

assistance of a number of his teachers, friends, and colleagues (Milko Matičetov in Ljubljana, Sergio Bonazza in Verona, Pavle Merku, and Marija Pirjevec in Trieste, Mark K. Greenberg at the University of Kansas—to mention but a few—his work would never have been completed.

In summary, Nikolai Mikhailov's *Frühslovenische Sprachdenkmäler* is an excellent international resource on the early Slovene manuscripts, their analysis, and their bibliographic documentation.

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Aleš Debeljak, ed. *The Imagination of Terra Incognita: Slovenian Writing 1945–1995*. Fredonia, NY: White Pine, 1997. 468 pp., \$20.00 (paper).

A back cover blurb says this book is "an essential resource for anyone interested in the power of literary insight and historical experience." I may be the wrong reviewer. All I'm after is truth's twin, beauty. Or I may be just the one to ask what, indeed, Slovenes can peddle.

Archbishop Rode, for instance, says Cankar "never reached world-class standards, the way Tolstoy and Dostoevsky can" because his concerns "were not material for world-class literature" (46). Actually, Cankar never made it because he wrote in Slovenian. To believe the "what" makes a writer is to say Frost isn't much because he writes of farmers. Indeed, *The Imagination of Terra Incognita* does not work because it follows too closely this view that only important themes need apply.

First, about language. Here is an excerpt from the acknowledgments: "This anthology could have not seen the light of day had it not been for the unflagging support and courageous, enthusiastic, and underpaid assistance of several persons ... , a transplanted New York editor, who settled in Slovenian capital city ..." (14). We could debate whether "could have not seen" is English, but there is nothing

debatable about “in Slovenian capital city,” the *the* mistake, just ahead of the thanks to the language editor.¹

The book was rushed for a special occasion. The editors sent out e-mails scant weeks before publication, asking for permissions. Translators did not see proofs—not that proofreading is foolproof. *Prisoners of Freedom*, for instance, amalgamated the front end of one proofed Kocbek poem with the behind of another. Each half was glisteningly perfect, as if to mock proofreading. This time, the items I selfishly checked first were disappointing. You work and you worry and then Strniša's “It is late afternoon, soon to be dusk” becomes “It is later afternoon, soon to be dusk,” and so on (208). The same for the Kovič.

The volume appeared for Ljubljana's turn at the European Cultural Month, a boondoggle, in my opinion, that needed poetry for perfume. If such books were meant to be read, the mistakes would matter. But they are only meant to be a burden in the armpit of someone holding a glass in one hand, a buffet plate in the other. If opened, this one might have provoked a diplomatic incident. For, among its peculiarities, the name of Slovenia's lost city is spelled not the Slovenian way, nor the English-Italian way, but consistently (17, 27, 29) the German way: *Triest*. Perhaps the spelling is political, reclaiming Trieste for Franz Joseph.

Wherever you show up, come with the right stuff, of course. That is the wrong Kocbek, for instance, in *Terra*. It is unforgivable that “Na vratih zvečer / At the door at evening” was not included. Alojz Ihan has said of the poem that “it hits him in the stomach every time, takes his breath away” (1071). It works that way at readings, too. Its English title is mentioned in the anthology, by the way, but limpingly misnamed, “At the door of evening.” Among the absent are “Samota

¹ Why blame New Yorkers?! The fault is in the gratitude of Slovenians to anyone who notices them. As we Slovenists, amateur and professional, are a small community, perhaps I can be forgiven for touting my own stupidity. I was so thrilled to find a small press for my Kocbek that I forgot how good the poems were. I realized how merely Slovenian my ambition was only when Charles Simic asked me, “Did you consider sending the manuscript to Wesleyan or Princeton?” No, not for a moment! And what does that tell us, who are still going to Fredonia, New York, and subsidizing them for the honor?

avgusta,” “Smrt,” and “Globoko zgoraj.” If the great poems of *Zemlja* are excluded because they are pre-1945, the editorial rigidity is a mistake.

