

## NEVERTHELESS, IS IT ALSO A MACHIAVELLIAN NOVEL?

### A REVIEW ESSAY OF

**Michael Biggins.** “Against Ideologies: Vladimir Bartol and *Alamut*” pp. 383–390. In: Vladimir Bartol. *Alamut*, Seattle: Scala House Press, 2004. 391 pp., \$15.61 (cloth), ISBN: 0972028730.

I received a copy of Vladimir Bartol’s 1938 novel *Alamut* for review, freshly translated into English by a friend of mine, Michael Biggins. This first translation into English was published a year after the centenary of the author’s birth in 1903. I tackled the task with great pleasure because it presented a chance to polish up my interpretation of the text; on the other hand, I found myself in an awkward and (objectively) unfavorable position because in the preface the translator argues against my own interpretation of the novel. The following observations will refer more to Biggins’s preface than to the novel itself. In lieu of judging the quality of the translation, I can offer my own opinion that—knowing Biggins’s abilities—the publisher could not have found a better translator.

The Biggins study is an exhaustive summary of everything that Slovene “Bartology” has created so far. It is also the first serious, detailed, and significant study of *Alamut* outside Slovenia. Although the number of translations, especially into French and Spanish, are not negligible, foreign editions have been accompanied only by superficial advertising blurbs on the covers or in newspapers. The title “Against Ideologies” announces Biggins’s critical attitude towards any ideological interpretation of the novel. The study opens with crucial information for readers unacquainted with the European context and it depicts Slovenia’s tight geographical position and the tense situation before the Second World War, when the novel was written. Biggins follows this by stressing that the novel is a literary work of very high quality, highlighting its moral and cognitive dimensions. To him it represents an “escape from the mass political movements” (388). Because escapism is not considered a very rewarding posture, he defines the novel as “a profound meditation on [these movements]” (388). One can agree with the introductory thesis that the novel offers the reader “a broad potential for symbolic, intertextual and philosophical interpretation” (389), but reservations remain regarding Biggins’s argument that the greatness of the work is justified by the degree of passion with which the author wrote the novel. As Biggins puts it, Bartol was “radiantly happy during this period, just as

we might imagine a person who knows he's creating a masterpiece should be" (389).

It is true that, for an observer looking for distinctiveness in a literary work, this novel seems unusual and exceptional in the Slovene literary tradition due to its exotic setting and removal in time. However, from the perspective of a literary historian that is interested in identifying the characteristics that connect a literary work with others, this novel is not so extraordinary after all. A series of Slovene novels and stories from the beginning of Slovene literature from the mid-nineteenth century onwards could be listed, all of which take place beyond Slovenia and without Slovene heroes. These therefore belong to the same category as *Alamut*; most closely related are the Roman historical novels, for example, *The Last Days in Aquileia: An Original Novel from the Fifth Century*, by Alojzij Lukovič Carli,<sup>1</sup> and *Publius and Hispala: A Novel of Ancient Rome*, by Joža Lovrenčič.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no doubt that *Alamut* is the most successful work in this group.

Among all the commentaries on the novel to date, Biggins's analysis of the four classifications of the novel is clearly his great contribution to "Alamutology." First, *Alamut* is classified as a novelized account of Iran in the eleventh century under the Seljuk dynasty: the master of the castle of Alamut, Hasan ibn Sabbah, trains his soldiers through trickery to become fanatic assassins, and in this way he manages to repel the foreign would-be conquerors of the fortress. The second classification comprises interpretations that explain *Alamut* as a contemporary allegory—that is, of the totalitarian regimes before the Second World War. It is no coincidence that Bartol intended to dedicate the novel to Mussolini, or to "a dictator"—according to Biggins, this would have been "a bold exercise in high irony" (391). It is possible to recognize some allusions to actual Nazi political figures and events of the time.

Biggins dedicates his harshest criticism to the third interpretation (which, I must immodestly explain, is my interpretation). The definition "nationalistic" would suit it best, because it characterizes *Alamut* as a novel with a key: unlike the previous interpretation, in which

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<sup>1</sup> *Zadnji dnevi v Ogleju: Izviren roman iz petega stoletja* (Ljubljana: Slovenec, 1876/1877).

<sup>2</sup> "Publius in Hispala: Roman iz starega Rima" (Ljubljana: *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1927; reprint Ljubljana: Jugoslovanska knjigarna, 1931).

the main character Hasan ibn Sabbah is an allusion to Hitler, Mussolini, or Stalin, the third interpretation draws parallels between the main characters and the members of the Slovene terrorist movement TIGR, which sought to free the Littoral Slovenes from Italian fascist rule between 1927 and 1941.

