
The Harmless Game of Memories and What It Can Lead To

Tanja Petrič

*All the dignity of man resides in thinking;
all the dignity of thinking resides in memory.*

– André Comte-Sponville,
A Small Treatise on the Great Virtues

The Slovene writer and historian Sebastijan Pregelj is one of the most visible authors in contemporary Slovene literature. He has made a name for himself, too, in German-speaking countries with translations of three of his novels, and I have no doubt that his good reputation will soon be spreading across other geographic expanses, including the Anglophone world. Since 1991, his short stories have appeared in a variety of Slovene and international literary magazines, and he has so far published four short-prose collections and seven novels. Not long ago, he began writing books for children: he has published two books about a ghost named Babujan and five books in his successful series *Stories from the End of the Stone Age* (*Zgodbe s konca kamene dobe*).

Pregelj's enviable corpus of novels may be divided into two narrative strains: in his first three novels – *Years of Mercy* (*Leta milosti*), *On the Terrace of the Tower of Babel* (*Na terasi babilonskega stolpa*), and *The Man Who Rode a Tiger* (*Mož, ki je jahal tigra*) – he creates a unique world in a hybrid of genres, which span the full range of narrative registers, from (pseudo)documentary

and quasi-memoiristic writing to (science) fantasy, the fairy tale, and the love story, all usually wrapped in a (post-modern) ball of yarn, where the true and the untrue, the ordinary and the mysterious are intertwined. Beneath the visible surface of banal everyday life, in which people are concerned mainly about their egos and interpersonal relationships (especially love relationships), a more exciting ‘other world’ is always hidden, a world swarming with prophets, angels, divine or diabolic helpers, saints, and mysterious supernatural beings, who are almost always involved in some suspenseful, open-ended crime story.

In his fourth novel, *Under a Lucky Star* (*Pod srečno zvezdo*), however, the author, more or less radically, retreats from his earlier fantasy writing (although he never completely abandons it) and explores an assortment of realistic, cruel destinies, which befall immigrants in the windy and xenophobic coastal city of Trieste, a hotbed of crime and, not least of all, for Slovenes a site of painful memory in twentieth-century history. The literary critic Matej Bogataj writes: ‘If in his earlier novels Pregelj was developing grand, fantastical plotlines, he now preserves only a comet, which some see as a sign, a good omen, and so are optimistic and active, and several episodes and narrative capillaries lead to surprisingly successful conclusions. But this is only because the comet foretells something new.’ With this fourth novel, then, Pregelj introduced a more definitive and unambiguous socio-political commentary on current events; in particular, the novel highlights the treatment of immigrants and may be seen as a critical response to Europe’s refugee crisis. Indeed, this crisis reached its climax while he was working on his second triad of novels, which begins with *Under a Lucky Star*, continues with *A Chronicle of Forgetting* (*Kronika*

pozabljanja), and concludes with his most ‘migrant-related’ novel, *Breathe In. Breathe Out. (Vdih. Izdih.)*, in which the central theme problematizes attitudes towards refugees and others who through no fault of their own find themselves struggling with extraordinary existential conditions. This is the universal refugee (*ur-*) story, which seeks, in a directly activist way, to open the eyes of all of us who ‘keep our eyes and ears tightly shut’ despite the repeated lessons of history, from which humankind has obviously not learned very much. Pregelj also weaves ecological themes into the central narrative line, such as air and water pollution and the extinction of animal species.

A Chronicle of Forgetting, then, stands in the middle of Pregelj’s ‘socio-political’ triad, which may even be called a trilogy, although each of the novels functions as a complete whole. Despite its modest length, *Chronicle* is one of the author’s more complex works. A moving story about life, ageing, transience, and death, it was among the ten books nominated for the Kresnik Award for Best Slovene Novel of 2015. Memory and remembering, understood in the broadest sense, play a central role in the novel, transcending its thematic, and also ‘stylistic’, core – the articulation of dementia, a rapidly growing modern epidemic that afflicts some forty-seven million people worldwide. Although many contemporary authors have attempted to address this issue, including, for instance, the Austrian writer Arno Geiger in his award-winning work *The Old King in His Exile*, in Slovene literature such themes remain a curiosity and rarity. Pregelj, however, addresses the topic with deep personal insight, sensitivity, compassion and, importantly, respect.

