

# The Metamorphic Vision of Uroš Zupan

*Richard Jackson*

I believe it was the late eighties, maybe 1990 at the Vilenica Writers' Conference. My friend Tomaž Šalamun pointed out this imposing figure, standing to the side, and said "he is going to be the major European poet of his generation. You need to meet him." It was Uroš Zupan. And of course Tomaž was right. It would be a few years before I really got to know Uroš and invited him to Chattanooga as a guest writer where he quickly attracted a following of students and writers. Another time we traveled from Piran to a small town in the east, sampling the food and talking poetry along the way. And yet another time he came as part of our university festival. I continue to know him as a major world poet and to be constantly impressed by his knowledge of poetries from around the world. In many ways it seemed he breathed poetry, and of course still does:

For me it's about poetry, long wild lines of poetry  
that gallop like horses through the traveler's longing,  
like cold, crystal clear water that I submerge in naked,  
poetry that gives me air,  
poetry that I can pound into the paper forever.  
Poetry measuring time, my time, our time,  
the only thing that sets milestones to our passing.  
("A Psalm—Magnolias in April Snow")

The talk ranged from O'Hara to Vallejo, Hölderlin to Whitman and he introduced me, as Tomaž and Iztok Osojnik did, to numerous Slovene poets. I had already read some poems in translation and was taken by the way sea, land and breath seemed to metamorphose into

one another. This, I soon learned, is an expansive poetry, often beginning with a small observation: “The real theme is always nearby,” he writes in “Writing Durable Poems.”

And durable they are, from his first book to this tremendous *Selected Poems*, always fluid, always giving us a personal voice as if sitting across the living room, while at the same time expanding that world into the Cosmos. I am reminded of Gaston Bachelard’s notion of an “intimate immensity.” The influences are many, as we can see in his well known poems like “Hölderlin’s Tower” and “Leaving the House We Made Love In.” So many poems begin in enclosures—lying in bed, sitting at a table—and then spiral outward. To achieve this the poems move at an easeful conversational pace: “The world is in slow motion, in tune with the morning steps” (“Valium”).

But let’s look more closely at an example. “Autumn Leaves 1” begins

An August morning still moving slowly, full of quiet  
recordings, outside motionless trees, big shaggy shapes.  
The upper side of the leaves starting to turn yellow

And takes us through several permutations that refer to other writers, history, movies, his wife’s pregnancy, art, speculations on an unborn son (which acts like a refrain), all coming together four sections later in lines that remind one of Coleridge’s “Frost At Midnight” where the seasons, the cosmos and the child (here also Zupan’s wife) are all linked:

Your belly becomes like a full moon  
grown onto your body. At night it glows in the dark. My  
hands  
never grow tired. And the time is approaching, inexorably.

The vision here is a kind of metamorphosis where images not only stand for one another as metaphors but seem to blend together

in a kind of metamorphosis, precisely the opposite of the “hermetic poetry” he rejects in the poem. As we see in other poems, sea, wind, mountains, rooms, windows, etc. all seem to be echoes of each other as perspectives on a larger world.

So many poems proceed this way beginning with a street name, water on a window, a quiet stream—and end with a cosmic vision. “Amber,” begins, for instance, with “An insect gets caught in amber. A house gets frozen / in time. Here’s where it all begins.” And then after realizing it could also be an end, and so positioning himself, as he often does, between past and future, he goes on to consider various aspects of time—evening, forgetting, echoes, recalling the shape of a body, the seasons—before placing himself and an other in one setting, using words to fling out visions that echo back but echo with a change, a strangeness. In this way the poem speaks to us as the amber does: old and new, repeated and different, and the poet achieves the kind of “grace” referred to earlier in the poem:

You and I remain sitting in the dark, committing  
our words to distant spaces, which then return as an  
echo, as the voices of people I’ve never known.

Early on, in fact, he ironically mentions in “Soap”—“We Slovenes have our eyes fixed on / transcendence, doubles, mirrors, the / cosmos.” And in “Thirty-Four” he begins “I’ve crossed the border. It didn’t hurt at all. / I don’t feel any different.” And ends:

The visa in my passport, like the breath of a traveler  
on the window of an express train being drawn  
into the night, grows fainter from one day to the next.  
But my vision reaches the stars.