The translator initially even supports this comparison with an excerpt from Bartol's diary: the Italians had accused one of the terrorist movement's leaders, Bartol's personal friend Zorko Jelinčič, and Bartol claimed that he would avenge him. At the next turn, however, Biggins characterizes this interpretation as "facile and flat" (391) on four counts. It is purportedly false because (a) the part in which Hasan explains his suggestions for national liberation is much smaller than the statements reflecting his nihilism, (b) because for a "self-respecting human being"—that is, for a sensitive humanist—it is impossible to be inclined towards Hasan's manipulative ideology, (c) because Bartol was politically uninterested, and (d) because such an interpretation would reduce this literary work of art to a mere thesis product.

I agree completely only with Biggins's last statement. So far I am convinced that each new interpretation of the novel does not replace previous ones, but only supplements or modifies them. This fact is obvious in the literary world: each new interpretation increases the semantic potential of the work and enhances the impression of its artistic complexity. One can even argue that for a long time already the artistic fame of *Alamut* has not depended on the novel itself, but on numerous critical, essayistic, and literary historical explanations. Although I root for my own interpretation of the novel, I am not convinced that I have articulated its only and most important message. However, I find it necessary to stress this message at a time when it seems everybody would like to avoid or ignore it. Finally, this is not a matter of my own interpretative whim, but is based on fresh reading of Bartol's astute contemporaries and compatriots (especially Lino Legiša). These knew the author and the circumstances in which the novel was created very well, and were therefore able to decipher the disguised nationalistic message of *Alamut* much more clearly than today's readers.

It is true that much more text is dedicated to the descriptions of Hasan's demonic rationalism and nihilism than to the instrumentalization of his manipulative ideas for the noble interests of the community. However, this narrative practice is commonly used; even in

texts with the most striking positive moralistic teaching, describing humanity's evil side is at the foreground because the theme of evil deeds has always been more interesting than anything else. My answer to Biggins's second scruple is my belief that the basis of self-respect is the courage to face the world, although its facade is not always likeable. Here I would like to mention an incident in Bartol's short story "Al Araf" in which two bloodthirsty hounds tear a cat apart: he who wants to become master of his own fate should follow the dogs' behavior.

The third objection regarding Bartol's political lack of interest is not debatable because his literary activity practically cannot be understood beyond the ethnic implications on which all of Slovene literature depends. This applies even more to marginal areas and to certain genres that were introduced only to constitute the nation and to emancipate it. Bartol was a Slovene from Trieste, born in an existentially exposed and endangered western ethnic region (in 1920 the fascists burned down the Slovene cultural center in Trieste, and they abused and violently assimilated Slovenes; as a result many Slovenes emigrated to Yugoslavia). *Alamut* belongs to the genre of the historical novel of which the basic demand is a nationally relevant message. The reasons why this national(istic) dimension was gradually suppressed in the history of its reception are very similar to the reasons why it is not likeable today. The situation is even worse: stressing it seems to be increasingly perilous.

Two years ago I provocatively jotted down an exaggerated, polemical threat that the revelation of Bartol's inclinations towards the Slovene terrorist organization TIGR (in Slovenia it is not referred to as a terrorist organization, but as a justified liberation movement) might close Slovenia's door to NATO.<sup>3</sup> Biggins's eager dismissal of the "nationalistic" interpretation makes me believe that my irony was not exaggerated after all. The translator is sincerely afraid for Bartol and for *Alamut*; he is afraid that the cultural and literary reputation of the Slovenes might be harmed if one of their most frequently translated books were suspected of being a terrorist novel. I do hope I am wrong, but it appears increasingly evident that today every desperate aggressive deed by those that have exhausted all other means to defend their rights is labeled as terrorism out of paranoia. Is it possible that now—during an obsessive fight to the end against terrorism—even a literary work by a

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<sup>3</sup> "Nam bo *Alamut* ubranil v Nato?" *Delo* 23 December 2002 (also available at <http://www.ijs.si/lit/alamut3.html-12>).

European author dating back to 1938 can become suspicious, stigmatized, dangerous, and an object of persecution?

