismiss them as too sophisticated and elaborate for such a young age, or as detail recalled at such a vast chronological remove as to

¹ Novel of education or coming of age novel, artist novel, and picaresque novel. The first two concepts originated to describe types of novels that first gained currency in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German literature, and subsequently internationally, but for which the original German terms remain the standard even today. The third term came into being much earlier, and in Spanish (*novela picaresca*), to describe a subtype of novel that emerged in Spain in the sixteenth century, influenced Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and reached its peak of popularity in England two centuries later with Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon*, Melville's *The Confidence Man*, and others. Koron (1991) has pointed in passing to the presence in *Newcomers* of elements of both the *Bildungsroman* and picaresque novel.

² Dolgan (1998), Leben (2009), and Zupan-Sosič (2009a) remark variously on the exceptional immediacy, verisimilitude, or cinematic nature of the descriptions in *Newcomers*, as well as its construction from fragments of recalled experience.

³ The closest we can come to an objective evaluation of Kovačič's personal mnemonic gift is freighted with a caveat, since it comes from the author's son, Dare Kovačič, who is, significantly, a trained research psychologist with a professional interest in memory. He assesses his father's autobiographical memory as exceptional with respect to three principal criteria of accuracy/detail, extent, and chronological depth (Kovačič, Dare 2009: 106)

be improbable and mere post hoc fabrications of the mature artist's literary imagination.

Although there have been some published studies of *Newcomers*, most critical monographs have dealt with aspects of Kovačič's oeuvre overall, and article-length studies dealing specifically with *Newcomers* have focused on particular aspects of the novel's style, imagery, and diction, but have stopped short of attempting to synthesize these patterns into a larger interpretation of the book. Perhaps the most common observation about *Newcomers* is the fragmentary nature of its narrative structure, its seemingly endless strings of descriptions of episodes, events and encounters, each of which is in turn composed of numerous shorter, more precise observations which themselves are prone to break off at the end or be left hanging, marked by the novel's trademark ellipsis (...) and often lacking any apparent narrative bridge to the subsequent observational fragment. Dolgan describes this structure the other way around, as proceeding from an atomized micro-scale to a unified, overarching macro-scale (although he stops short of explaining how, precisely, this large-scale unity out of small-scale fragmentation is achieved):

Kovačič builds his narrative out of fragments of particular incidents, skillfully arranging these into larger, more complete units that are set off from each other typographically and themselves in turn function as fragments. These larger units are then joined into three still larger, numbered parts, which are fragments yet again, until they are united into the overall *narrative*, when they no longer function as fragments, but as a novel distinguished by an extraordinary internal dynamism, a density of action, a vast array of activity, subtle psychological insights, unsparing autobiographical frankness and ethical probity. (Dolgan 1998: 159)

Jure Jakob (2010) usefully applies Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel to *Newcomers*, where it functions not as a way of distinguishing different characters, but to differentiate between the two distinct identities and voices of the narrator, which tacitly coexist throughout the novel: first and predominantly as the relived ten- to twenty-year-old child and youth that Kovačič once was, whose stream of consciousness from forty years earlier the secondary or meta-narrator (i.e., the fifty-five-year-old author Lojze Kovačič, writing in 1983) is at all times focused on channeling. The meta-narrator only rarely makes a brief, and even then scarcely noticed appearance, such as when Bubi is describing his first impressions of the foreign-looking people that he suddenly discovers have filled the train car all around him and his family after he wakes up from sleeping through the border crossing into Yugoslavia. Here, for barely a moment, the meta-narrator interrupts his ten-year-old alter ego's stream of consciousness:

People were sitting in the shadows... on all the benches, dressed almost for autumn, although it was June. They had scarves and hats on their heads... Their heads, their heads. What were they like? Blurry. They were holding baskets, bags woven from straw, brightly colored, a man in a black suit and white shirt sitting on the bench across the aisle from me had the ugly remains of an old backpack slung over his shoulder.⁴ (*Newcomers* I: 22)⁵

The reader may be excused for not noticing in this excerpt the very brief shift in narrative voice from ten-year-old narrator to mature meta-narrator, a recognition which Kovačič does not in any way facilitate by setting the shifted voice apart typographically. It is, instead, up to the reader to grow attuned to and listen for these shifts in voice, as subtle, sporadic and even rare as they are. Here, the meta-narrator reveals himself to be intervening in the narrative and slowing it down at a point where the ten-year-old seems to be having trouble recalling a visual memory (“*Their heads, their heads. What were they like?*” [italics mine]), and even after all the effort of that intervention we the readers are no better off on that particular point of detail than we and the narrator were before: “*Blurry*” (italics mine). This unconcealed inability to recall particular details, and the meta-narrator’s refusal to invent them post hoc in order to generate the more complete picture that he may think the reader expects, further reinforces our perception of the fundamental authenticity of the narrative. At the point where the meta-narrator capitulates in this effort, we revert immediately to the primary narrator, whose attention refocuses, as will eventually prove to be a natural instinct for him at this stage of his young life, on the strangers’ clothing and accoutrements: baskets, bright woven bags, a black suit, a white shirt, the ugly remains of an old backpack, or a knobby, carved umbrella handle that looks like a lizard’s head. As we will see, this particular array of details is anything but random or gratuitous gussying-up of the setting.

In addition to *Newcomers*’ distinctively dialogic voice bridging the youthful and mature selves of its narrator (Jakob 2010) and its hierarchy of fragments yielding a whole that is more than the sum of its parts (Dolgan, 1998), Zupan-Sosič (2009a: 143–44) has pointed to the novel’s preponderant use, particularly in Books One and Two, of enigmatic descriptions

⁴ Ljudje so sedeli v poltemi... po vseh klopeh, precej jesensko oblečeni, čeprav je bil junij. Imeli so rute in klobuke na glavah... Glave, glave. Kakšne? Zabrisane. Držali so košare v rokah, pletene torbe iz slame, barvasto poslikane, mož na sosednji klopi zraven mene v črni obleki in beli srajci je imel čez ramo obešeno pravo grdobjo od starega nahrbtnika (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 18–19)

⁵ This and all subsequent references to Kovačič’s *Prišleki* in English translation, listed in the works cited as Kovačič 2016 and 2020, are identified within the text by the English title and book number—i.e., *Newcomers* I or II.

(*ugankarski opisi*) as a device for deliberately slowing our progress through the narrative, forcing us away from stereotyped presumptions and toward a more active, reflective engagement with the text. In the course of processing these enigmas or metaphorical riddles, she points out, “we are dependent on Bubi’s detailed memory, the flurry of associations it delivers, and the highly personal aesthetic filter” he has developed at any given stage of his life between the ages of ten and twenty. Employed together, all of these narrative devices yield a highly distinctive text that draws readers in while simultaneously forcing them to focus their problem-solving attention on the task of translating the mostly enigmatic descriptions and fragments into images that become coherent for us only to the extent that we can also think ourselves into the narrator’s unique life circumstances—itsself a task requiring the reader’s sustained focus and imaginative effort. The ultimate result is, or should be, that the reader develops the same kind of *tabula rasa* approach to this “new” reality—which for the book’s primary audience of Slovene readers is, of course, anything but new—and that we discover both its wonders and its deformations with the same kind of sense of estrangement and absence of prejudice that only a complete outsider, a newcomer, can bring to it.

Book One opens, famously, directly onto the scene of the Kovačičes’ expulsion from Switzerland in 1938, described in the now fifty-five-year-old narrator’s recollection of those events as witnessed from the perspective of his then ten-year-old self (referred to at the time by his family as Bubi⁶), with numerous police appearing at their apartment, urging them to pack quickly and get ready for their departure. The book’s very first sentences confront us with imagery that is so unusual for a ten-year-old boy as to vaguely disorient the reader, as part of what, in Zupan-Sosič’s terms, is an enigmatic description:

...mostly police. Some wearing uniforms, others in plain clothes. Among the latter were some who looked like businessmen from the city center, while the wide-brimmed black satin hats on some of the others made them look like dancers from the Variété. (*Newcomers* I: 7)⁷

⁶ Hypocoristic form of German *Bube*, meaning simply “boy.” The Kovačičes neglected to have their son christened until he was eight, hence he remained officially nameless. At last he was taken to church as an afterthought and named Alojz Samson in a christening ceremony during which he later recalled feeling (typically) grotesquely out of place amid all the infants being christened that day (*Newcomers* I: 271–72).