What is crucial here is that Zupan’s metamorphic vision does not mean a metamorphosis or loss of the self. Indeed, to write such poems one must have a strong sense of identity. In fact, the sense of identity allows him to try on other voices and perspectives, which

also accounts for the wide range of references within even single poems. In “Autobiography” he says how he “felt at my side some other presence” that exists in the “afterlife of words,” and ends the poem:

My words are the words of somebody else.  
My body is the body of someone else.  
My name is more than a heteronym.  
Now, although I don't know  
where my beloved Ithaca is,  
I can say like Odysseus:  
I am Noman.

In “Art History for Beginners (Paul Cézanne speaks through my mouth and I speak through his),” we see Zupan’s sense of the artist—and of himself—emerging. Here he throws off theory and the academic interpretations of art and poetry as he has Cézanne and himself explain:

What matters is to know  
that theory is dead, that I’ve come to proclaim the dictatorship  
of light and herbs and that I used that canvas to cover the  
hen house,  
not because the painting had supposedly fallen short of  
perfection and  
drawn me into a mystical suffering, but so that the hens  
would stay dry.

There is a comic take down of ivory tower thinking here, a practical vision we see especially in the later, more domestic poems. We should also draw attention to the kind of wit displayed here and in several other poems. “I is another,” Rimbaud once wrote, and Zupan is in many ways the things and people that populate his poems. Having this sense of a stable self that can also thrust itself into various modes in the world also underlies his metamorphic vision.

It is obvious, of course, in the couple of sestinas that themselves are metamorphic in form, but take a small poem like “Coal” that begins “All the lamps in the room come to life, creating light / that slowly spreads over the window, deep blue.” The poem moves quickly to embrace clouds like tankers, Bach, the afterlife, a passing car, voices, children’s skyrockets and ends with the larger vision of “Someone is carefully adding on larger / and larger pieces of shiny black coal to the sky.” That movement from a lamp lit room to the dark sky reveals not only the metamorphic technique behind his expanding vision but also a sense of impending darkness that permeates the book. But it is a darkness constantly fought against. One way he accomplishes that sort of movement is linking perspectives through synesthesia as he does in “Saturation With Words”—“The hours / are soft and flexible and get caught on your skin and / wrist.” It is language itself, as we will continue to see, that pulls the poet along, even, as Charles Simic says, to places he never expected:

    this saturation with words  
    that begin to repeat a vanished world all  
    by themselves, even if you argue with them  
    and try to point them toward someplace else?  
    Is that the other place? The only real

    place? It has to be. It has to hang in the air  
    as consolation and an unfading reflection. Like the scent  
    of the flower that marked you and that you now recognize  
    as the only genuine flower.

Another technique, like the poet Frank O’Hara, is to fill the poem with digressions which after all are not mere digressions but all connect, albeit through seeming non-sequiturs, leaps, near surreal associations, tentatively connected references, chance events. Zupan explains the technique in a brief essay:

While any given poem is being written, and then again once it's written, much of what surrounds, influences and obsesses the poet at that particular moment gets preserved within it in the form of a kind of kinetic energy. This includes the spirit of the time and place in which the poet is writing and living, his life and his individual sense of well-being, who he associates with, who he sleeps with, what the weather is like outside, how old he is, what he's consuming... and in this category above all what he's reading, the sustenance that lifts the poet to a particular height and gives him a particular vantage point. This consists of various poetic and non-poetic (e.g., essayistic, prose, philosophical, mystical...) voices that the poet remixes anew, combines, links, throws into a pot (writing is analogous to cooking) and then with the help of his own sensibility as the one most critical ingredient turns it all into a unique, individual voice. (Zupan, "Chrysalis, Caterpillar, Butterfly: On Revising Poems")

What this technique fights against creates the central tension in the book: the onslaught of Time. There is a sense of loss, of parents, friends, a kind of innocence, and yet also a rebirth through imagination, through poetry itself:

I mourn for that which is lost.  
My heart beats and I try to persuade myself  
that what matters most is imagination entering  
onto the field of undefined things. It's a pleasure  
to wake up amid all their bustle and engage  
with the pauses that spread across it like  
quiet laughter, washed clean by sunlight.  
(*"Farewell to Philosophy"*)

