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## A National and Linguistic Patchwork

*Matej Bogataj*

**A**ndrej E. Skubic is one of the rising stars of Slovene fiction. His first novel, *Bitter Honey* (*Grenki med*), won two awards: for best first novel at the annual book fair and the “Kresnik” prize for novel of the year. One of the reasons is that his writing has obviously excavated its way into the new social situation marked by globalisation, multiculturalism, mixed nationality and urbanisation. Writing about the latter could in some senses be described as a new phenomenon in Slovene literature, which has in recent years been the subject of much debate and polemics. Of course, one has to talk about something and what is probably involved here is a change of mindset, for in earlier periods there were definitely some urban writers, but their approach to urban life was completely different. We are familiar with portrayals of urban life from the pre- and post-War eras, for example in the writing of Miran Jarc and Mira Mihelič, while the narratives of Peter Božič or Lojze Kovačič also take place in towns, but in the Sixties, so that the small town environment is characterised not by the disco or ‘alternative’ bar, but by socialist cafes and shabby temporary residences or, at best, sleazy bars with bad service, the gathering places of the lumpenproletariat. Skubic is thus one of the highest profile writers portraying the new, fast, unpredictable and changing face of the urban environment and the position in it of the individual on the cusp of the new millennium – plus all that goes with it, such as the transition from schnapps to drugs, from jazz to techno and ‘turbofolk’, as well as the diversification of sexual practice and a kind of new romanticism – shown above all through descriptions of the social margins. Let us not forget that the downtrodden and the excluded have long been the privileged vessels of beautiful souls which, the dirtier the mess that surrounds them and in which they are submerged, the brighter they shine.

In most of his work, Skubic deals with the social and mental margins, so that it is neither surprising nor coincidental that his prose continually addresses the problem of the divide between the local and the foreign. This tension between the familiar, the warmth and security with which we identify, and the danger of the unknown 'out there' is also a frequent theme of Drago Jančar's stories, such as the novel *Mocking Lust* (*Posmehljivo poželenje*), in which the hero, when finally returning to his homeland, feels his heart flutter at the image of the church on the hill, that typical, clichéd, easily-recognised Slovene motif; or he finds himself in a foreign metropolis, where he is seduced by a lady of the night and dragged into an apartment where he is robbed and then, snivelling, calls his mother for help. Facing the world at large is common enough in Slovene prose: not only the daring and juicy erotic submersions and raids on the genitalia from Andrej Morovič's collections *Divers* (*Potapljači*) and *Parachutists* (*Padalci*), but also Polona Glavan's *Night in Europe* (*Noč v Evropi*), a novel about InterRail travellers, a new, unscrupulous and nomadic generation. At the end of the latter prose omnibus, a collection of fragments from a journey showing what happens to various unconnected individuals on a train, all set off optimistically for a bright new future. The last few sentences of the novel indicate that this is a victorious generation before which the whole world will bend its knee. It seems that Skubic's short story *I'm not getting on that train* (*Nočem s tem vlakom*) from the collection *Madhouse* (*Norišnica*, 2004) is a direct response to Glavan's novel, is in fact locked in an intertextual clinch with it: Vladimir, a retired teacher and, over-portly even in his own estimation, so much so that it must be true, travels by train, but to him only strange things happen, from a dead pigeon that accompanies him from one European capital to another, to the smoked sausage that he whips out in front of the conductor or indeed anybody else every time a painful, hallucinatory encounter happens, or when the whole affair could develop into a more enticing, erotic adventure.

On the other hand, Skubic's prose works away at the local and the domestic, digging into the most characteristic cultural intersections in order to move them away from the most stereotyped and judgemental viewpoint. Thus the novel *Bitter Honey* (1999) presents a group of foreigners – translators

and language revisers – in Ljubljana, plus a heroine who has a cracked, schizophrenic identity, offering us both locals (Slovene readers themselves) and an international group of individuals who are willing to accept that the borders of their world are the borders of their language and thus go as marginals to the edge of their empire, as in Ovid's *Ex Ponto*, an unattractive transfer to the edge of Europe. And yet the city that they experience is at the same time the Ljubljana we know from stories that are actually in circulation and accounts of titillating but verifiable events, although not exactly as described here. *Bitter Honey* is a translation novel not only because it deals with individuals from that profession – a large number of the characters are translators for a firm operating between English and Slovene – but also because much of its linguistic substance is based on misunderstanding, on what is lost or gained in translation, either through simple error, or literal translation, or on different mentalities coming together and bouncing off each other, all of which are perceived through language, and so the circle is complete.