When I mention *Alamut's* Slovene nationalism, I do not intend to tease the present masters of the world. Nor is my intention to question the reputation that the novel gained in Slovene literary history. I simply want to highlight the reasons for the disguised, dubious, or suspicious Slovene attitude towards this literary work. Perhaps I have no right to scold Slovene readers (and Mike Biggins together with them) because they consider ibn Tahir a healthy counter to Hasan's manipulative plans; in Slovene culture literature is *a priori* highly respected; positive characteristics are attributed even to works with questionable messages. The objective of literature is, according to the general belief, to broaden readers' horizons and to make them gentler persons. However, as a literary historian I owe an explanation of why some other interpretations face harsh opposition. The interpretation of *Alamut* as a terrorist novel was born as polemic rejection of the stereotypical reading in schools, which explained it as criticism of terrorism and as criticism of the manipulation exercised by the authorities. My objection to the insincere attitude towards *Alamut* refers to two measures that help us prove our truth (and this applies not only to the United States, but also to Iran, Italy, and Slovenia). When we need to defend our aggressive deeds, we talk about the defense of democracy and human rights, about the fight for national freedom, or, in short, about national interests. However, when we are the victims of foreign aggression, we label it as terrorism—without giving it a second thought. Among the Slovenes this pretence turns into a common belief that we are by nature incapable of committing evil deeds at all and, of course, this positive character also applies to our national literature.

My objections here have also been motivated by my disagreement with the thoughtless stressing of the “cosmopolitan” spirit of *Alamut* by Slovene literary critics, whose other goal was to disqualify the Slovene rural prose by the author's social-realist contemporaries: Prežihov Voranc (ten years his senior), and Miško Kranjec and Anton Ingolič (his juniors by some years).

The reason why *Alamut* was not received with unanimous applause by the author's contemporaries was the suspicion about its Machiavellian nature. The Slovene translation of *Il Principe* by Niccoló

Machiavelli was published in Ljubljana in 1920;<sup>4</sup> it was read as a manual for successful political behavior and not as an example of morally questionable political principles. The dubious Slovene attitude that I criticize manifests itself in the fact that we would like to have both: a successful historic element and an example of moral justness. Bartol dedicated much of his writing to persuading readers how these two extremes are incompatible and that deciding on one of the two possibilities is inevitable—namely, the Slovenes should finally take responsibility for their own fate. To see how clearly and un-enigmatically he did this, one should browse through his collection of short stories *Al Araf (The Wall)*,<sup>5</sup> which was published three years before *Alamut* (for more information, consult the reviewer's 2002 and 2005 articles).<sup>6</sup> In the title story, the experienced Simon Krassowitz and the young naive Jernej Svetina exchange two letters. The elder man is responsible for the younger one's terrible disappointment in love and, when Jernej looks for him to take revenge, Simon explains to him the unselfish reasons why he has deceived him. Behind these reasons there is a demonic plan of bringing up powerful individuals whose hearts become hardened through personal shocks. They give up their personal happiness in love (acquiring a trait of tragic personalities), and only in this way do they become mature, turning into leaders of the nation. It is normal that we cannot find Hasan likeable when he, like Krassowitz, preaches about giving up one's own personal happiness in order to sacrifice oneself for the community. Therefore we share our anger with Hasan's "mean" plans with young ibn Tahir; but later on he allows himself to be persuaded and indirectly even makes us accept Hasan's altruistic, victimistic, fanatic, manipulative, and Machiavellian argumentation. No, we do not like this ideological conglomerate, but despite this we must admit that the Slovenes have survived exactly because of such ideological excesses in their literature; the entire Slovene system of literature (yes, even *Alamut*, which looks so different at first glance) functioned as an instrument to boost national confidence, to direct, and to encourage.

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<sup>4</sup> *Vladar*. Albin Prepeluh trans. (Ljubljana: Zvezna tiskarna, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> *Al Araf* (Ljubljana: Modra ptica, 1935).

<sup>6</sup> "Alamut in slovenski nacionalni interes" (*Filozofija na maturi* IX/24 (2002): 42–49, also available at <http://www.ijs.si/lit/alamut2.html-12>) and "Razmerje med Bartolovo kratko in dolgo prozo (*Al Araf* in *Alamut*)" (<http://www.ijs.si/lit/alamut5.html-12>, 2005).

The disappointment the heroes experience is very similar to what some people felt a full decade ago with the attainment of Slovene independence; a feeling that made Austrian writer Peter Handke turn away from this country that was, in his opinion, a mystical, charming place before independence. It appears that at the background of Biggins's writing there is also an image of a small, lovely, historically unreal country, founded in literature, that with its declaratively literary orientation is so pleasantly different from all the serious big states. Bartol's plan was to establish an equal historical status for Slovenia, a country without a heroic past but with ample defeats and losses. This is feasible only if the unsuccessful "faith of our parents" is given up. Instead of stressing Slovenes' good-heartedness, mercy, and justness—instead of attributing to Slovenes the role of "peace-loving farmers"—Bartol dictates that they make risky decisions and forget the example set by the writer Ivan Cankar (recalling his trinity of faith, hope, and love from his *Dream Visions*).<sup>7</sup> The example of Črtomir in France Prešeren's *The Baptism on the Savica*<sup>8</sup> should be followed because only such perilous behavior ensures the survival of the nation.

