

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304069604579153372112110700>

By

SAM MUNSON

Nov. 1, 2013 3:56 p.m. ET

The first efforts of a junior-grade Casanova are comic even when they are tragic. "Waltz"—a 1935 work of Francesc Trabal, a Catalan writer long neglected in English—takes up that double theme with warm and bitter humor. The book tells the story of Zeni Assens, a university student and child of Barcelona's privileged class, whose life falls apart at the end of his adolescence.

The novel's plot is simple and rich. Zeni arrives at the summer home of his Uncle Agusti, a corrupt and decadent lawyer, only to discover the domestic atmosphere charged with rumors about the uncle's affair with a chambermaid. The rumors illuminate for Zeni the first hints of larger erotic possibility. Summer ends; Zeni departs. Ensnared again in Barcelona and egged on by the specious exaltations of the student life he has resumed, Zeni begins several parallel affairs, varying in their degree of sexual involvement.

Waltz

By Francesc Trabal

Dalkey Archive, 244 pages, \$15

This harried, exuberant and just-blooming sex life is mirrored in Trabal's deft, exclamatory prose. After a successful bit of romantic practice, Zeni feels that "everything favored him for once. Standing there alone, he picked up a cue and balls (trying unsuccessfully to whistle as he did) and, giving the appearance of fighting ferociously with the billiards table—immobile, with that provocative, insolent green—he began a series of never-ending cannons."

Zeni's adolescent pursuit of truth by way of sexual and romantic exploits forms the novel's thematic arc. He takes his first step toward his dubious enlightenment in the book's polyphonic opening section: After his uncle's affair fires sparks in Zeni's psyche, his friend Teresa learns of his impending trip to Vienna and asks him for a recording of a waltz. He promises to obtain one; and in a matter of weeks has begun his delirious, hurtling dance among his women, his male friends (one of whose girlfriends he seduces), and his various tried-on and discarded identities (Romantic bibliophile, stoic young soldier, urbane seducer).

It's in seduction that Zeni finds the consequential. Two in particular: one of the intense, philosophical and tubercular Raya; the second of his younger cousin, Otilia. The former results in a crisis of conscience in Zeni, brought on by Raya's retreat from him and her subsequent, sudden death; the latter in a severe social humiliation, which sends Zeni on his flight east, toward a luxe Budapest hotel,

driving alone in the stolen family Ford. (He will find there, in an echo of the novel's beginning, a "slender chambermaid, with fine ankles and orange lips.")

Zeni is aware of the dangers coloring his debauched parade, or of how bound up his love life is with his epistemological one. Near the novel's end, Trabal glancingly describes a thumbnail index of Zeni's liaisons as a "growing list of remarkable findings"; Zeni himself, in a long confession he makes to the family priest after Raya's death, says: "I've become a person of scathing distrust. . . . I have doubts about myself, about this stupid judgment of mine that I used to think was so glorious."

Any sentimental education is an education in loss: of love, of certainty and (in the best cases) of illusion. Not so for Zeni Assens, despite his apparent epiphanies. For Zeni—promiscuous to the last not just in matters of the flesh but in his ceaseless attempts at self-definition—such knowledge brings with it no redemption, no late mercy from the author. Indeed, Raya proves to be his most accurate diagnostician: She knows that he will "enjoy the time he spent writing [his] diary more than the time he spent with her"; she can "imagine him acting out his passions, caught up in the strange influence of a blank sheet of paper." Her judgment applies, it seems impossible to doubt, just as harshly and clearly to his "scathing distrust" as it does to his romantic playacting. We last see him, despite his protestations to the priest, with his arms wrapped around that seductive, fine-ankled and orange-lipped chambermaid. A truly obscure object of desire.

—Mr. Munson is the author of
"The November Criminals."