Terra is full of the self-important Kocbek. But there has always been a preference for the wrong Kocbek. Michael Scammell got this into *The New York Review of Books*:

“Now”
 When I spoke
 they said I was dumb,
 when I wrote
 they said I was blind,
 when I walked away
 they said I was lame.
 And when they called me back
 they found I was deaf.
 They confounded all my senses
 and concluded I was crazy.
 This pleases me (61).

What an opportunity lost! It is hard to prove it is bad, *de gustibus*, but Scammell's note may be proof: “Of the following poems, the first reflects his experience as a Partisan leader. The second and third ... his disillusionment with Communism. The fourth ... could be read as an account of the entire Slovenian nation as it fights for independence” (61). Good poetry would mock such cribs. These poems are presented not as poems, but as important artifacts.

The best example of the bad Kocbek in *Terra* is “Lipicanci,” thought to be a great poem because the horses are the animal kingdom's Trieste. *Terra's* version contains, of course, a rip-roaring typo (170). Would that the rest of the poem were as lovely as the stanza about the emperor in Vienna speaking to his horses in Slovene. The next editor should cannibalize and then chuck the rest, a series of preachy stanzas beginning, “Nevertheless I must add, my son” and “Remember, my child” and culminating in an “Above all” exhortation that belongs at a fund-raiser. This laureate is all too aware of his stature.

Still, “Lipicanci” is not as bad as the Kocbek prose in the volume: For instance, “I suddenly became so drunk with love of the earth that I tore her hymen” (56). And worse: “Let us look more closely at how poetry expresses its paradoxical meaning. Most important, we

should note that words in poetic use become polyvalent. That is to say, a word in a poem loses its one-dimensional meaning and takes on multiple meanings. Even the most overused word becomes polyvalent in poetic context" (51).

The brilliant Debeljak knows how jejune this writing is and resignedly includes it because, for a festival, it's de rigeur. Mortis. It is, by the way, unfair to ask a Slovenian writer to make up an anthology that includes the living. Debeljak has wisely handed over the next anthology to an outsider. After all, he has to meet half of Slovenia's writers every day on his way to market. The anthologies that cross my desk every day hold as much fluff, and for similar reasons, as *Terra*, but English can afford that surplus.

How much in this volume will attract a reader to Slovenia? Or is it really just a bluffers' guide? What sort of advertisement, for instance, can Boris A. Novak's sonnet sequence be? I understand the desire to represent a wonderful tradition. I have intentionally not looked at Novak's original, which I am told is lovely. Let us also assume the task is impossible. But the fourteen lines of Novak's sonnet of sonnets, for instance, make no surface sense and thus cannot move us:

Memory has two wings: the first is past, the second is
future,
A luxury that hurts, a name of the silence.
Only dreams can weave time with water:
A magical mirror, a distant face of milk.
Truth is always being born at the edge:
A child is building the whole world out of clay—
A sand castle is stronger than emptiness.
A mother eagle is shielding calls of the weak ones.
Anguish opens like a curtain.
The child is a crown. I crown you, my life.
The densest moment: terrible is the gold of the body.
The blooming of the world demands a serene vigil.
Here, my child, I bequeath to you all the wonders
The knees where I cradle you into floating (273).

In English, this is only a handsome bunch of lines, not a poem.

Milan Jesih, the best poet writing in Slovenian today, is not represented by his best poetry, his sonnets, and thus sounds like

everybody else. But that is our failing. We don't have a translator that could do them. We are not close to what Veno Taufer is in the other direction.