The novel’s protagonist, an eighty-year-old man, decides to move to a nursing home while he is still in

possession of his health and his memory; there, under the care of the staff, he plans to live out the last years of his life in ease and free of worry. The novel, which is divided into four parts, opens with ‘a first-person obituary in the chatty style of *Sunset Boulevard* or *American Beauty*,’ as the critic Ana Geršak colourfully describes it. This prologue of sorts provides a list of the novel’s secondary and tertiary characters – the ‘extras’, as it were, who marked the last period of the protagonist’s life and here form an ‘unusual assembly’ around his grave. This first part serves almost as a key, then, and is worth remembering – or rather, you’ll need to return to it at the end of the novel. For the prologue sheds new light, retrospectively, on the protagonist’s life journey, which, as his memory gradually fails, becomes open to doubt, while the story, too, through the author’s skilful dramaturgy, appears to unravel.

The novel’s elderly hero is not particularly interested in his fellow residents or the social life of the nursing home. Initially, it seems that he has made only a few cursory and necessary connections – for instance, with the former ship’s cook and boxer Jon (who soon dies), the chess player Maks, the cleaning woman Aida, or, from his earlier life, his personal solicitor, Adam, who manages his property; he is also in contact with the staff, who would be difficult for him to avoid. Life in the nursing home becomes more pleasant and bearable for him when Konstanca, ‘a tall, beautiful woman’, moves into Jon’s vacant room. She inflames his heart, excites his (erotic) imagination, and kindles passion in this ‘old and decrepit hunter’.

Still, what causes the old man the greatest concern is the awareness that his memory is slowly fading: ‘At first, I was afraid of forgetting. I ordered a thick, hardbound notebook from the saleswoman at the shop.

When it arrived, I started writing down memories. . . . Since then I've understood that memories are just a game, mostly a harmless one.' But if everything is just a game of consciousness, and memories start 'changing their shapes and colours, like glass that every so often liquefies and reshapes itself, but then the molten glass quickly hardens again', then the game is brought into the text, the lacunae are filled, the void legitimizes its own existence and the unconnectable is connected. The reader must ask if what she has before her could be a text within a text that is being written in the moment, as a chain of unconnected associations, particles of memory from the distant past and flashes from dreams. The 'extras', too, become ever less substantial, less physical, more and more otherworldly, ethereal – whether this is the figure of the old man's idealized neighbour Konstanca or the angelic/diabolic mysterious visitor who ceaselessly knocks at the man's conscience even as he acts as his guardian.

The realization that the end is near usually arouses the need to reflect on the life you have led, to find answers to the questions: 'What kind of person did I grow up to be and what kind of person did I age into?' Addressing such questions is rarely pleasant and may even be traumatic. The image the old man sees in the mirror of his conscience is hardly reassuring: in his earlier life he had been a kind of insolvency practitioner, whose job was 'crunching numbers and writing analyses, reports, and recommendations', which provided a basis for some people to become monstrously rich while others slipped into dire poverty. As an eighteen-year-old border guard he had, in a different era, even killed refugees, and as a young man, he had once fled the scene of a road accident instead of stopping to help the injured. His entire knowledge of 'tricks' for getting by in life, ways to spin

and suppress the truth, and the futile self-deception that ‘candour is a matter of choice’ – all suddenly, as the disease progresses, sound like banal platitudes. The old man, clinically diagnosed with short-term memory loss, is eventually overtaken by the long-term memories he has buried in the distant past, memories of his unscrupulous and wrongful actions towards others – for you cannot run away from yourself or avoid the final accounting of your life.

So the man’s guilty conscience begins looking for solutions (and redemption) in socio-political activism, which is rooted in his inescapable awareness that ‘the world has better and worse sides; . . . that we are divided into people here and there, into those who have shoes and those who are barefoot, into the overfed and the starving’, and that eighty years is too long a time ‘especially if all you do is watch and think and talk’. To work, then! Right away he decides to sell his property, which we assume his solicitor, Adam, arranges, and to put the money into opening a home for underprivileged immigrants and refugees. The migrant theme, in keeping with the protagonist’s effort to clear his conscience, is presented in a moralistic, didactic way, almost grandly and heroically, to the extent that it casts the very best light on this instantaneous world-reformer. The entire project, too, in which all the novel’s ‘extras’ gradually become involved, is suffused with the noble and profoundly humanistic idea that it is never too late to help your fellow man and there are no good excuses for failing to act.