⁷ ..., največ policajev. Nekateri v uniformah, eni v civilu. Med temi so bili taki, podobni trgovcem iz središča mesta, drugi zaradi svojih širokih klobukov iz črnega žameta baletnim rajalcem iz varieteja. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 9)

In the course of a concise subordinate clause in the book's first paragraph, Bubi manages through close observation and visual association focused on a single item of clothing to conjure, *skaz*-like,⁸ a metaphorical troupe of dashing clad musical theater dancers into his family's living room, imaginary doubles of the Swiss plain clothes policemen whose actual appearance evokes them. The underlying tacit contrast in this doubling of implicit threat (policemen enforcing the family's expulsion) and harmless make-believe (musical theater dancers) is consistent with a ten-year-old's natural inclination to perceive a world predisposed to play. But how, the book's readers should be asking themselves here at some level, can an image like these rakish, silken (presumably silk-banded) hats come naturally to a ten-year-old boy? Where in a typical ten-year-old's experience could it come from? No explicit answer will be forthcoming from the text itself, which by starting *in media res* seems heedless of the anonymous reader's desire for context and is focused instead on reconstituting the dense web of imagery that the narrator's ten-year-old alter ego generated in order to process the

⁸ "Skaz" is a Russian term most notably first employed by Russian formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum in his now-classic 1919 essay titled «Как сделана шинель Гоголя» ("How Gogol's Overcoat Is Made"), to characterize the narrative technique exemplified by nineteenth-century Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol in his short story "Шинель" ("The Overcoat"). Eikhenbaum defines *skaz* as the practice of systematically incorporating a certain type of slang, jargon, or other non-normative speech elements into a literary narrative in order to achieve a particular colloquializing and estranging effect. Kovačič himself was no stranger to the innovative concepts of literary analysis that formalist critics like Eikhenbaum and his more renowned colleague Viktor Shklovskii advanced during the Soviet Union's first, unusually liberal decade, before the onset of ideological rigidification in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In his auto-critical work *Delavnica* (Workshop), published in 1974, a decade before *Newcomers*, as a section of his book *Preseljevanja* (Migrations), Kovačič explicitly shares his familiarity with the concept of *skaz* as elaborated upon by Shklovskii, and he describes his own long series of experiments with narrative diction: "Every true work of literary art, whether it's accessible or not, remains a work of art regardless of the register of speech it uses. I've experimented with the very lowest registers, with jargon from communist party assessments of individuals' loyalty, with spontaneity and directness as my leading protagonists, and with completely ordinary fears—sensations of the flesh felt on our skin, through our clothes—with clichéd descriptions, bureaucratic procedures, the contents of a soldier's footlocker and the cash in a clerk's wallet—in short, I've used the most familiar, unadorned objects to assemble a novel from start to finish, to make it more or less like Isaak Babel's short story "Salt," about which Viktor Shklovskii said that the author used in it technical terms, literary clichés, and trite colloquial turns usually taken out of their typical context—but that precisely that makes it possible to see things in some new semantic and cognitive context intended for a different kind of reader who can process that language from a completely different perspective; in other words, Babel's use of *skaz* motivates a new way of seeing things by complicating the work of art" (Kovačič 1974: 504–505).

flood of unprecedented experience that confronts him beginning on page one. In short order the family entrains with their Swiss police minder and Bubi stations himself in the corridor apart from the others, where he can freely take in the rare and disorienting experience of a train ride through the otherwise familiar urban territory of Basel. Here, barely one page into the novel, he deliberately turns around so he can face backwards, toward the receding objects and places that the train has already passed, a stance that becomes implicitly emblematic for the point of view—looking back—that will dominate the following 1,200 pages of narrative:

Now I could see what Basel was like when it got dizzy. At first like a fat, gray-green snake flying backwards, half on the ground, half in the sky... into a sort of huge sucking tube in the distance behind us... What was appearing behind us was more interesting than what was coming toward us from up ahead. So I turned my head back... (*Newcomers* I: 8)⁹

The din of crossing a bridge is followed by the relative silence of returning to closely-joined tracks, and we are introduced to a long description of the family's overnight deportation by train, in which the fifty-five-year-old narrator, still channeling his ten-year-old self, draws on an enigmatic but oddly consistent inventory of concrete reality as experienced in the course of the first ten years of his life in Basel, in order to register, whether in straightforward descriptive terms or through the nonce creation of some highly curious metaphors (for a boy of ten), the succession of striking impressions from his first significant childhood encounter with the world beyond Basel, most of which is spent on a succession of trains. In the excerpts that follow, which span barely more than fifteen pages of text early in Book One, I have underscored these images as a way of pointing to the pattern in Bubi's perceptual processing that they strongly suggest:

A splendiferous gentleman... [who] smelled of all different colognes, different down below than up above. He was wearing white trousers, a serious, striped jacket and a stiff red necktie. (*Newcomers* I: 10)¹⁰

The infernal clamor died away and was replaced by a soundless silence, as though the train had become a balloon, a zeppelin, a

⁹ Zdaj sem videl, kakšen je Basel, kadar ga zgrabi vrtoglavica. Najprej kot kaka debela, sivo zelena kača, ki leti nazaj pol po tleh, pol po zraku... v nekakšno ogromno sesajočo trobo zadaj... Kar je izginjalo nazaj, je bilo zanimivejše od tistega, kar je prihajalo od spredaj. Zato sem obrnil glavo tja... (Kovačič 1984: 1–2: 9–10)

¹⁰ Sijajen gospod [...], ki je] dišal po raznovrstnih vodicah, spodaj drugače kot zgoraj. Imel je bele hlače, resen, črtast suknjič, trdo, rdečo kravato. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 11)

glider slicing through the air with a whoosh as though it were silk... (*Newcomers* I: 11)¹¹

...when the sun started to go down... a huge red tunic... I went back into the compartment. (*Newcomers* I: 12)¹²

They woke me up in the night with the electric light bathing the compartment in yellow. "Schnell, schnell, wach auf," Vati said as I sank back into a pleated sort of sleep. (*Newcomers* I: 14)¹³

In the light of the locomotive, the rain turned into Christmas tree tinsel. (*Newcomers* I: 14)¹⁴

Mother sat on a black iron bench holding Gisela in her arms, who was awake now and had the eyes of an ermine... (*Newcomers* I: 15)¹⁵

As I was standing next to a pillar now, everything that had happened seemed as colorful and abrupt as in some cartoon... (*Newcomers* I: 17)¹⁶

Suddenly everyone started talking at once, a veritable barrage of yarn and wool... (*Newcomers* I: 24)¹⁷

... and people got up from the seats, revealing the unbuttoned panels of their short vests and white expanses of the shirts underneath... (*Newcomers* I: 24)¹⁸

¹¹ Ko je peklenški trušč zamrl, je nastala brezslušna tišina, kot da je vlak postal balon, cepelin, jadravno letalo, ki trga zrak kot svilo, da šušti... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 12)

¹² ...ko je sonce začelo zahajati... ogromna rdeča tunika... sem se vrnil v kupe. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 12)

¹³ »Schnell, schnell, wach auf,« je rekel Vati in utonil sem nazaj v nekakšen plisirani spanec. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 13)

¹⁴ Dež je tako lil, da se je pred lučmi lokomotiv spreminjal v rakete z božičnega dreveščka. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 14)

¹⁵ Mama je sedela na črni železni klopi in pestovala zbujeno Giselo, ki je gledala kot hermelin... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 14)

¹⁶ Vse, kar se je zgodilo ta dan, se mi je zdelo tako barvasto in bliskovito kot v kaki risanki, ko sem zdaj stal ob stebri... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 15)

¹⁷ Naenkrat so vsi spregovorili, prava toča iz prejic in volne... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 20)

¹⁸ ...vstajali so tudi s klopi, da so se videle odprte pole njihovih kratkih suknjičev, bele tapete srajc... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 20)

Some people were standing around ... many of them in black trousers and white shirts, with hats on their heads... (*Newcomers* I: 25)¹⁹

There were a few dark-skinned women with scarves on their heads and men's shoes on their feet... (*Newcomers* I: 25)²⁰

... just one woman, running across the tracks in the distance, was dressed in cheery, colorful clothes like the women in Basel... (*Newcomers* I: 25)²¹

Even my buttons, the anchor, my whole blue navy coat from Basel was saturated with this topaz-yellow light... (*Newcomers* I: 27)²²

The street that we saw the glass palace through seemed wrapped in a flannel darkness... (*Newcomers* I: 27)²³

A gentleman wearing a striped waistcoat was standing behind a desk... (*Newcomers* I: 27)²⁴

These examples by no means convey the sum total of the dense web of impressions and actions centered around Bubi that guide the reader with him and his hapless family out of Basel and into exile, but they do constitute a significant subset characterized by the motif of specific textiles (satin, silk, yarn, wool, flannel), items of clothing, some quite specific (trousers, jacket, necktie, tunic, shirt, vest, scarves, shoes, hats, buttons, waistcoat), and even tailoring techniques (pleated) that is too conspicuous and persistent to be accidental and that alternates with other types of imagery deriving from more typical childhood experience (e.g., rain as tinsel, events as colorful as a cartoon). While most of these instances are descriptive outright and contribute to the material context, others are metaphoric and even startlingly so (the setting sun as a huge red tunic, a pleated sort of sleep, spoken Slovene heard for the first time as a barrage of yarn and wool, a nighttime street wrapped in a flannel darkness, his infant niece with the eyes of an ermine).