What is readable to a friend—that real test—is instructive. Šalamun is always a pleasure, though much of my favorite Šalamun is missing. Debeljak's prose in the volume is more performable than his poetry. Nothing among his poems here equals—a tall order—the heart-breaking “Brush me with your knee beneath the table,” from that best book on the death of “Juga.” I envy Michael Biggins, the translator, for the title alone. Jančar is represented by two essays. He may be more talented in this genre than the novel. As the essay is an underrated form and today's European novel overrated, this is a compliment. Ivo Štandeker's account of the little war is a poem, as is Herbert Gruen's piece on Prešeren. I was glad to see Blatnik's “The Day Tito Died” again. The best story in the book is another essay, really, out of Cankar through Magajna and out Evald Flisar. It is called “Executioners” and is so perfect it cannot be excerpted from, so perfect the typos are unforgivable.

Festivals demand an official anthology, not the alternative canon, but what a merely safe collection this is. 1997 marked the twentieth anniversary of the first punk concert in Slovenia.² So, naturally, there had to be a plaque. At its unveiling, Peter Mlakar read this by “P. Traven:”

The line they hold is crumbling: death
scythes its way through the defenders;
from him whose voice alone could steel their spirit,
no wise directive comes. He lies
with his beloved in the redoubt,
his organ enters her. Streaming blood,
his second-in-command bursts into the bunker:

² I spent the summer trying to find two Slovene stories for an anthology. I found Maja Novak's gorgeous “Propad Pirnatove Hiše” and Blatnik's bitter-sweet “Še dobro,” and gave up on a beautiful Moderndorfer because it was too painful, but looking was hard work. I decided it must have been my bile or lack of contacts. No, said Bernard Nežmah in conversation with me. The problem is, he said, our writers were so long coddled by subsidies they forgot their readers. Says Šalamun, “Nations that forget their story-telling die out” (246).

“Come lead your troops,” he pleads, “lest the city fall.”
 To which his commander replies, “My duty lies here.”
 (13)

That would sell! Against the argument that one couldn't go with pornography for the European Cultural Month—I want to say there already is pornography in *Terra*. Florjan Lipuš is some writer, but “The day of the country wake” is pornography, gussied up in a noble theme.

It is time for another kind of book. Here is Ihan's formula—Ihan is not represented in *Terra*—for writing, loving, and, I suggest, anthology-building:

I had to decide to start
 writing poems again. Besides the ones I've
 steadily been writing for some years now. To write
 for each new poem one more, a parallel,
 different poem. In secret. I feel that there's
 some sense to this. Something similar happens
 to a man with a woman he has loved, really loved,
 for a long time. There comes a need
 to start loving her again. To begin a new love,
 next to the old. Parallel to it. In silence.
 In secret. And if the love is really long-standing,
 it needs more silence all the time, more composure.
 For new and new beginnings and continuations.
 For nothing must be noticed on the outside.
 I write this in all sincerity, without irony.
 My girl, before we make love,
 still draws the curtains because of the neighbours.
 Though in some silence of hers she may be stepping
 naked
 into a city bus, her monthly pass in her hand.
 What is essential is to know
 and still to play an old, simple fairy-tale.
 To celebrate a rite whose gods died long ago.
 Precisely because (52).

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Tomaž Šalamun. *The Four Questions of Melancholy: New and Selected Poems*. Ed. Christopher Merrill. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1997. 265 pp., \$15.00 (paper). ISBN 1-87727-57-1.

The importance of being a poet: Tomaž Šalamun, the one who wrote those twenty-nine books in his own language, Slovene. The one who had the courage to look for kindred spirits, in North America, and often prepare the grounds for a translation to take off, for communication to take place, by starting to transplant his texts into this other language, English. For an American poet to feel their vibrations, to sense their complexity, and to bring them completely into the new linguistic realm. When these two met, with synergy at work, with all the Muses called upon, for the essence of each single verse to be grasped and honored, then this beautiful book emerged, *The Four Questions of Melancholy*. For us to enjoy it, to be charmed, to be transformed, just as the poems were modified in the process of being integrated into another universe. Tomaž Šalamun worked closely with Christopher Merrill, a poet, and a professor, the editor of this book, weaving together this presentation of twenty and more years of work, of a lifetime. With poems taken from twenty-five volumes, with some of them already published in English,