That tension creates the power that is so apparent in Zupan's work. In "There Will Always Be Sadness" he focuses on Prešeren (1800–1849), Slovenia's great founding poet whose work remains

unsurpassed and definitive two hundred years later, but who died frustrated and unrecognized: “It was in that wooden bed, too small for him, but big / enough for the nation that Prešeren died,” Zupan begins, then quickly relates that image to a number of poets. What he laments is the seeming loss of their vision, that “[a]ll the battles and short-lived / victories have been gently, resignedly / surrendered to a few readers and unspeaking oblivion.” But the irony here is that Zupan himself is rescuing their work, at least in the poem, from oblivion. The poem then turns to expand on what this means to our own visions: “We’ll never uncover the full extent of / what we carry inside us: dreams and delusions.” But then when he mentions

... the precipitous  
path of the sun that guides us to some point and grows  
with our bodies, all of it mixed and bestowed  
in random, mysterious sequences...

the poem suddenly takes a turn, for while “[t]here will always be sadness. Always nearby. Always / leaning onto the air,” the poem also refers here to expanses, to stars, words, dreams. The poem ends by rescuing its own sad vision in lines that enact the very rescue of memory that poetry can achieve:

By pronouncing words we claim  
the dream we like best, but the unearthly whisper  
will catch up and announce itself only when we’re awake—  
open your eyes and with them gently connect to the world.

“Pronouncing”—that is the key here. As long as one can speak, as long as the poet can write, there is a triumph over time. Depression turns to conquest, at least until the next poem. This struggle becomes more and more obvious as the book progresses. Early on there are poems about love, various houses and writers, but increasingly father, wife, children begin to populate the book. It is as if their presence itself provides what Frost called a “momentary stay against confusion” or what Wordsworth called

spots of time

That with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A renovating virtue, whence—depressed  
By false opinion and contentious thought,  
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight,  
In trivial occupations, and the round  
Of ordinary intercourse—our minds  
Are nourished and invisibly repaired.

Writing on melancholy and depression Zupan ironically reports: “I’ve managed to avoid that carriage ride through tree-lined lanes illuminated by the autumn sun, because when I’ve crossed over to the dark side and seen those autumn colors blazing, I’ve passed straight into depression.” And yet, like Wordsworth writing and meditating on his famously long walks, Zupan writes “hours-long walks with my dog through the woods take me out of time and space, sheltering me from them [the darker forces].” Those darker moments are rare, he goes on to say, “[b]ut I have been nostalgic, and quite a few times, at that. And I find myself getting nostalgic more and more often.” This coincides precisely with the increasingly nostalgic poems in this *Selected Poems*, especially in the poems about his family. And yet, that too is something the poems work against, for to succumb entirely to nostalgia is to become sentimental, to simply wallow in the past. He goes on to explain:

...as a contemporary of mine has written, nostalgia is a trick of the mind that keeps whispering to us with unflagging insistence that we used to be happy and that the happiness, whether real or imaginary, that used to lead us by the hand but then moved someplace impossibly far away can still warm us and comfort us. Warm and comfort us even at a very great distance. Warm and comfort us here and now. In the moments that remain allotted to us. In the moments we have available to live. To live happily. (Zupan, “Melancholia... Then Again, Maybe Not (A Trick of the Mind)”) ”

This vision reminds me of Pavese, who also, and again like Wordsworth, deals with characters and events that could fall into sentimentality but instead expand their vision to provide a kind of aesthetic detachment. Those techniques I mentioned earlier, of association and digression, expand nostalgia into deep and complex emotions.

The perfect form for dealing with any measure of nostalgia is the sestina, as Zupan does in “Evening Train,” where he dreams he is leaving his home town, but on a Polish train and into the past, yet also forming a vivid present. “My thoughts are jumbled by an imaginary wind,” he writes. Nostalgia turns to a sense of confusion: “The train has no timetable. It has thousands of mirrors,” as the elements of the scene start to disintegrate and metamorphose where “the midnight sun shines on Trbovlje.” For a moment we are in a surreal world, and the poem is quickly followed by “Atlantis” and we feel we are moving into a surreal myth. However, while it begins in dream once again—one of the main vehicles Zupan uses to enter the past—it is a dream of an apartment building that embodies his own past:

On the stairs I run into strangers and  
outside the door to the apartment where we once  
lived I see that it's not our apartment,  
that mother and father have moved,  
that between their youth and old age they've traveled  
so far away that the building is barely a fragile dream  
that once displaced trees and grass.