¹⁹ Nekaj ljudi je postavalo daleč na drugi strani ali hodilo sem in tja... mnogi v črnih hlačah z belimi srajcami čeznje in s klobuki na glavah... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 20)

²⁰ Nekaj temnih žensk je bilo, imele so rute, na nogah moške čevlje... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 20)

²¹ ...samo ena, od daleč, ki je tekla čez tire, je bila oblečena barvasto in veselo kot v Baslu... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 20)

²² Tudi gumbi, sidro, ves moj modri mornariški plašč iz Basla je bil prepojen s topazovsko rumeno svetlobo... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 22)

²³ Ulica, skozi katero smo gledali stekleni dvorec, je bila v flanelasti temi... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 22)

²⁴ Za pultom je stal gospod v progastem telovniku s številnimi ključi na steni. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 22)

These metaphorical ermine eyes, this solar tunic, pleated sleep, verbal yarn and wool and flannel darkness make sense in a ten-year-old's stream of consciousness only if the ten-year-old has spent his young life in a world furnished on a daily basis with all different kinds of fabrics, furs, fur-bearing creatures, and people who are masters of the craft of assembling them into clothing. Yet the first-time reader of *Newcomers* will not begin to get even a glimpse of the Kovačič family's prior circumstances in Basel, and hence of the life context that motivates the juvenile narrator's metaphorical language, until a good 18,000 words farther into the narrative, after the family arrives in the father's hometown of Cegelnica to move in with his uncle and aunt on their farmstead; and even at this later stage, the revelation will only be partial, presented in passing as the familiar reference point for understanding some alien phenomenon appearing in the boy's new environment. Here, while taking a first tour of their relatives' unusual farm buildings, implements and contraptions, in the middle of a threshing floor Bubi comes across...

...some piece of equipment that resembled Vati's square sewing machine for working with fur. Uncle got it going with his leg and cut off a sheaf of straw... *bzzz! bzzz!...* (*Newcomers* I: 69)²⁵

Further evidence of the Kovačičes' past livelihood in Switzerland is also received piecemeal, as Bubi's mother takes up sewing dresses for her and Vati's newly met nieces, and indirectly some twenty-five pages farther on as an element of more similes used to describe the reality of their new rural life in Slovenia. But the first extensive revelation of the parents' clothes-making profession comes nearly a third of the way into the text of Book One, as Bubi's mother, engulfed in homesickness for her urban, Germanophone past, shows the boy photographs from her youth and tells him family stories that he has apparently heard before: about her tragic first love in Germany, about the arrival of Bubi's father in her family's household as a young tailor's apprentice to her father and her importunate suitor, about their marriage and early occupations as a seamstress and tailor, respectively, and Vati's later certification as a furrier.

***Newcomers* as a Picaresque Novel**

During the year the family spends as impoverished laborers and almost universally despised German-speaking alien immigrants on their relatives' farm in Lower Carniola, the elder Kovačič finds employment as a poorly paid tailor's assistant working off the books for a clothing company in far-off

²⁵ Na sredi je stal tudi nekakšen stroj, podoben oglati šivalni mašini za kožuhovino. Stric ga je pognal z nogo in odrezal šop slame ... *rsk! rsk!* (Kovačič 1984: 1–2: 48)

Ljubljana, and sends back weekly remittances to pay for his family's upkeep. By the end of Book One and through most of Book Two, the family will have reestablished itself as a barely profitable clothes-making and furs business operating out of a succession of rented rooms and apartments in which they also live on Ljubljana's outskirts and, ultimately, in the city center. The two principal strands of *Newcomers* as a *Bildungsroman*—the picaresque strand documenting Bubi's discovery of the essentially dangerous and polarized nature of the new world he has come to inhabit and his escalating attempts, reminiscent of a rogue's progress, at mastering that world; and the *Künstlerroman* (artist novel) detailing Bubi's development and growth into an artist, initially within the conducive environment of his family's newly reinvigorated clothes-making business—correspond roughly to these two main periods in the family's fortunes—i.e., the initial impoverishment of their exile marked by frequent periods of desperation, peril, and hunger (1938–1940), followed by a period of relative prosperity which is actually much closer to subsistence living than to affluence (1941–44).

During Bubi's first days in Slovenia—at that time, the Drava Province of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia—he is confirmed in his anticipation of at least some of the childish visions of marvelous new things that animated the train ride from Switzerland:

I was traveling, traveling through an endless expanse to a country that had lots of horses waiting in stables, and I would unhitch one of them and ride him down to the river so he could drink water... and there would be red boats, so I could row from one riverbank to the other. On the rooftops there would be biplanes ready to take off, and I would fly around in them... over the rooftops and the water... and when they called me to dinner, I would land on the roof and climb down the chimney on a ladder back into the house. I pictured the short, stodgy airplanes that they used for acrobatics at the amusement park, with an open cabin for the pilot... one of them, a red one, would have my name stenciled on it... (*Newcomers* I: 11)²⁶

Sadly but predictably, the red boats and miniature airplanes of his fantasies do not materialize; the disenchantment, however, is not complete. After a Sunday dinner hosted by one of his uncles, he is encouraged to mount one of

²⁶ ...potoval sem, potoval skozi neskončno dvorano, v deželo, kjer stoji veliko konj po hlevih, od katerih bom enega odvezal in odjahal z njim k reki pit vodo... Tam bojo rdeči čolni, v katerih bom veslal od enega na drugi breg. Na strehah bodo, pripravljene na start, stali dvokrilniki, s katerimi bom poletel naokoli... nad hišami in vodo... in ko me bojo poklicali jest, se bom spustil k dimniku in po lestvi zlezal v hišo. Predstavljal sem si kratke, trebušaste avione za akrobacije iz Lunaparka z odprto kabino za enega pilota... eden od njih, rdeč, bo nosil moje ime... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 12)

their horses and ride it alongside his cousins on their horses down to the nearby Krka River to drink, an experience that offers a wealth of new, minutely described physical and visual sensations. The family's earlier nighttime arrival in Ljubljana by train also offered an unanticipated miracle: the sight of the Ljubljana castle in its nighttime illumination, which causes it to appear to the ten-year-old to be made out of glass and floating in mid-air. No amount of explanation by his parents of the mundane cause of the apparent miracle has any effect in dispelling Bubi's sense of wonder at the mystery of the nighttime, illuminated castle which is clearly made of glass and floats in mid-air, as opposed to the dreary, earthbound structure that replaces it by day.

The process of disenchantment takes interpersonal and culturally specific forms, too. The handsome uncle who welcomes Bubi and his family to his farmstead has an unfortunate habit, revealed by Bubi early on, of laughing malignantly at the patent inability of his older brother's urban Swiss family to cope with the rigors of rural life in Slovenia. Not only that, but the uncle is shown to revel in deliberately setting up situations to ambush his citified relatives. Bubi's, his sister's and his mother's utter lack of ability in Slovenian expose them to abuse by the locals, their relatives included. In Bubi's case, we are allowed to assume that the sudden absence of comprehensible verbal clues predisposes him to develop compensatory skills for detecting threats posed by his new surroundings through heightened visual perception. The reader, who has already been impressed by Bubi's powers of imagination, not to mention his near-total recall, in the course of his descriptions of the multiple outsized adventures encountered during the train trip from Basel via Ljubljana to the whistle stop in Lower Carniola where they detrain to make their way through a virtual enchanted African jungle to their relatives' farmstead, should appreciate that Bubi, of all the members of the family, is already predisposed to make the most of this new, heightened power of visual observation.

The picaresque narrative begins in Cegelnica, in response to the harsh expectations imposed on Bubi and his family by their uncle while Vati is absent, trying to earn money in Ljubljana. It begins gradually, as Bubi notices certain peculiarities of his uncle's emotional affect, which at first strike him as unfamiliar and odd, and later become confirmed as positive signs of barely restrained malice. Thus Uncle Karel emerges as the first embodiment Bubi encounters of what will prove in the course of *Newcomers* to be a classic personality type in their place of exile—the hostile neighbor or relative, who consciously represents a different and presumably incompatible social class, ideology, religious creed, or ethnicity from that of the protagonist and exacts personal satisfaction from tricking, deceiving and laughing at the helplessness of the Other.