The very title of the novel *Fužine Blues* (*Fužinski bluz*, 2001) plays with both the marginal and the local: Fužine is first of all a large housing estate on the edge of Ljubljana, where in the 1970s workers from the other republics of the then Yugoslavia were given council flats leading, it is said, to certain conflicts, some of them amusing in a way and some of them less so. Thus it came to be said – and widely believed, not without a hint of malice – that at first the inhabitants of the new blocks of flats threw their bathtubs out of the bathrooms to make room for their farm animals; and there is a joke about Fužine, in which this guy, boasting in front of his relatives, says the flat is great but that every time he goes to take a drink from the well he bangs his head on the lid. At the same time, the Slovene word *bluz* not only refers to the lament-prone music, but is also short for the verb *bluziti*, which means to act confused, out of it, slightly mad – especially in reference to those who are a little crazy from grief or from narcotic substances; it conjures up a sentiment, a way of feeling the world.

*Fužine Blues* takes place in a single day – the day of a historic football match between Slovenia and Yugoslavia – on an estate where the water is turned off; it revolves around four

characters who live in the same block of flats, who come into contact with each other, but whose stories never really interconnect, neither on this day nor any other. They encounter each other only in passing, and it is unlikely that they will ever have any closer or more significant contact.

There are days that are unforgettable: like the day the Berlin Wall fell or, for those of us who grew up under the previous system, that day in May in the early 1980s when, with the death of its long-time President, our common state irrevocably entered its final phase of agony. Such concentrated moments often find their way into literature: one of the selections of Slovene prose in English was entitled *The Day Tito Died* (*Dan, ko je umrl Tito*); the writer Vinko Möderndorfer's narrator, in London, after a few drinks, celebrates the day when the United States recognises his new country's independence, in a suitably sentimental, even pathos-filled manner. Some such days are the product of literature themselves: for example, Bloomsday, the day described in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, is actually celebrated in Dublin, the city where it takes place.

Here, we should not forget that Skubic is one of the rare translators of parts of *Finnegan's Wake*. A fan, one might say.

Skubic's 'historical day', his D Day, is a day when conflict is transferred from the political and military-propaganda level to that of sport, to the sports field. Football is in this case the pursuit of war by other means, the similarities with a real conflict being underlined by the excessive use of explosive fireworks.

The novel is written as an omnibus of four interconnected stories and one could trace, on a model of *Fužine*, at any particular time, where a particular character is, how near to the others, whether they could observe each other, and so on. It seems that, more than the present, they are characterised by what happened to them in the past – what they each have to live with – which they do with varying degrees of success; their personal histories weigh them down like the dead on the shoulders of the living.

Skubic defines them in a number of ways. There is no objective, external narrator in *Fužine Blues* – although the protagonists sometimes appear to us through the consciousness of others, there are many brief and incidental encounters, dreams of each other, minds connecting. And in spite of them

living in close proximity, there is only minimal face to face contact and that is of a restrained nature. At the same time, the novel contains a myriad congruent facts involving, for example, numbers of condoms or stairs, while the author himself draws attention to the fact that the quotes at the heads of chapters are of a heavy metal character because Pero, an ex-heavy metal fan and would-be singer is, in spite of everything, more of a narrator than the other characters. One might say the first among equals.