Now that I have hopefully neutralized any dislike on the translator's part for my interpretation, I can resume the account of Biggins's study. Although he is skeptical towards simplifying ideological explanations, he himself adds the fourth explanation, a current one. According to the new explanation, *Alamut* prophetically reflects the conflict between the humiliated, bereft, and offended Islamic world and the aggressive West. In this point Biggins is a very daring critic of Western civilization.

Biggins defines all four interpretative possibilities as fake keys that will not open the door to *Alamut*. Each partial reading is denoted as ideological; the interpretation that equates *Alamut* with Slovenia, deploying terrorism for purposes of self-preservation, is defined as degenerated. At the end of his study he offers an interpretation that would dismantle the numerous ideological readings, that would surpass them and disclose how the work reflects a diverse and complex human personality, consisting of biological, social, historical, psychic, ethical, and spiritual components on an equal footing. According to Biggins, Bartol was much more strongly influenced by French personalist

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<sup>7</sup> *Podobe iz sanj* (Ljubljana: Nova založba, 1917).

<sup>8</sup> *Kerst per Savizi* (Ljubljana, 1836).

philosophy than by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and Friedrich Nietzsche. French personalist philosophy also influenced Bartol's contemporary Edvard Kocbek (Biggins has also translated Kocbek). The personalism in *Alamut* is proved by pointing at the moments of sincerity and vulnerability in the relationships among the persons and by the contradictory motto. (I cannot help but add how these very elements subdue the impression of Hasan's demonism, and in this way smooth the way for the success of his plan for both the novel's characters and its readers.)

The conclusion of the Biggins study is dedicated to a defense of Bartol as a man that, apart from his study of philosophy and the nature sciences, also occupied himself with other hobbies: he was interested in insects and butterflies, was an alpinist and a pilot, and as such obviously "in love with life." This apology is an introduction to the quotation of Bartol's own interpretation of *Alamut*: in 1957, about two decades after the book's publication, the author recorded in his diary what he actually intended to convey with *Alamut*, had he been asked about it. His reply would have been that he wanted to express emotions of courage, affection, and enthusiasm. He achieved this by depicting solidarity, friendship, and the heroes' endeavors to recognize the truth. The quotation suits our reading experience and we would gladly believe it even if it were not introduced by the translator's apology of Bartol's personal attributes. (Incidentally, Bartol's generation did not think much of Bartol's character.) The quotation itself does not trigger any problems regarding the Machiavellian character of the novel.

One further point: despite its critical attitude to the "nationalistic" explanation of *Alamut*, Biggins's study paradoxically approves of such an explanation through the very introductory sentences that do not refer to Iran, Islam, or general human comprehensions. On the contrary, in the introduction he finds it vital to mention first that the novel was written in Slovenia by a Slovene author. Actually it seems that Biggins's and my motivation to write about *Alamut* are related in a way. We both are concerned about the Slovenes: Biggins strives to achieve an acknowledgement of the novel's artistic relevance, which would place Slovene literature onto the global cultural map, while my aim (via the novel) is to correct the flaw in the Slovene national character that already annoyed Bartol because it endangered the existence of the nation: namely, pretence regarding its self-image and a servile attitude towards everything foreign. It is understandable that Biggins and all those that

strive to promote Slovene literature abroad are concerned with the fate of the big translation project and are at the same time obliged to defend it from possible doubters. Nor am I indifferent to the endeavors mentioned above,<sup>9</sup> so I can assure the translator and the publisher with reconciliation that the choice to translate *Alamut* was, any misunderstandings aside, a very suitable one. Unlike Biggins, however, I am convinced that Slovene literature is powerful and differentiated enough to afford a critical approach to its basic literary works and great authors. The very successful promotion of the translation among an interested audience in Seattle in mid-November 2004 was a great reward for this accomplished translation endeavor. Some interest in various Slovene-oriented interpretations could be expected only in this narrow circle of readers, whereas it is likely that the broader American readership (if the novel succeeds in making a breakthrough) will pass over such interpretations and simply read *Alamut* as an adventure novel.

Personally, I like the definition of literature as a sort of a laboratory—a room where various solutions to man's individual and social problems are tested in a fictional way. *Alamut* is a narrative about the rescuing of a vitally endangered community that had no other choice left to preserve its existence but fanatical, extreme forms of aggression. If we read it as instructions for action, these instructions would, of course, be very questionable and dangerous. Are we today in as poor a position as in 1938, when it had to be read as instructions?

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<sup>9</sup> Miran Hladnik, "Some Slovene literature available in English" ([http://www.ijs.si/lit/slov\\_lit.html-l2](http://www.ijs.si/lit/slov_lit.html-l2), 1997)