I looked at uncle. There was something about him that suggested he was laughing internally. Perhaps the strange light was at fault for that, or his mustache, or the late hour... (*Newcomers* I: 60–61)²⁷

When he spoke with Vati, who was holding that first lamp, the clean one, I noticed under the mustache on his pale yellow face that grin like a taut string... I could see the very same grin in his eyes, which were even more pronounced... No, this wasn't a smile... this was scorn. This made me sad. (*Newcomers* I: 62)²⁸

Uncle Karel stood watching, once again doubled over with hilarious laughter... but strangely, his eyes weren't laughing at all. No, this was not a good sign... (*Newcomers* I: 75)²⁹

When I went out and said, "gut mornink! gott villink! gut day!" my cousins would laugh. This wasn't a pleasant laughter, I noticed that right away... It shook them so hard that they practically bounced up to the roof. "Zerspringt nur, kleine Mistviehe,"* I thought to myself. They ran into the house to get reinforcements for their laughter... Aunt Mica or Karel. If one of them so much as touches me, I'll lose it... (*Newcomers* I, 92–93) *"*Go ahead and blow up, you bloody little animals.*"³⁰

...Karel was waiting for me on the path. Angry. "Du niks arbeiten da,"* he said. He put a hoe in my hand and pointed back where the potato field was... Was he saying I hadn't done anything around the house?... I struck once, twice at a furrow. But the sun was too strong and my bones hurt so much from bending over in the high meadow Let him think whatever he wants! No, I'm not going to dig anymore!... Angrily I flung the

²⁷ Pogledal sem strica. Nekaj takega je bilo na njem, kakor da se smeje v sebi. Mogoče je bila temu kriva čudna luč, brki ali pozna ura... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 43)

²⁸ Ko se je pogovarjal s Vatijem, ki je držal ono prvo, čisto, sem opazil na njegovem belo rumenem obrazu zraven brk tisti nasmešek kot napeto vrvico... Taisti nasmešek se je videl tudi v očeh, ki so še bolj izstopale... Ne, to ni bil nasmeh... bil je porog. To me je onesrečilo. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 44)

²⁹ Stric Karel je stal zraven, spet ga je zgrabil krohot, da se je kar nagibal... ampak čudno, oči se mu pri tem niso prav nič smejale. Ne, to ni kazalo na dobro... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 52)

³⁰ Ko sem stopil ven in spregovoril »topro jutro!... pok taj! Toper tan!«... sta se bratranca smejala. Ta smeh ni bil prijeten, to sem opazil brž... Kar stresalo ju je od njega, da sta skakala do strehe. »Zerspringt nur, kleine Miestviehe,« sem si mislil... Skočila sta v hišo po okrepitev za smejanje... teto Mico ali Karla. Če se me bo le eden dotaknil, bom zdivjal... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 63)

hoe back toward the train tracks and headed for the house... Karel, who had just been unhitching Liska from a pear tree, shouted, "Zurieck!"** and bounded after me. I took off at a sprint and he started running and because he happened to have [a] chain in his hand, he hurled it at me from a distance so that it wrapped around my back and chest... I thought I was going to puke my lungs and heart out... (*Newcomers* I: 99–100)³¹ * *You not do no work there. ** Get back here!* (spoken by the uncle in broken German)

Aside from a handful of kindlier neighbors and the occasional spectacular dramas that nature affords, Cegelnica proves to be the crucible in which Bubi learns the art of survival, self-defense, and even pre-emptive warfare against an overwhelmingly hostile environment. Once Vati relocates to Ljubljana, Bubi, his sister, niece and mother are entirely at the mercy of their relatives, who at least temporarily put old family grievances behind them to unite against the presence of their unwanted, German-speaking, citified guests. As Bubi steals cured meat from his uncle's attic smokehouse, which is strictly off limits, he readies himself to deal Karel a lethal blow, should he be caught in the act:

That's when I decided to do something that might have cost me my life if I'd been caught. I was going to steal some meat from the attic! While Karel and Mica were out tending the pigs, I climbed up in my stockings... one, two, each step separately. I pushed the hatch open and entered a world of hanging hams and sausages... I pulled off a long, moldy salami and even a ham with the hook still embedded in it. And if I ran into Karel?... I'd kill him! Flat out, like an ant underfoot. Plant my foot on his chest so that he'd—*wham!*—go flying back down the stairs!... (*Newcomers* I: 139)³²

³¹ ...me je Karel čakal na stezi. Jezen. »Du niks arbeiten da,« je rekel. Potisnil mi je rovačo, pokazal nazaj, kjer je bilo krompirišče... Jaz da nisem nič delal pri hiši?... Udaril sem enkrat, dvakrat v brazdo. Ampak sonce je bilo premočno, kosti so me bolele od pripogibanja na senožeti... Naj si kar misli! Ne, ne bom več kopal!... V jezi sem zalučal rovačo do proge in odšel k hiši... Karel, ki je ravno razpregal Lisko pri hruški, je zavpil »Curik!« in se pognal za mano. Zdirjal sem in on je stekel in ker je imel v roki ravno verigo, je zamahnil z njo od daleč, da se me je ketna ovila okrog hrbta do prsi... Mislil sem, da bom skožlal pljuča, srce... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 67–68)

³² Tedaj sem sklenil, da bom storil nekaj, kar me bo mogoče stalo življenja, če me zalotijo; ukradel bom meso spod strehe! Ko sta bila Karel in Mica pri svinjah, sem v nogavicah stopil gor... ena, dve, vsako stopnico posebej. Dvignil sem pokrov v stropu in se znašel med samimi visečimi klobasami in gnjatmi... Odtrgal sem dolgo plesnivo salamo in celo gnjat s špage s kavljem vred. In če

Retaliation for the theft is exacted when Karel secretly tampers with their stove pipe in order to try to smoke them out of their room, day after day. Ultimately, life in Cegelnica having become untenable, the decision is made for the family to move to Ljubljana, where they can be united with Vati and surely devise some way to survive. However, this move takes place only after a hellish last night spent enduring a continuous verbal and grotesquely symbolic physical assault against them on the part of the combined forces of their extended family.

Bubi thus arrives in Ljubljana, an urban environment that more closely resembles the Basel of his first ten years, more or less primed to be continually on the lookout for visual evidence of potential threats to himself and his family. These begin to present themselves in a seemingly never-ending parade of human guises, punctuated only occasionally by the unexpected generosity of well-wishing altruists. He makes friends with some of the local children his age, but has to stay on his guard to keep from making himself the brunt of their taunts and derision, as during a first visit to the nearby gravel bed of the Sava River:

“Es ist so nice here!” I forced out, but immediately realized I’d blown it. Red-haired Jaklič next to me broke into a broad grin that involved all of his freckles and all of his teeth. Rats! I softened. For a second I turned my head toward the dense forest to calm down... Just let him poke at me one more time, and I’ll let him have it, I’ll give him a knock-out punch straight into the Sava... (*Newcomers* I: 162–63)³³

The tensions and conflicts between groups of children that Bubi sees escalate into taunts and otherwise unprovoked physical violence over and over are shown to manifest themselves along the same divergent political, ideological or religious lines espoused by the children’s parents, hinting at an endless generational succession of tribal polarization. Bubi’s closest friends in the Ljubljana suburb his family first moves to happen to be from the large, devoutly Catholic family next door. Politically unaligned and only formally Catholic himself, he also spends time with the children of secular families, such as the Pestotniks. It becomes inevitable that in the course of roaming with one or the other clan through the vicinity he will become embroiled in the spontaneous clashes that break out when they encounter children from the opposite camp—as in this early instance of a fight when Catholic-sponsored

bom naletel na Karla?... Ga bom ubil! Gladko, kot mravljo pod čevlji. Z nogo v prsi, da bo – *bum!* zletel po stopnicah!... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 92)

³³ »Gako dukaj lepo!« sem izdaval, a pri priči sem vedel, da sem ga polomil. Rdečelas Jaklič zraven se je na ves glas zarežal z vsemi svojimi pegami in zobmi vred. Smola! Omehčal sem se. Obrnil sem glavo za sekundo proti gostemu gozdu, da bi se pomiril... Naj samo še enkrat pobeza vame, zlatil ga bom, knockautiral naravnost v Savo... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 107–108)

Eagles (referred to disparagingly by their opponents as Owls) face off against secular, left-leaning Falcons:

...we suddenly ran into the Pestotniki and other Falcons and girls... They were on their way back from exercising at the National Home... We spotted each other from a distance and as we drew close, both sides got ready... It started with taunts: "Hey, owls!..." "Falcons!..." "Clerical curs!..." "Red rubbish!" Shouts, arguments, then blows [...] Once you get slugged in the face, the hatred comes from somewhere deep down. And it floods everything. And it's so deep that a bit of it stays in you... They threw themselves on each other... twisting, rolling ahead, rolling back... (*Newcomers* I: 184–85)³⁴