As everything happens in only one day, Skubic defines his characters not by actions and developments, but by what enters their minds: through their personal selection of what attracts their attention, their prioritising of events, their choices, their experiences, their pasts – in short, with everything that represents their personal mythology. All of the characters, including the minor ones, live beneath a vault of their own urban myths, as they are referred to by Adam, the never-to-be lover of one of the main characters; they have constructed a value system, an understanding of the modern urban lines that they may not cross. They cannot fully accept and understand the chaos of reality: some things remain on the margins of their experience, enticing, incomprehensible, strange – that which they avoid at all costs, but which insinuates its way into their thoughts and observations, into their awareness. There it grows, gains weight, raising obsessive questions regarding what might have been. These are not big stories: they have much in common with jokes or anecdotes, triggered by a real event which, with time and telling, takes on different nuances and a new breadth, in which, as a rule, the teller is always more heroic, noble, brave, witty – distanced. It is characteristic of myths that, through stories featuring archetypal situations, the individual maintains his links with the world. The characters in *Fužine Blues* try out such stories, which they are convinced are appealing to the listener, as a way of drawing others' attention, of standing out from the crowd, of creating a specific role for themselves, so as not to melt indistinguishably into the mass.

Typical of such stories is one involving self-immolation, which is then reflected in the burning of the daughter of a couple selling a flat; or the minor collision of two cyclists in a pedestrian zone; another is Zoki's description of how his wife, on the stairs, encounters three young people, partly naked,

engaged in oral sex, who, to his great surprise, feel not the slightest shame, but on the contrary defend what they are doing as something completely normal. The reason why the storyteller is obsessed by this tale, and why he is always on the lookout for new opportunities to tell it, can be found in his desire that the incident was taking place elsewhere, with him as a participant rather than a spectator. That the erotic is everywhere, even on your doorstep, is the message the story offers him and Zoki, under pressure from his wife to earn more, apparently fails to hear this siren song, which is why the incident occupies him all the more.

Sixteen-year-old Janina, the daughter of a Montenegrin immigrant, is most exercised by the fact that, in a fast-moving, crude and opaque world, from among the numerous men and boys that make themselves available to her and examine her, she must choose the one that will offer her gentleness and friendship, while exploring with her the paths of sexuality. So engaged, she checks her group membership and searches for her identity, including her nationality, as is apparent from her language which, depending on her interlocutor and the emotional loading of the situation, veers from almost pure Montenegrin to urban Slovene rich in the foreign words loved by teenagers; her use of language is also at times a method of rebellion, of distancing herself from the actions of others. In the end, not too surprisingly, she finds the one who best understands her, at the same time finding a solution to the problem of the most appropriate erotic partner – her best friend. Her experience is that guys, and good-looking ones at that, fall for her neighbour, while no-one likes her.

Pero, former heavy metal freak, never expected that his group of friends would either die or waste their lives or fall into drug addiction, which within their value system was unacceptable. Or that they would become respectable, living the kind of grown-up, well-ordered life that, from his marginalised viewpoint, seems materialistic, self-serving and a sellout. He remembers the fights between them and other groups, as well as the unrestrained alcoholic parties, and simply cannot get over his unexpressed love for Irena, so he slides into fantasising and boozing, always alone, reduced to monologue, which leads to social isolation, and then madness, delirium and the collapse of any grasp on reality. His repeated refrain that there

is too little mindless violence in the world points to the inner conflict that erupts in hallucinations full of blood and violent revenge.

Igor Ščinkavec is a former bus driver now working as an estate agent, a nervous type who appears self-confident, a pragmatic breadwinner, seemingly unsentimental, excitable, convinced that he is the cleverest one around and that he occupies the middle ground, prone to conflict, aggressive, a member of the lower-middle class who is certain that he is on the way up. He shows a high level of national awareness, primarily at the level of mouthing off, which is what he is best at, although he is also concerned about children and about his family – in a patriarchal, mafioso kind of way, for family is the only thing that can arouse feeling in him. And because of that, his eruptions in this respect are all the more impetuous and thus dangerous, as well as sentimental: for example, his disproportionate rage when his daughter has a minor accident on her bike or his empathy with a client whose daughter's body was set on fire. Of all the Slovene literary characters he is most similar to Vojko Pujšek from the trilogy of novels *Bloody Hell* (*Porkasvet*), *To Drive You Crazy* (*Za znoret*) and *Rožencvet* by Zoran Hočevár, an author who, along with Skubic, has striven to bridge the gap between spoken and written Slovene.

