

has been translated from Polish into German, while Miłosz himself translated the haiku into Polish from Japanese and English originals. He acknowledges the difficulty of this effort, concluding, “I simply try to sketch a picture with a few strokes of the pen.... This collection can be considered my private sketchbook given to the reader to develop his own insights” (178).

The section “Considerations II” continues the spirit of “Considerations I,” including several commentaries on the haiku form as such; on “two-liners,” which is to say poems consisting of two lines of verse; and on small verse forms in the “Metamodern” movement. Like the preceding pieces, these articles focus primarily on authors who are not well known outside of eastern Europe.

Overall, the book is a bit of a slog because the context is not well known to Anglophone readers and because the back and forth of translation can be linguistically unsettling. However, the effort is worthwhile. The book provides a number of intriguing perspectives on what a poem actually is, and how poetry relates to the human condition. In a world constantly beleaguered by the complexities of geopolitical life and culture on the vast central and east European plain; we need all the insight we can get.

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The Vow: A Requiem for the Fifties. By Jiri Kratochvil. Trans. Charles S. Kraszewski. London: Glagoslav Publications, (2021). 290 pp. Bibliography. €21.99, paper. doi: 10.1017/slr.2023.130

Jiří Kratochvil (born 1940 in Brno) is one of the most prolific and critically acclaimed Czech writers of the post-communist period. He has won numerous literary prizes, most recently the Magnesia Litera for best prose fiction book of the year (2020, for *Fox into a Lady*). Milan Kundera has called Kratochvil’s novels and short stories “the greatest event in Czech literature since 1989.” Until 2021, however, Kratochvil’s work was represented in English translation only by two short stories in anthologies from the 1990s and by an excerpt from his 2002 novel *Down, Beast!* published online in 2014. It was therefore a delight to see the publication last year of a complete English translation of the 2009 novel under review, originally *Slib: Rekviem na padesátá léta*, which is one of Kratochvil’s most ambitious and entertaining works of the past two decades.

The Vow tells the story of Kamil Modráček, a Brno architect who aspires to create original buildings in a functionalist style, but reconciles himself to satisfying, by turns, the demands of Nazi authorities in the early 1940s, the vulgar tastes of the Brno bourgeoisie in the mid-to-late 1940s, and the new regime’s commissions for socialist realist housing projects after the communist takeover in February 1948. When his sister dies while under interrogation by the secret police (StB), Modráček vows to seek revenge against Rudolf Švarcšnupf, alias Lieutenant Láska (Love), the StB agent he believes is responsible for her death. A series of coincidences then leads Modráček both to the idea and the means of abducting Láska and imprisoning him in an underground chamber deep beneath the streets of Brno. Further accidents and a kind of obsessive mania eventually prompt Modráček to lock up a whole colony of twenty-one people in the subterranean vault, where he forces his internees to build a “horizontal underground city.” This project becomes both the culmination of Modráček’s ambitions as an architect and a twisted model of utopia: ostensibly a Noah’s-Ark-like refuge from the unfreedom of the Stalinist regime above

ground . . . even as it is itself a totalitarian regime in miniature. This whole fantastic story is told by more than a dozen alternating narrators, of whom an omniscient third-person narrator and Kamil Modráček himself take turns most frequently. Like most of Kratochvíl's fictions, *The Vow* is replete with verbal and situational humor, culinary and sexual adventures, literary and cultural references, exuberant language, genre bending, and various postmodernist strategies for undermining narrative and leaving it open-ended.

Charles S. Kraszewski, who has also translated Czech works by Jaroslav Hašek and Jan Balabán for Glagoslav, as well as numerous Polish texts, has produced an English version of *Slib* that is serviceable and at times inspired in the verve and felicity with which it renders the idiosyncrasies of Kratochvíl's narrators. It appears, however, that the translator lacks an intimate familiarity with Czech cuisine, Czech words for some everyday household objects, and several idioms and verbal mannerisms typical for colloquial Czech, and this has resulted in a number of inaccuracies. There are a few cases where a term has been rendered accurately in one part of the novel and inaccurately in another, which suggests that some errors may be due more to the haste with which the translation was produced and edited than to the limitations of the translator's knowledge. The translation also struggles at times to settle on a consistent regional variety of English. British vocabulary, spelling and editing standards generally prevail: one finds many references to "flats" and "lifts" in *The Vow* and none to "apartments" or "elevators." But the inclusion of Americanisms like "Johnson" (as a mildly vulgar expression for penis), "garbage truck" (for bin lorry) and "pants-leg" (trouser leg) disrupts stylistic continuity in a way that does not correspond to the Czech original. Several sentences in the translation sound not fully translated, retaining syntax that would be quite normal in a Slavic language, but is stylistically awkward if not impossible in English. The translator's unconscious assimilation to the norms of Czech and Polish style probably also accounts for his habit of putting a comma before every dependent clause, including restrictive clauses.

Kraszewski supports his translation with a substantial apparatus: a 30-page introduction; 41 footnotes to the text of the novel, plus nine more to the introduction; and a bibliography of ten secondary sources. Some of the footnotes provide English translations of passages left in German or Russian in the body of the novel; others reproduce phrases from the Czech original that involve puns or other translators' dilemmas. A number of footnotes gloss cultural and historical references. Most of these glosses are sufficient and helpful to the reader, but a few are remarkable for their incompleteness or inaccuracy. The introduction is a distinctly personal and rambling discourse on human sinfulness. It argues that Kratochvíl's purpose in writing the novel is more to reveal the innate moral failings of his characters (and, by implication, of all humanity) than to illustrate a specific moment of societal depravity (and perhaps mass insanity) in Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s. To advance this tendentious reading, Kraszewski essentially has to deny the validity of the novel's subtitle: *A Requiem for the Fifties*. That Kraszewski personally believes in humanity's persistent wickedness is less troubling than his assertion that "the imposition of expected uniformity of liberal attitudes" and liberal "cancel culture" in today's United States constitute an Orwellian evil no less sinister than anything that ever happened under Stalinism (33). Perhaps anticipating that the introduction may not make the best impression, Kraszewski alerts his readers—in his very first footnote—that they may be better off *not* reading it before they have read the novel itself. Good idea.

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