In Nove Jarše Bubi learns to swipe potatoes and cabbages from peasants' fields, joins his neighbors in dressing up as a beggar to cadge coins and other alms from passers-by downtown, and deceives his parents about his failing grades at school. After the Kovačičs relocate to the Old Town of Ljubljana, Bubi finds himself suddenly cut off from his usual friends, but by that time he has undergone enough of an education in the art of survival and acquired enough Ljubljana street smarts to solve the challenge of his new surroundings proactively by becoming a gang leader. Gathering a half dozen devoted minions around him, he asserts control over Town Square and toward the end of Book One even commands an assault with slingshots on the older gang that controls the then derelict Ljubljana castle and hillside. In going on the offensive, Bubi enacts on the micro-level a version of the same dynamic that throughout the previous two decades had been encouraging radical social movements and petty but aspiring despots throughout Europe in their drive to attain security through scape-goating, unrestrained aggression, and the physical elimination of rivals. Bubi is unconscious of his own personal transformation into a juvenile delinquent, until one day he unexpectedly encounters his double—an outward bully concealing the insecurity at his core:

...in the goldsmith's display window next door to the Hammans' front gate I suddenly caught a glimpse of myself, so changed that I didn't even resemble anyone I knew... I felt such despair, fear, hopelessness, and confusion within myself... but

³⁴ ...smo nenadoma trčili s Pestotniki in drugimi sokoli ter puncami... Vračali so se ravnokar od telovadbe v Narodnem domu... Zagledali smo se že od daleč in ko smo prišli vštric, smo bili že oboji pripravljeni... Začelo se je z zmerjanjem: »Hej čuki!«... »Sokoli!«... »Farški psi!«... »Rdeče barabe!« Kričanje, prepir, nato pretep... Ko jih enkrat dobiš po očeh, pride sovraštvo nekje čisto od spodaj. In preplavi vse. In tako globoko je, da še zmeraj nekaj ostane v tebi... Vrgli so se drug na drugega... se zvijali, se zakotalili naprej, zakotalili nazaj... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 122)

the windowpane showed a thin, wiry boy with disheveled hair and the muscular legs of a soccer player or boxer... An athlete trained almost to the point of deformity... I had to step close to detect in the shadows of my eyes and nose some of that hopelessness and confusion that were inside me... All the rest was some unknown brat, whoever he was, who could very easily also have been my enemy, but under no circumstances my close friend [...] I was one of those kids I had to run from because they were constantly blocking my path... (*Newcomers* I: 293–94)³⁵

Bubi's ultimate transgression of many against his own family involves the theft of a number his father's rabbit pelts to ingratiate himself with Ivka, a beautiful, young, and unattainable neighbor woman on whom he has a crush, who works as a seamstress and deliberately, manipulatively plants the germ of the idea of stealing the pelts so that she can make a muff, collar and other fur items for herself in anticipation of the new season. Bubi devises an elaborate plan for smuggling the furs out of his family's apartment so that no one will notice, at least not for a long time. Once his parents discover the theft, the results for Bubi prove catastrophic:

I watched what followed in rapt attention, as one watches a gathering storm... Vati turned away... an instant later he was stammering and shaking... flinging some tongs, scissors, a whetstone aside as he looked for a bamboo rod on the table... Mother pried the rod out of his hand... he would have whipped me too gently... I quickly retreated to the corner next to the window, because the people outside could see and hear her, so the blows would be milder and her shrieking subdued... But no, it was the other way around... mother turned into a hurricane... The yellow rod with its green knuckles turned into a darting rattlesnake... *Zzzap! Buh-dum. Clack, clack. Eeyaaah!*... The rod bit into my cheeks... my hands... my knees... straight across my open mouth... The torturers of the dark ages would

³⁵ V zlatinarjevi izložbi zraven Hammanovih hišnih vrat sem med nakitom na baržunu ugledal samega sebe, tako spremenjenega, da sem se zazdel komajda podoben znancu... V sebi sem čutil tak obup, strah, polom, zmedo ... a v šipi se je pokazal fant suhe, čokate postave, razkuštranih las, mišičastih nog, kot od kakega nogometaša ali boksarja... Malodane do iznakaženosti izurjenega športnika... Moral sem stopiti zraven, da je bilo po senci oči in nosu zapaziti nekaj tiste polomijade in zbežanosti, ki je bila v meni... Vse drugo je bil nepoznan mulc, kdorsibodi že, ki bi bil prav zlahka tudi moj nasprotnik, nikoli pa ne dober prijatelj... prej ovira, kot so bili ovira drugi, katerim sem šel raje s poti... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 192)

have hidden their faces in shame in her presence. (*Newcomers* II: 63)³⁶

The precise definition of what qualifies as a picaresque novel has been a recurrent subject of discussion among literary historians for decades. The most conservative definition restricts application of the genre designation to its first representatives in sixteenth-century Spain, following the *Reconquista* and the sudden flood of “new Christians” (newly banished Jews and Arabs who contrived to be Christianized and thus remain in Spain) and knights errant with no battles to fight and no steady income, reduced to penury and surviving, mostly by their wits, as they roamed through the countryside and from town to town. More liberal definitions flex to encompass later literary portrayals (French, British, American, German) of social outcasts conniving for status amongst the establishment, often showing up its hypocrisy and corruption in the process. According to this broader typology (Garrido Ardila 2015: 14–16), the narrative arc of *Newcomers Book One* and the first half of *Book Two* are fundamentally picaresque. Bubi, born into the underclass (in this case, the minuscule but despised class of German-speaking aliens delivered by overnight train into the Slavic world), is an outsider who survives by his wits, often engages in illicit activities, and undergoes a gradual process of psychological transformation, all of which is recounted in a narrative that is both self-effacingly comical and either mildly or highly satirical of nearly all of the entrenched, warring factions that make up the fractured society around him. This picaresque narrative arc is interrupted early in *Book Two* by a competing new narrative line which depicts the emergence of an artistic consciousness, one that engages Bubi's creative energies in positive, even remunerative ways that restore him to the role of a contributing member of his family and ultimately coalesce into a long-term quest for mastery of an artistic medium adequate for conveying his vision of the deeper truths concealed behind the surface of the events he witnesses.

The Turn Toward a *Künstlerroman* (Artist Novel)

The sense of disappointment with the direction his life is taking and his determination to do better are a significant motivation for the novel's second

³⁶ Gledal sem kot začaran, kako se začenja nevihta... Vati se je obrnil... v trenutku je začel jecljati in se tresti... iskal je bambusovke med rečmi po mizi in vrgel velike škarje, brus, kleščce z nje... Mama mu je iztrgala trs... on bi preblago tepel... Hitro sem se spravil v kot pod oknom, kajti pri njem, kjer bi jo ljudje videli in slišali, so bili njeni udarci milejši in njeno kričanje bolj pridušeno... Ne, obratno... mama se je spremenila v orkan... rumeni trs z zelenimi členki je postal poskakujoča klopotača... *Peng! Sa! ra! Klak! klak! I iii!*... Ugriz bambusovke v lica... v roko... v koleno... ugriz počez čez odprta usta... Mučitelji srednjega veka so se lahko skrili pred njo. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 273)

major narrative strand, which begins by intertwining the gradual emergence of Bubi's artistic gift with the ongoing account of his flagging progress as an aspiring young rogue. The story of Bubi's growing awareness of his artistic predisposition and his search for and discovery of his particular creative gift takes shape mainly in the course of Book Two and by gradual stages, including false starts, unsparing self-scrutiny, and sudden flights of inspiration followed by dogged dedication to transforming those inspired visions into finished artistic objects. Unexpected, if indirect validation of Bubi's artistic turn comes from a wholly unexpected source—his father—initially in the form of high praise lavished by adult authority figures in a position to know on the elder Kovačič's fur-making expertise, something that up to that point Bubi has taken as an ordinary, mostly disagreeable given of his family's home life:

Mrs. Rot, a fat blonde lady, owner of the largest fur store in town next door to City Hall, was impressed with our expertly finished items. With Clairi's permission she cut open a collar lining [...]. She examined Vati's stitching on the skin and then the fur on the other side... he always used a collection of various pieces, patches and remains of pelts to sew an entire fur hat, a muff, or a vest... in such a way that the fur of the various pieces of pelts was aligned with respect to color, composition, and density, making it look as though he had made each item out of the whole pelt of a single animal or just from the backs of a few larger animals... "Das ist wirklich ein großer Meister,"* Mrs. Rot said. That made Clairi and me feel good, even if we didn't sell her anything... (**This is [the work of] a truly great master.*) (Newcomers I: 205–206)³⁷

Highly motivated to contribute materially however he can to the family's survival, Bubi applies his love for drawing and painting to the task of producing, on commission, a series of colorful hand-drawn advertising posters for the local shoeshine shop featuring a long and whimsical lineup of variously shod feet. With the praise and remuneration he earns from this job, he gets his next commission from the nuns who run the Church-sponsored