Vera, a retired university professor of Slovene, is marked above all by the fact that some, such as her former neighbour, relate to her not as a highly educated academic, but rather as a woman, as a body which, through sexual repression, she has not been able to come to terms with in an appropriate way, for she has failed to incorporate the erotic into her view of the world. Any possible ambiguous invitation into a different, unbridled sexual role and the inability to ever express the dilemma with which she feels herself faced have acted upon her as a mental block, have burdened her with an inexpressible and almost incomprehensible secret that has, among other things, caused the collapse of her marriage. Now she goes, after fifteen years, to seek answers to the questions she was then unable to ask. For her, reality is synonymous with language: she retreats into clichés about the threat to Slovene and, with it, the national essence in general, while her subconscious is saturated by the language material that she soaks up in passing, for instance when travelling on the bus. For

this reason her reality is the most graphically presented, through the use of different fonts.

*Fužine Blues* jumps from one chain of interior monologue to another. The stories are not completely separate, they do not stand entirely alone, but are interlinked, even though the fates of the main characters are not. It is the approach used by Polona Glavan in *Night in Europe* or by Igor Šterk in the film *Ljubljana*, and it is obviously suited to capturing the fast-moving, (sometimes only superficially) urban environment and life within it. Above all, we see the lack of contact between people, their isolation and non-communication, while society is shown as fragmented into small, closed groups. In *Fužine Blues*, reality is filtered through four distinct and hierarchically equal streams of consciousness, in which we have to contend with distortions of reality, with self-censorship and with self-aggrandisement.

The most characteristic instance is the only scene that is described twice: when Ščinkavec goes up to the Paškovič brothers and Mirkovič during the broadcast of the football match. We see the scene once from Ščinkavec's point of view and then from Pero's unbiased viewpoint, although because of his weak grasp of reality this cannot be described as objective. The difference is striking: Ščinkavec sees himself in a more heroic light, coming out of it much better, whereas in Pero's version he is soiled and humiliated, grovelling and submissive. Probably this scene is a key to the objectivity of all the others, in which the most subjective and distorted are those parts with which we encounter shifts in awareness, marginal states involving hallucination or sexual obsession. As each individual observes the external world it is as if it intrudes into their subconscious, while it seems that the perceived reality has cracks in it and that sensation triggers associations which they are unwilling to pursue or incapable of so doing. Skubic deals with this in a masterful and artful way by using breaks in the stream of consciousness, with unfinished sentences to show us where they have stopped, becoming distracted or obsessed.

In Skubic's novels *Bitter Honey* and *Popcorn*, which deals with phantasms in post-transitional capitalist times, as well as in his translations, such as *Trainspotting*, we have been able to admire his feeling for language, for the vernacular that deviates from high, literary linguistic norms and characterises those

speaking it. *Fužine Blues* widens these possibilities, as we find ourselves in an area where various linguistic variants are intertwined: speakers shift from one sociolect to another, use slang and, above all, foreign words invade the language; there are constant echoes of foreign languages, a complete promiscuity of all possible linguistic variants existing in parallel, overlapping in the speakers themselves. It seems that Skubic has succeeded in both writing literature while setting up a recording session to help the reader recognise urban and suburban linguistic conglomerates and the mixtures thereof. The fact that not long ago a shortened and (probably) popularised version of Skubic's doctoral thesis in socio-linguistics was published in book form only serves to re-confirm that theory and practice rarely, but sometimes very full-bloodedly and without conflict, cohabit under the same narrative roof.

In the collection of short stories *Madhouse* (2004), which all seem to have come from the same source as *Fužine Blues*, and some of them at about the same time, we notice something similar: again, there are the linguistic margins, the mixing of different cultures, such as for example the meeting of the woman from Ireland with a Slovene guy in Cadiz, where he boasts of all the things he has experienced, while she confesses to him in tears that her parents left the country because of Bloody Sunday and that the whole Slovene war story with its half dozen deaths and a bit of broken glass is just crap, something insignificant, unworthy of comparison. Another similarity is Skubic's focus on the bilingualism of his characters, the mixing of languages, the influence of one language on another and the places where various mixtures are used in everyday life. The dramatic excerpt from the story *An experiment with an apple* (*Preizkus z jabolkom*), fully written in dialogue, is typical here: at school, the Serb Goran is asked, supposedly to raise awareness of and familiarity with other cultures, why his people celebrate Christmas at the beginning of January and whether they eat anything special, as if this was a meeting between civilisation and a member of an anthropologically still unresearched tribe. Another example is the part where the young narrator, the child of immigrants from the former Yugoslav republics, falsely reports his Slovene neighbour for trying to drive him out of the country, and the father, who has been in Slovenia for forty years, totally loses his

cool, shouting and insulting the neighbours, who react perfectly normally, as you do with an irate neighbour. We all have our bad days, don't we?