Nevertheless, the old man’s awareness continues to fragment and, in the third part of the novel, breaks down entirely – he is no longer capable of engaging in social interactions, does not know how to communicate with others, does not recognize the people around him,

confuses the coordinates of place, time, and space, and becomes increasingly alienated and anxiously paranoid, although he still believes that he has not yet 'lost his mind'. In keeping with the standard clinical progression of dementia, his earliest memories, of childhood and his parents, come back to him more and more often, and at several points in the novel he recalls his father's promise: 'Before you were born, you were a star in the sky. A teensy tiny little star. And when you die – but that will be a long time from now, because you are still a child – you will go back to the sky and be a star again.' Even in this basically realistic narrative, then, Pregelj does not renounce surrealist dreamlike elements and symbols, which are introduced into the story with great care and escalating power. In this way he illustrates the deterioration of the protagonist's external and, later, internal worlds – in the end, at the moment of his death, the hero and his beloved Konstanca ride a horse into the sky, up into the stars, from which stardust sprinkles down.

The fourth and last part of the novel frames a brief epilogue, which is spoken by a man who (we suppose) has been taking care of the old man: this man is with him during the last moments of his life and also tends to his corpse. But the identity of the new narrator is hardly unambiguous: he could be that strange (non-) acquaintance, the man with the beautiful face who 'might have been a woman', or he could be a reflection of the soul, as with almost biblical imagery and parlance he writes a new story of life: 'Bushes grow out of the [grave] mound, and then trees, with strong branches that break open the walls and lift the ceiling and open the sky. Birds arrive from the air, and dormice, weasels, martens, hares, and deer come running over the ground.' Before the reader's eyes, then, at the end

of this novel about the end, there opens a beginning: the cycle of life and death is complete but it is also dynamic, returning to the source again and again. The novel's four-part, seemingly linear structure thus circles around and becomes cyclical, bringing the reader back to the prologue, where, in the opening scene at the funeral, we find all those 'extras', who possibly were not simply a product of the deluded memory of a dementia patient. Alongside the protagonist's closest friends and acquaintances – dignified Konstanca and her daughter Rina, his solicitor Adam, Maks the chess player, Franc the caretaker's assistant, and the artist Bernard – we see an entire group from the migrants' home, which perhaps was not an imaginary building after all: the mourners include the cook Musa from Sudan, Rabia from Pakistan, Makemba Alisa from the Central African Republic, Joseph from the Philippines, and even Luminita from Romania, who was a central character in Pregelj's previous novel, *Under a Lucky Star*. It is, indeed, typical of Pregelj to employ small, repeating references, fragments of motifs, and individual characters that connect his body of work into a greater whole. Along with the Romanian Luminita, for instance, the mysterious retired police officer Kozma Breclj also turns up as an 'extra' in *Chronicle*: he was one of the main characters in Pregelj's first novel, *Years of Mercy*, and played a secondary role in *On the Terrace of the Tower of Babel*; in *Chronicle*, the policeman disappears under strange, unexplained circumstances, although his disappearance, and even his existence, may again be just a figment of the protagonist's deluded imagination.

At the start of my essay I drew a dividing line between the two narrative strains in Pregelj's corpus, but in fact all his novels share something more fundamental than the repetition of certain mosaic details: they are

always concerned with issues relating to memory and its manifestations, whether individual or collective, historical or private, damaged, suppressed, or embellished. Memory is also central to his seventh and most recent novel, *Dear Ali. Dear Elvis.*, in which he returns to memories of being a child, growing up, and experiencing the collapse of Yugoslavia, which left such a deep mark on people's lives. 'If *A Chronicle of Forgetting* was a collection of fragments from a scattered consciousness that blurred the border between fiction and reality, the novel *Dear Ali. Dear Elvis.* is a long reminiscence about living through a period of history that, against all hopes, affected the south-eastern part of Europe profoundly and tragically,' Ana Geršak writes. Pregelj views memory both as ontological to an individual's life and as a mirror of society, distorted in places but unbreakable, which thus surpasses the value of historical fact – most likely, this is because, as a historian by training, he knows that history, too, is dependent on the interpretation by the dominant elites. But our deeply internalized memories, which require self-reflection, are impossible to fool.

Regardless of where the writer next directs his pen, Sebastijan Pregelj – as the critic Tina Kozin has noted – is clearly an author with a remarkable ear for narrative and plot structure, its gradual escalation and at times extremely minute but never insignificant reversals. This is what allows him to capture the reader's attention and keep it to the very end, an open end that, deviating from the main narrative axis, often becomes a harbinger of something new. Something exciting. Positive and hopeful. Given such ability, it is hardly surprising that Sebastijan Pregelj is among those leading Slovene writers whose works delight not just literary critics but ordinary readers as well.