³⁷ Gospa Rot, debela, plavolasa gospa, lastnica največje krznarske trgovine v mestu zraven Magistrata, se je čudila najinim mojstrsko izdelanim artiklom. Razparala je s Clairinim dovoljenjem podlogo na ovratniku, ki jo je nato dala spet sešiti eni svojih deklet v delavnici, ki je bila nad trgovino, kjer je v vsakem od petih oken stala po ena pupa v krznem plašču. Ogledala si je Vatijeve šive na koži in potem dlake... zmeraj je iz različnih koščkov, krpic, ostankov kožuhovine sešil celo kučmo, muf, jopič... tako, da so se dlake iz različnih delov kože po barvi, sestavi, gostoti prilagale, kot da je vsako stvar naredil iz kože ene same živali ali samo iz plečk večjih žival... »Das ist wirklich ein großer Meister,« je rekla gospa Rot. To nama je s Clairi dobro delo, čeprav nisva ničesar prodala... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 135–36)

children's home where his niece is recuperating from surgery. Tasked with decorating the playroom in exchange for cafeteria privileges and the cost of materials, Bubi devises a plan to illustrate the story of *Snow White* (the Tchaikovsky opera which both he and Gisela had recently been to see at the theater) on a series of massive sheets of paper affixed to the room's high walls. It is his first major artistic undertaking, which he executes in the family's workroom at home, symbolically assuming the position of junior craftsman in the environment of focused attention that his parents have modeled for him for hours on end every day, year after year:

I got started immediately. I worked for seventeen days, including three Sundays in a row. Every afternoon, alongside a row of glasses filled with water, and then, when Vati went to sleep, on the workroom floor next to his brass lamp... The grim castle of the old queen on top of the mountain... the magic mirror flashing in her boudoir... Snow White... with deer, owls, rabbits, weasels, hamsters... Everyone came to the opening... all the nuns and the director... Gisela was excited that I had decorated the room and proudly told the other kids that her uncle was the one who had made all the paintings... (*Newcomers II*: 144)³⁸

Bubi's passion for drawing and telling stories through sequences of related drawings becomes all-consuming and remunerative, as well. He authors several series of hand-drawn comic books on fanciful topics, depicting the adventures of heroes, anti-heroes and arch villains, which become a hit among his schoolmates and their families at home; he lends these out in exchange for his colleagues' lunches. At school he forms a natural alliance with two other boys who are also avid and aspiring comic book artists³⁹, and one day their art teacher advises them to register for the National Gallery's contest to identify the best young artists in Ljubljana. They do, and while one of them places third, Bubi is mortified to realize for the first time, and in such a public way that, as passionate as he is about drawing, painting, and other visual art, his actual talent for producing it is nil:

³⁸ Začel sem takoj. Delal sem sedemnajst dni in tri nedelje vmes. Vsak dan popoldne ob rajdi kozarcev z vodo in ko je šel Vati spat, na tleh v delavnici pri njegovi medeninasti svetilki... Mračni grad stare kraljice na vrhu gore... čarobno ogledalo z bliski v njenem budoarju... kilavega lovca... Sneguljčico... za njo srne, sove, zajce, podlasice, hrčke [...] Na otvoritev so prišli vsi... vse sestre in upravnik... Gisela je bila navdušena, da sem prav jaz okrasil sobo in ponosno je kazala frkolinom, da je malarijo na stenah naredil njen stric... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 325)

³⁹ The most artistically talented of the trio of schoolmates is named Miki (or Mikec) in the novel and is likely modeled on the young Miki Muster (1925–2018), who later became post-war Slovenia's most celebrated and prolific comic artist.

During the banquet, I went to look at the pictures by the other contestants. Such oil paintings! watercolors! pen-and-ink drawings! charcoal sketches! All of them, every single one was better than mine by I-don't-know-how-much... How could I have been so presumptuous as to let myself be persuaded to enter this contest!... What gifted people! And how pathetic by comparison was my draftsman's skill!... (*Newcomers* II: 176–77)⁴⁰

The scenes that follow this high point seem anticlimactic at first. The sense of passionate creativity and inspiration that has driven Bubi in his artistic quest until now begins to dissipate as he realizes the limits of his painterly abilities. In fact, during the apparently fallow period that follows he reassesses his visual and imaginative gifts with the long-term aim of matching them to a suitable substitute medium. Ever fascinated by drawings, paintings and photographs, he spends long hours in the public library, poring over old German illustrated magazines that depict the world and events during the years leading up to his birth, as he unconsciously fulfills the essential artistic task of placing his own personal moment in time within the larger context of historical trends and forces. He enthusiastically attends slide lectures on classical and religious art that his church cohort's catechism instructor, Mr. Becele, delivers for their benefit on weekends. When his sister Clairi begins dating a kindly German Army medic stationed in the castle and bringing him home to family dinners, Bubi befriends the older man, who shares his insights into philosophy and cosmology with him as though with an equal, contributing still further to Bubi's broadening artistic vision. The crucial influence at this developmental turning point is his Slovene language teacher, Mrs. Komar, an earnest, demanding, but kindly woman who sees the signs of unique creative promise in her young pupil, but also the challenges he faces in mastering his non-native second language. She devotes hours after school to tutoring him through painstaking rewrites of his essays and countless attempts, not just to perfect his grammar and style, but to help him attain the extreme precision of expression needed in order to convey how a particular event happened or how he perceived it, or in Bubi's words, "the part of it that's behind the event, the part that's unusual, strange, unreal..." (*Newcomers* II: 338).

As an epic-length novel set in tumultuous times, *Newcomers* naturally has many climaxes, but in Book Two one of the most significant of these is the death of Bubi's father, which is crucial for the boy both

⁴⁰ Med pojedino sem šel gledat slike tekmovalcev. Kakšna olja! akvareli! Perorisbe! Oglje! Vsi, vsak posameznik je bil boljši od mene za ne vem koliko stopenj [...] Le kako sem bil domišljav, da sem se pustil prijaviti na to tekmovanje! [...] Kako nadarjen narod! In kako uboga je bila moja risarska veščina!... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 346)

ontologically, as his first immediate encounter with death, and as the catalyst of a major life transition to his new status as principal provider for the family. In his final days in the family's workshop at home, the ailing elder Kovačič tries in vain to convey the subtleties of his fur-making art to daughter Clairi:

Now he lay [on the table] on his side with one hand under his cheek and watched as Clairi, wearing her overcoat and with a blanket wrapped around her legs on account of the open window, sewed items that he had left only half- or one quarter-finished before his trip to the hospital... Every now and then, he bellowed... "Whoa!" if she missed anything... Clairi, who was freezing and shook even more at these shouts... had to hold the fur right under his nose... so he could use his finger to point at the problems... and it was true, Clairi's stitches weren't by a long shot as exact and microscopically precise in the leather as his... they warped it... the fur on the other side didn't blend naturally as it should have, to make the finished piece look like it was made from a single piece instead of a bunch of disparate smaller ones... She had to rip out all of the stitches... carefully! carefully!... to avoid damaging the hide, not to mention the fur... before starting all over again... (*Newcomers* II: 313–14).⁴¹

It is a sequence both poignant and revealing which, like most complex scenes in the novel, lends itself to graphic segmentation into multiple visual scenes, each conveying a salient moment of the dynamic between the elderly parent/teacher placing high demands for performance on his earnest but hopelessly ungifted offspring/apprentice. Translated into actual pictures, the scene might proceed as follows: Picture 1: Vati lying on his side on the worktable, back to the reader, while Clairi, sitting at the far side of the table, facing us, works intently under his watchful eye. Picture 2: Close-up of Vati's face, expressing intense focus and consternation, and shouting, "Whoa!" Picture 3: Vati's haggard index finger pointing to the problems in Clairi's workmanship, Clairi looking on studiously, but also in quiet despair. Picture 4: Clairi fearfully, cautiously taking her stitches back out, while the narrator

⁴¹ Ležal je zdaj na boku, z roko pod licem in opazoval izpod kučme, kako Clairi v plašču in z deko okrog nog zaradi odprtega okna šiva stvari, katere je on pred odhodom v bolnišnico dokončal le napol ali do četrtnine... Vsake toliko se je zadr... »Hooooo!« če je kaj zgrešila... Clairi, ki jo je mrazilo, se je ob tem kriku stresla še bolj... morala mu je pomoliti pelc pod nos... kazal je s prstom... res! Clairini šivi zdaleč niso bili tako natančni, mikroskopsko iztanjšani v usnju kot njegovi... zatezali so ga... dlačje na drugi plati se ni naravno ujemalo, kot bi se moralo, da bi bilo krzno kot iz ene kože, ne pa iz različnih krpic... morala je razdreti šive... pazljivo! pazljivo! da ni ranila usnja, kaj šele dlak, kožo je morala natreti z masno kreda... in znova začeti od začetka... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 433–44)

explains the situation just before the placement of Vati's speech bubble, in which he admonishes Clairi, "Careful! Careful!" Optional picture 5: Like picture 1, but showing Clairi with brow knitted, now slightly more hunched over her work and decidedly more focused on and apprehensive of her stitching. Thanks to *Newcomers*' narrative style, consisting of concise but vividly described scenes with sparse if any dialog, this type of parsing of episodes from the narrative text to a hypothetical image-based counterpart can be repeated with virtually any passage occurring at any point in the novel.