*Madhouse*, too, supports Skubic's third obsession – with marginal states. Reality is constantly fragmenting, falling apart and it is very difficult to determine its borders and transitions. It seems that Skubic is radically modernist with respect to this: no longer in the sense of deconstruction and analysis of the language, but as a seeker of those transitions where certainty about the world flows into complete incomprehension. One of Skubic's favourite techniques is a milder version of the internal monologue, but his versions have more to do with Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*: the schizophrenic nature of individuals has since Joyce's heroic times come a long way, and Skubic remains firmly on this path in his latest novel *Popcorn*, in which the main character at first tries to market bloody historical chapters – staging torture and murder scenes for visitors thirsty for such tourist attractions – while fantasising about his neighbour and the whole affair comes suspiciously close to pursuit and violence, while in the denouement, in the style of *Natural Born Killers*, he and the girl flee from a department store because she has just shot a security guard. The recognisable elements of Skubic's writing are states of mind or of being, the status of which are difficult to determine and which escape reality although they strangely resemble it, as well as the transitions between these states.

Let us conclude with the following: Ana Lasić produced a dramatisation of *Fužine Blues*, which was staged in Ljubljana by Ivana Djilas. Both women are Serbian “gastarbeiters”, who are very familiar with contacts between cultures. At the premiere, after we had all been convinced that Fužine was nothing special, just an ordinary, perfectly normal housing estate, the Mayoress of Ljubljana, who comes from the political left, exclaimed that she, too, was from Fužine, and we did not know whether it was something akin to JFK's proclamation “Ich bin ein Berliner” or whether she was just telling us where she lived so that somebody could give her a lift home.

*Translated by David Limon*

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## Biography

**A**ndrej E. Skubic was born in 1967 in Ljubljana. He finished his studies in Slovenian and English at the University of Ljubljana in 1995, and his PhD in Slovenian sociolinguistics at the same university in 2004.

He has been publishing short stories in Slovenian literary magazines since 1990. His first novel, *Grenki Med* ('Bitter Honey'), was published in 1999 and won the 2000 Kresnik Award for the novel of the year, as well as the Slovenian Publishers and Booksellers prize for best first book. His second novel, *Fužinski Bluz* ('Fužine Blues'), appeared in 2001 and was nominated for the Kresnik award in the following year. It has been translated into Czech and Serbian and dramatised by the Slovenian National Theatre in 2005. In 2004, his first collection of short stories *Norišnica* ('The Madhouse') was published to critical acclaim, while the non-fiction book *Obrazi Jezika* ('The Faces of Language'), based on his PhD thesis on social dialects, was published in 2005. His last novel is *Popkorn* ('Popcorn', 2006), the winner of the Cankarjeva Založba contest for the best novel on the topic of contemporary life. It won the Župančič Award 2007 and was shortlisted for the 2007 Kresnik Award.

His short stories have appeared in various literary magazines in English (*Edinburgh Review*, Edinburgh), Czech (*Host*, Prague), Croatian (*Sarajevske sveske*, Sarajevo), German (*Literatur und Kritik*, Vienna), Hungarian (*Jelenkor*, Pecs), Polish (*Portret*, Olsztyn), Russian (*Vsemirnaja literatura*, Minsk) and Macedonian (*Naše pismo*, Skopje), and have been widely anthologised.

Skubic has translated several Irish, Scottish, American, Croatian and African authors (Flann O'Brien, Irvine Welsh, Enda Walsh, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Borivoj Radaković, Gertrude Stein, James Kelman, Ken Saro-Wiwa)

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and edited a number of anthologies and readers. He received the 2007 Sovre award for his translations of James Kelman and Gertrude Stein.

Andrej E. Skubic is currently a freelance writer and lives in Ljubljana.

*Contributed by the author*