

Andrej Blatnik. *The Law of Desire*; **Aleš Čar.** *Dog's Tango*; **Kajetan Kovič.** *Kaleidoscope*; **Maja Novak.** *Feline Plague*; **Andrej E. Skubic.** *Fužine Blues*; **Aleš Šteger.** *Protuberances* [brochures]. Translated by Tamara Soban, Tom Ložar, Ana Jelnikar, Tom Priestly, Lili Potpara, Nikolai Jeffs, Richard George, Brian Henry, Matthew Zapruder, Janko Lozar, Evald Flisar, Andrew Wachtel, Anne Talvaz, Peter Richards, and Aleš Šteger. Ljubljana: Student Publishing House (Študentska Založba), no dates.

The novel *Dog's Tango* by Aleš Čar contains this unforgettable line: "On the table, a book by Kardelj, which had somehow found its way there amidst the floppy disks, spilt sugar, and dried up biscuits; to his right were files and a botanical guide." There are many other memorable moments in the booklets at hand, on topics from beer to pets to inter-ethnic relations and again to beer to garbage to post-coital cleanups and back to beer. Obviously, for a historian of Slovene communism (like this reviewer) the Kardelj reference resonates—partly because it is so unusual and partly because it is so overdue. If any common theme wends its way through most of the six publishers' extracts under review here, it would be a gritty treatment of life—young life, edgy life—in postcommunist Slovenia. But such a generalization is of limited usefulness in assessing contemporary Slovene literature or even the products of one publishing company, in this case the Študentska Založba of Ljubljana. After all, there are just two small samplers of poetry and four extracts of fiction of about 3,000–6,000 words each; all are selected at random from the Beletrina series.

It is probably more useful to describe and analyze the pamphlets themselves and to take a look at possible interfaces between Slovene literature and the English-reading public. The fiction by Čar, Skubic, and two somewhat better known writers, Novak and Blatnik, all start with a photograph, a brief bio-blurb, and a description of Beletrina's activities. This description includes a brief mission statement of sorts about making available the works of promising and already prominent Slovene writers. So far so good. But the moderately helpful web site associated with these publications (www.studentskazalozba.si) reveals that the Beletrina series also includes foreign authors in Slovene translation: Anton Chekhov, Zbigniew Herbert, Zadie Smith, Imre Kertesz, Elfriede Jelinek, Blaise Cendrars, and Gottfried Benn, to name a few. A further point for clarification is that the pamphlets note that the target audience is "Slovene readers." This leads one to ask: why then have these extracts

been translated into English? Is the firm planning to launch an English-language series to parallel the admirable efforts, say, of the Društvo slovenskih pisateljev, with its long-running series *Litterae Slovenicae*? Who knows. The authors' sketches do not clarify the matter either, for although their works are listed in English and in Slovene, or in Slovene and then in English, it is unclear which of their works have actually been translated. The question of why these brochures exist is not meant to be trivial or cross. The issue is that this is good writing, all of it, each piece for its own reasons. Blatnik is obviously famous already, and Novak is always intriguing. I especially like the Čar piece for its narrative drive alternating between amok and melodiously rational and the Skubic for its sociological supplement to the sanitized-Central European-tourist guidebook-image of Ljubljana. One should sincerely hope that these books will appear in English translation.

Two of the works also have brief publisher's descriptions at the beginning. Skubic has written a brief introductory essay himself, while half of the entire Blatnik pamphlet is taken up by an essay entitled "Measured Transformations" by Petra Vidali. Novak's work is preceded by an anonymous essay entitled "Existential Mercantilism." The back cover of each booklet contains snippets from various reviewers. The critical apparatus is uniformly thoughtful and intriguing, but it would be appropriate to let readers know the qualifications or affiliations of the critics.

The translations themselves range from good to excellent. They consist of a healthy mixture of both British and American English. Unfortunately, though, the Blatnik brochure happens to be riddled with distracting typographical errors, and we have no idea whom to thank for the English version of *Fužine Blues*.

Čar's work, *Dog's Tango*, deals here with the personal ups and downs of a kind of contemporary Ljubljana antihero named Viktor Viskas. The third-person narration is ebullient and colorful and there is, presumably, a nice set of historical parallels or commentaries residing in the rest of the book. Skubic's *Fužine Blues* ratchets up the narrative heat to a manic level; it is a rather spicy stream of consciousness grounded in the class and ethnic distinctions of Ljubljana's "other side of the tracks." On hot days and nights a varied a cast of characters moves against a backdrop of soccer, ex-Yugoslavia, and urban blight; certainly a novel like this, centering on *čefur* life in the big city, places Slovenia right in the

middle of the gritty realistic currents of much of today's fiction. Andrej Blatnik's two stories, "Electric Guitar" and "It's a Good Thing," are written with his usual cool, sure dispatch; they also contain his customary accompaniments of quiet desperation and pop culture *realia*. Maja Novak's work often focuses on animals. Here we have a set of mostly childhood observations about Ira, a woman who relates better to animals than people. The closing scene, powerful and unique like many of her works, involves an aquarium with a sick fish, a double-barreled shotgun, an obese Ira who is experiencing menopause at age twenty-eight, and an ogress from next door with a job to offer. If this heady elemental cocktail does not hold the reader's interest and offer up numerous interpretive possibilities to our jaded age, nothing can.

The two poetry pamphlets have the same format as the prose. Kovič's *Kaleidoscope* poems, ably introduced and smoothly translated by Tom Priestly, are drawn from his volume of sonnets of the same name published in 2001. Kovič is such a huge figure in Slovenia letters today that these fine translations of his work are indeed welcome. The poems alternate between intimate, individual visions and broader, more philosophical ruminations. Although the sonnet's discipline is not for all contemporary readers (or writers), and Kovič's subject matter might be too subtle for some, the five "Sonnets for My Father" are beautiful because they are both poignant and meaty. Šteger's *Protuberances* has no introduction or critical essay, but the free-verse poems are hard-hitting. The work of a sizable number of translators appears here. "Europe," translated by Tom Ložar, is splendid in a paranoid, political sort of way.

The poems in these publications can stand alone and obviously can be anthologized or republished elsewhere. The prose fragments mostly leave us, ultimately, unsatisfied, but only because we are hungry for more—more in the sense of context and direction. At any rate the quality of both the writings and the renderings here is a cause for optimism that Slovene literature will eventually gain the greater degree of prominence that it deserves.

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