A Genre All Its Own: *Newcomers* as Comics-Inspired Novel

With its first publication in Slovenia in 1984–85, two years before the publication in book form of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the renaissance of the American comic book as graphic novel for adult readers, Kovačič's *Newcomers* achieved something virtually unprecedented in the tradition of Slovene literature and potentially trend-setting even for world literature, had it been able at that time to pierce through the linguistically hermetic shield of its Slovene casing: it constituted a vast, sweeping graphic novel documenting an intensely personal, intensely visual experience of a ten-year cross section of historic events, except that this graphic novel was composed entirely of word pictures, limited dialogue, and occasional sound effects, but completely devoid of graphics as such.⁴² Throughout *Newcomers* Books One and Two, the middle-aged meta-narrator draws on his prodigious eidetic memory to enable his channeled adolescent narrative voice to depict scene after scene of visually remembered experience filtered with increasing frequency through the vivid, sometimes grotesque and almost always humorous lens of a comic arts aesthetic. One need only recall the effortless "*Wham!*" in Book One, with which Bubi imagines himself dispatching his hostile and dangerous uncle down the attic stairs, or the agonizing "*Zzzap! Buh-dum. Clack, clack. Eeyaaah!*" with which he is unsparingly punished for the theft of the family's rabbit furs, along with dozens of various other sound effects that occur throughout Book One and the beginning of Book Two. The following selected examples of similar scenes occur in sequence in the course of some forty-five pages near the middle of Book Two. Each is excerpted from a different episode in that highly eventful stretch of narrative. Some employ typically fanciful comic book sound effects (italicized in the excerpts below), not only to evoke a particular auditory effect, but to put a comic or grotesque spin on both it and the entire scene, no matter how grim the events may have been in artistically unadorned, actual life. In no mean feat of creativity itself,

⁴² While the influence of literary forms and of particular literary works on comics and graphic novels has been extensively studied, there appears to be scant critical documentation of the reverse influence, of comics on literature. A handful of studies of Flannery O'Connor (Ellis 1994, Reiniche 2014) trace the impact of her involvement with comics early in her career on her subsequent literary style.

Kovačič rarely uses the same sound effect twice, selecting or crafting each one to be uncannily evocative of how the reader might imagine a particular sound to be in real life.⁴³ Among other stylistic devices, improbably long strings of semantically or contextually related nouns suggest a narrator-magician effortlessly pulling endless tricks out of a hat, also to comically hyperbolic effect; not to mention hyperbolic noun choices themselves, complete with exclamation marks to further underscore their outrageous excess, such as in a description of Vati's wealthy client bringing a metonymic abundance of her used furs and hides of all kinds ("whole suitcases! and bags! not just bundles! [...] an entire bear... a boa... a whole troop of foxes") to their shop for refurbishing. These *skaz*-like narrative techniques (were those real foxes? or just their furs? real musical theater dancers? or just policemen with silk-banded hats reminiscent of dancers?), each with a distinguished comic arts pedigree and typically expressive of adolescent exuberance and hyperbole used to ironic effect, set the essential aesthetic tenor of the work.

[...] suddenly, there was the sound of *brrrr! ping! brrrr! ping!*...
My God, that sounded like an automatic rifle at least, if not a machine gun. (*Newcomers* II: 151)⁴⁴

Then we heard *squok! squeak! squok! squeak!* on the steps...
An Italian officer [...] came through the door to the attic... as handsome as a movie star, wearing deer hide gloves, covered with medals and ribbons, with a neat little pistol in his holster and binoculars on his chest... (*Newcomers* II: 156)⁴⁵

[...] outside, there was also quite a lot of commotion and drumming ... outside Ljubljana a battle with the bandits was taking place... Machine guns rattled... mobile artillery thundered *Badoom! Badang!*, their tongues buried up to the stocks in ruts that the cannons made in the mud beneath them...

⁴³ There are thirty-three distinct sound effects used in Book One, for a total of thirty-nine instances. In Book Two, as Bubi discovers his passion for drawing, the use of them intensifies, with fifty-three distinct sound effects used in a total of seventy-six instances. In Book Three, as Lojze matures from the age of seventeen to twenty and becomes, effectively, the head of the Kovačič household, the frequency of their occurrence sharply declines.

⁴⁴ Nekega dne pa, komaj sem prišel do konca ograje Dečjega doma... se je naenkrat oglasilo *rrrr! peng! rrrr! peng!*... Bog, to je bila po mojem avtomatska puška, če ne brzostrelka. (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 330)

⁴⁵ Tedaj smo zaslišali na stopnicah *ptam! ptaf! ptam! ptaf!*... Skozi vrata v mansardo je stopil italijanski oficir, drugi, ne tisti z vrta... lep kot igralec iz filma, v jelenjih rokavicah, ves v trakih in progah, s pištolico v torbici in daljnogledom na prsih... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 333)

tank grenades announced themselves with a thin, birdlike twitter *Pheooooeee – Wahh!...* (*Newcomers II*: 158)⁴⁶

That was an unpleasant house... as though prisoners, volunteers, deserters, rebels and traitors were living in it side by side, all jumbled up... (*Newcomers II*: 193)⁴⁷

She would bring whole suitcases! and bags! not just bundles! of all kinds of furs, sweaters, and collars for Vati to rework for her and her friends... She would pull out some fur that was six feet long... an entire bear... a boa... a whole troop of foxes... a veritable flood of all kinds of pelts... worn and shiny... or black as blueberries... (*Newcomers II*: 194)⁴⁸

Hiril now started giving me provocative looks whenever we passed each other in the darkness of the staircase ... he would brush right up against me, letting his stinking, sweaty suit stick to me, so that I could hear the snot popping in his hairy nostrils ... he made no effort to conceal that he was on the verge of raising his cudgel against me any instant... *whack!* and *smack!* and *clunk!*, sending half of my head flying... (*Newcomers II*: 197)⁴⁹

These types of passages, deliberately told at a high pitch of comic intensity, while interspersed throughout the narrative, do not by any means define it in its entirety. As narrator, Bubi is also capable of very different modes of perception and representation, including contemplative wonder and aesthetic buoyancy, particularly at various moments when he looks upward, depending on what he observes there, whether the vast, infinitely centrifugal

⁴⁶ Vendar je tudi zunaj razgrajalo, bobnelo... zunaj Ljubljane se je odvijala bitka z banditi... Mitraljezi so ščeketali... »leteča« baterija je bobnela »*Brum! Brang!*« do vitla vgreznjena v luknjo, ki so jo naredili kanoni v blatu pod sabo... tankovske granate so se oglašale s finim ptičjim čivkanjem »*Hiiuuuuii – Ua!*«... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 334)

⁴⁷ To je bila neprijetna hiša... kot da bi v njej živeli drug ob drugem ujetniki, prostovoljci, dezerterji, uporniki, izdajalci, vsi na enem kupu... (Kovačič 1984: 1–2: 356)

⁴⁸ Prinesla je cele kovčke! kaj torbe! ne samo cule! različnih kož, jop, ovratnih kožuhov, da bi jih Vati zanjo in za njene znanke iz okolice popravil ali pre naredil... Vlekla je ven metre krzna... celega medveda, boo, lisice... pravo poplavo različnega dlačja... oguljenega in bleščččega, črnega kot borovnice... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 357–58).