From there he dreams of being out with friends from that past where they all have their faces from childhood except for him. That allows him to question “What's lost forever? / And what keeps coming back in distorted form.” Here we have gone beyond nostalgia to a questioning of reality and the passage of time. Thus he realizes “I moved alone through a dream / that was only my dream” and that he lives in the present, in “Tonight” as he repeats three times at the end along with forever, so that the present embraces all time, and all time

embraces the present, another example of what Wordsworth calls an expansive “spot of time.” In short, nostalgia collides with the reality of the now.

One poem, early on in the book, starts off as if it were a nostalgic plea for reconciliation with a father: “Let’s bite through the chains trapping our words, father, let’s melt / the iceberg of silence that looms up between us,” but the poem quickly becomes more a definition of the speaker’s self as distinct from the father. More than that, the poem is titled “A Psalm—Magnolias in April Snow,” and it turns into a prayer more than a simple plea, a vision hoped for where the father will forget his tawdry past and understand the son:

when you’ll be drinking beer somewhere alone and  
everything crumbles around you to bits and you say  
for the first time in your life to hell with it all,  
all that can wait,  
and for the first time in your life you’ll sense  
that there exists something else, something exceptional,  
some crescent moon overhead and some moments of brilliance  
that open us up like those magnolias  
in my dream, magnolias opening in the April snow.

That is an amazing turn for a poem to take. And it prefigures other poems. In “Locomotives” he remembers how “On summer evenings /... father or grandfather would take me to the strip mine to look at the train engines,” old and abandoned there. He wonders if he had climbed them, seen the world through them, but the memories “mingle” and their reality is lost. So he then moves to the present where he is returning to that past and place, now radically changed. But he also remembers a poet who suggests that poems should move forward like trains (trains figure importantly in Zupan’s work). This allows him to escape a simple nostalgic past as the poem moves to its stunning conclusion:

So far no one has returned from the other side  
to tell us. But it seems to me that in that poem the poet used  
the full force of art to  
choose a scene that had passed from his life into his dreams  
and  
from his dreams into some far more durable substance and  
form, into his  
verses.

Once again it is language, poetry that provides the poet with the complexity of vision to move beyond himself. And of course there are moments of nostalgia as when he wishes in “Autumn Leaves 1” that “When my father was in the hospital I wished / he could one day see my child.” And there are numerous tender moments as this with his wife and son: “The warm breath of our son kept trading glances / with your skin.” There are memories that fill him with wonder, with feelings of loss and with feelings of hope, of loved ones and friends won and lost. “First my aunt died, followed by grandpa” he writes in “Unearthly Fruit,” but their loss is redeemed when “muffled voices began to gather in the rooms / and the lights shone,” creating a vision where a “future is still making plans.” In every case Zupan finds, through the magnificent language of his poems, a masterful language that has grown through all his books and is on display here, a way to place his individual feelings in a larger, transcending context.

The penultimate poem, “The Dog in Summer,” begins with a sense of static repetition marked by the anaphora “Every year.” In this kind of timeless pastoral setting “[m]y daughter and I are stretched out on either side of the bed. / The dog naps at our feet.” One couldn’t hope for a more possible nostalgic scene. Yet each lives in their own world: the dog licks their feet, the daughter reads on her phone, Zupan reads a book. In fact he seems to be lost in the book as if in another imagined time. But in a typical turn for Zupan, the next stanza shifts to the outside reality where “a virus takes hold of the planet, living its double life.” A double life—just as they are, together and in their own worlds. And then yet another context enters—the

music of Glenn Gould and *The Goldberg Variations*. The reference is not accidental, Gould bent over close to the keys, humming, as if he has entered Bach's world, entered the music itself, become the music. And so "[f]rom out of the depths these lines come floating before my inner eye" as he synesthetically enters the music himself. As he thinks towards the future and the death we all face he concludes:

*I'm trying to find the most powerful antonym of mors.*

*And I think it's music. Music of the baroque.*

My daughter still doesn't grasp this. I grasp it more and more every day.

So what of the dog and of summer?

Neither one is ever bothered by this.

There is still that distance, but the word "still" suggests a future where she will understand. And the last two lines are masterful, for here he puts aside his worry and focuses on the incidental present, the everyday life. All that is left is the final, short poem, "A Secret Life," watched by dreams, by the dreams of the poet, as he has watched through this book.

There is one thing to add. You must read these poems carefully, enter them as Gould and Zupan enter the music. They will enrich you. They will bring you, as Stevens says, to a new understanding of reality. Your very being will undergo the kind of metamorphosis the poems enact.