⁴⁹ Hiril me je zdaj gledal izzivalno, kadarkoli sva šla drug mimo drugega na temnem stopnišču... on je šel čisto zraven, prilepil se je s svojo smrdljivo obleko name, da sem slišal pokati sluz v njegovem kosmatem nosu... prav nič ni skrival, da bo zdaj zdaj vzdignil svoje krepelo... *pljask!!* pa *pok!* pa *pljas!*, da mi bo odletelo pol glave... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 359).

force of the cosmos or a nighttime overflight by Allied warplanes that instantaneously transforms his surroundings from midnight to brightest noon:

Boom! Ba-room! hummed the flying fortresses way up above, five miles over the city, each carrying seven tons of munitions and a highly accurate bombsight. They had a much homier sound than the Heinkels or Messerschmidts... *Bzzz!* went some Mosquito, the fortresses' pathfinder, as it dove down in loops, as if on a lark... once... then once again... And each time it dove, just for fun, it set off twenty or thirty phosphorus flares that rocked and sailed... from one cloud to another... they were determined to see everything!... the flares crackled, shot up... they could see everything, more clearly than in broad daylight... (*Newcomers II*, 149–50)⁵⁰

Still other visual evocations that Bubi as narrator articulates can be quite solemn. While the friends in his small clique of budding comic artists at school mostly shun the Bible (aside from its battle scenes, massacres, floods, and similar action scenes that appeal to the typical male adolescent imagination) as a source of inspiration for their own art, Bubi's aesthetic inspirations derive from the full Biblical gamut, including the Gospels, which are a clear object of fascination for him. As he himself says, distinguishing his tastes for Biblical stories from theirs, "But I liked it all." The murals that Bubi, at the height of his engagement with visual art, paints on the otherwise grimy walls of his family's last Ljubljana apartment in the attic of a large house on Stari trg (Old Square), are one of many attempts he recounts as narrator to escape the chaos and random violence of the Ljubljana streets and the destructive polarization of the society around him through some higher, unknown but transcendent, unifying order for which he serves as artistic medium—in this instance by sanctifying the lifelong plight of his long-suffering, hard-working, yet affectionate family and father through the image of Christ on the cross, embodying the suffering along life's journey of Everyman, and this in spite of the profound character flaws and prejudices, widespread at the time among Central Europeans, that we've clearly seen the elder Kovačič to have:

⁵⁰ *Bum! bum!* so brnele visoko zgoraj osem kilometrov nad mestom v širjavi oblakov leteče trdnjave, vsaka s 7000 kilogrami bomb in natančnim bombnim vizirjem... imele so, to je bilo res, prijetnejši zvok kakor Heinkli in Messerschmidti... *Fsss!* se je kak moskito, spremno letalo trdnjave, spustilo kakor za šalo v lupingih navzdol... enkrat... nato še enkrat... In pri vsakem strmoglavljanju je za hec prižgalo dvajset, trideset fosfornih sveč... ki so se zibale, jadrale... od enega oblaka do drugega... hoteli so videti vse!... sveče so prasketale, vzplamtevale... vse so lahko videli, jasneje kot ob belem dnevu... (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 329).

At the window behind the bed, I produced a Creation of the World [...] On the wall opposite, I painted paradise lost... the Garden of Eden, surrounded by four rivers [...] On the narrow stretch of wall next to the baker's shelf, I did Christ on the cross: the head... with respect to the beard, mustache, and curls it resembled Vati's [...] (*Newcomers* II: 168)⁵¹

Translated into the Kovačič family's concrete experience, the archetypal Biblical scenes that Bubi paints represent his own birth, the family's previous life in Basel and their expulsion from Switzerland, and his parents' suffering—ill-matched and ill-tempered but trapped as they are in a profoundly unhappy, incompatible marriage, agonizing over their unruly children, and constantly working to scrape together the barest of livings. By not flinching from depicting his father's profound character flaws and, more importantly, his auto-fictional protagonist's own worst instincts, evasions, thefts, seductions, and even betrayals of friends, Bubi as narrator paradoxically establishes his credibility with the reader as an impartial witness to the actions of the schoolkids, teachers, shopkeepers, nuns, priests, peasants, foresters, soldiers, underground conspirators of the right and the left, writers and other assorted strangers who are continually passing into and out of his life. By delving relentlessly into the details of his own past, whether flights of inspiration or fits of all-too-human, self-interested deviousness, his narrator performs a necessary feat of introspection that goes far beyond the capabilities of most of his readers, who can nevertheless benefit vicariously from the narrator's performance of atonement (*sprava*, including all of that word's fraught, post-1945 implications for Slovenia), relishing the vivid visual recreation of real, historical moments in all their complexity that this text is deliberately designed to evoke. This is also how the structural tension between the novel's two principal strands—the picaresque novel featuring Bubi the posturing schemer, petty thief, seducer and power-seeking gang leader, on the one hand, and the artist novel tracing the spiritual maturation of the young protagonist and his ultimate mastery of a medium of creative expression and reconciliation (once again, *sprava* in Slovene), on the other—is ultimately resolved. While the picaresque novel that dominates Book One, true to the rules of its genre, consists of the hero's misadventures in pursuit of ever greater security and power, the artist novel that emerges in Book Two centers around the protagonist's quest to extract pattern and meaning out of the seemingly chaotic world around him and to contribute his own artistic depiction of a path toward that meaning. Book Three of *Newcomers*, not dealt with in this article, will proceed to a postwar situation (1945–48) in which the protagonist continues to mature in his role as an artist, while the new

⁵¹ Na steno nasproti sem naslikal izgubljeni raj... vrt Eden, ki so ga obtekale štiri reke [...] Na ozki zid ob pekarski polici sem napravil Križanega: glavo... Po bradi, brkih, kodrih je bila podobna Vatijevi [...] (Kovačič 1984, 1–2: 341)

totalitarian society in which he suddenly finds himself insists on viewing and treating him, despite and ironically, *because of* his best, most authentic artistic impulses and efforts, as picaresque, with the competition of these two incompatible narrative modes resulting in an unsettling, disharmonious narrative that will end with no resolution.

By capturing thousands of vivid images of whole scenes and events, or of multiple phases of complex scenes and events from the rare viewpoint of a highly observant, impartial, adolescent outsider, and linking these together into a dynamic and virtually seamless progression of images—in spite of or even, paradoxically, thanks to the book's ubiquitous and ostentatious use of its signature, seam-like ellipses, which symbolically perform the same function as the frames separating the many panels of a graphic novel or comic book—*Newcomers* succeeds in conveying the chaotic reality of the highly localized, alternately cold and hot civil war that until the book's publication in 1984 had been described, with ideologically polarized bias and countless self-serving exaggerations or tactical omissions, only by adherents of one or the other side in the conflict. That a narrative inspired by the forms of a juvenile aesthetic should accomplish so sophisticated and daunting a synthesis makes Kovačič's achievement in *Newcomers* all the more remarkable. Who would ever have thought that the most highly regarded Slovene prose fiction masterpiece of the twentieth century, whose aim is to bridge a society's seemingly unbridgeable divides, would be inspired in equal parts by the lowly art of the comic book and the frugal but masterful art of the furrier.

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POVZETEK

KAKO JE NAREJEN KOVAČIČEV KRZNENI PLAŠČ: KAJ FORMALISTIČNA ANALIZA RAZKRIJE O VELIKEM SLOVENSKEM ROMANU

Obsežen avtofikijski roman slovenskega pisatelja Lojzeta Kovačiča Prišleki (Newcomers), ki se odvija predvsem v Sloveniji v desetletju med letoma 1938 in 1948, je splošno priznan kot eden od izjemnejših slovenskih romanov druge polovice dvajsetega stoletja. Kljub temu literarna kritika tega romana do zdaj še ni razkrila bistvenih značilnosti njegove pripovedne strukture, ki bi združevale in osmislili njegovo – kot so jo kritiki sicer pogosto opisali – razraščajočo in »fragmentarno« naravo. Avtor tega članka s pomočjo številnih značilnih odlomkov iz romana in formalistične literarne teorije pokaže, kako je Kovačič prefinjeno formuliral pripovedni glas, ki pripada

predvsem njegovemu deset- do dvajsetletnemu alter egu Bubiju, da bi prikazal, kako se ta literarni lik spopada z navalom novih, neznanih in pogosto nevarnih izkušenj v tuji deželi, kamor je bil izgnan. To doseže s povezovanjem preteklih izkušenj iz bolj znanih okoliščin, ki služijo kot sredstvo za spoznavno in metaforično osmišljevanje novega. Vsaj začasno prikrajšan za medij jezika v kritični razvojni fazi pozne pubertete in zgodnje adolescence, Bubi postane skrajno dovzeten za različne pretajane vizualne podobe v svojem novem okolju. Ta proces oblikuje njegove spoznavne in interpretativne navade in razkriva doslej skrito artistično senzibilnost in strast. Odločen, da postane vizualni umetnik, ampak zafrustriran nad pomanjkanjem nujno potrebne spretnosti za ta poklic, Bubi išče alternativen medij, ki bi mu omogočil razcvet njegovega daru. Ko mu kot bralci sledimo skozi faze artističnega in osebnega razvoja, ne opazimo nujno, kako njegova zrelejša različica sebe – meta-pripovedovalec – v Bubijevo pripoved že inkorporira velikopotezno, domiselno in presenetljivo rešitev njegove dileme, in sicer v samo strukturo knjige, ki jo beremo.