

Coprire con una coperta
le membra infreddolite.
Entrare
nell'enclave monastica
del buio e del silenzio.
Andare lontano.
In capo al mondo.
Al confine dei sogni e dei non sogni.
E magari
ancora più lontano.

... and your mouth rediscovered the meanings of the forgotten languages of Babel

Every conversation with no matter which poetry, every approach to the texture of an individual poem, series or collection, not to mention larger bodies of work, is an undertaking with no stability in its starting point, and none of the self-evidence and self-sufficiency which are brought to some other disputations and which might be, at least conditionally, useful in the analysis of the epic literary forms. The fragile, delicate, and transparent structure of each poem, of each part of a poem, even of each word or metaphor in it, will not allow such treatment. And something else happens, a paradox, especially if we try to approach a poem without any extensive or complex theoretical system: The better we feel we know it and the more it seems to open up and give itself to us in all its mysteries, the more it is in reality opaque and enigmatic, caught in the mazes of unique meanings and sounds which compose its skeleton and which can be indicated and described only by its author in the special language of auto-reflexive "metapoetry", while everyone else can only approach it up to a certain point which remains a point *outside the poem*. This is the point from which we draw all our real and false knowledge, make all our conjectures and assumptions, and interpret all the elements of a poem's structure. This is also the point from which we view the inner artistic symmetry of a poem. And last but not least, this is the point in which our experience and that of the poem can meet in a unique and exceptional way. Only these fragile and deceptive realizations, not confirmed by anything, always

outlined on the horizon of the "assumption", guide our perceptions and register our declarations related to a certain poem and poetry as its "home". Thus the recurrent misunderstandings between poetry and criticism are merely proof of these statements. Those who manage - on the side of both poets and critics - to put up with their delusory unreliability, those who can face a poem in this way, possess at least a little wisdom to bring to a conversation, which may in turn grow into a creative dialog.

It is therefore with mixed emotions that I tackle the present article, which will attempt to outline and comment upon the four-language selection of poetry by Kajetan Kovič, one of those twentieth century Slovene poets without whom the skies of contemporary Slovene lyrical poetry would be considerably darker, and its memory of poetry much poorer. This is not caused only by the above mentioned awe-filled caution with which I have probed the texture of all manner of poetry for the past three decades, but also by the fear that I might relate to the particularly attentive and favorably disposed readers from other cultures and with other literary historical experience of the nature and effect of poetry, something which will seem self-evident, and fail to mention something which is (for them) essential and fatal, a Baudelarian "secret liaison" (correspondence) which unites poetry and its reader, admirer, and fuses them into a new functional whole. Perhaps I am perplexed by this very fact, enhanced by the ever present, and in these moments intensified, memory that at the beginning of my career as a literary theoretician and essayist I encountered Kovič's collection *Firewater* (1965), which was not only one of my first really independently chosen and inspiring high-school readings and incredibly, breathtakingly different from what the educational sagacity of the time had to offer, but also the subject and material of one of my first (unpublished) attempts at Slovene poetry criticism.

The first attempt did not remain the last; ever since that

crucial collection in Kovič's poetic arc, I have been following his poetry systematically from collection to collection, from selection to selection, including a few of his collections in translation, and I therefore dare claim without modesty that my conversation with it has opened up for me at least a few views which might be called more than merely ephemeral, although I am also aware (which is further confirmed by any return, including the present one, to Kovič's poetry) that real poetry is an inexhaustible source of forever new secret liaisons, forever new and more profound acquaintance with the worlds it sings of, in which it is born and where it is headed. A new reading of a poem is also a new conversation with its author. Everything that is indicated and said is just a shred of what poetry communicates in its entirety, but in such a way that every poem is a new and different way of writing, designing and understanding this entirety.

The task is made all the more difficult by the fact that the poet, himself a connoisseur of Slovene and European poetic traditions and practices, a translator from German, and also an expert on the issues of the literary theories which preoccupy our time, has compiled in four languages four collections which share just a minority of poems, the majority of them appearing in only two or three collections, with some poems chosen individually for the four selections. This also means that the focal points of these selections differ with respect to individual collections: The German and Spanish selections consist mainly of poems published in the *Labrador* and *Summer* collections and new, as yet unpublished poems, while the English and Italian selections are also comprised of poetry from *The Roots of Wind* and *Firewater* collections and from the *Anemones* selection. Even if one is not an expert on poetry, particularly in translation, this selection principle raises a number of questions which exceeds the scope of this exposition but can not be completely ignored, as the issues deserve mention: That one's acceptance of and sensitivity to individual

poets and their poetry is to a great extent independent of their true value, and to an equally great extent dependent on a myriad of other factors, sometimes (and not only sometimes) also on factors that at first glance have no real or logical connection with poetry and its substance. How this or that poet is received in this or that culture and national literature is unpredictable and subject to change with time and historical conditions. The present four-language collection of Kovič's poetic creation and his commentary takes these facts into account, thus perhaps complicating the problem four-fold. It also raises further questions of translating and "translating" certain points of meaning salient in the source language into other, Germanic and Romance, linguistic systems and the corresponding reception, which can not avail itself of tradition and history, semantics and melody, which all form part of the reader's reception of the original, but must seek matching equivalents in the target languages of the translations.

In short: There is a profusion of questions raised by the selections, for both Slovene connoisseurs of Kovič's poetry and its potential readers, questions that meet not only on the "communicative" level, but also, perhaps paradoxically, on the level of the fundamental "poetic components" that Kovič's body of work grows from.

Therefore it is proper to attempt to establish at least a few basic traits which determine the image of Kovič's prosody from his poetic development, which has in almost half a century undergone a number of phases whose characteristics can not be ignored.

Kajetan Kovič made his debut in the anthology **Four Poets** (1953), a book which represented, together with some other public literary acts of the then young Slovene literary generation born around 1930, one of the watershed deviations from the imperative aesthetic canons of socialist realism, adopted from the Soviet model by the Slovene Communist ideologists. The collection of the four poets' work (apart from Kovič, it presented Ciril Zlobec, Janez Menart, and Tone

Pavček) is only seemingly unified, or, its unity is apparent above all in the urge to reveal and articulate intimate poetic problems which finally buried the image and the ideal of the externalized Collective Man, replacing it with the wounded, troubled individual, lost in a world of numerous mysteries, labyrinths and disasters. After **Four Poets** each poet followed his individual poetic path; Kovič's might be the most specific one and the one most devoted to steadfastly seeking an aesthetic absolute, as much as this can be verbalized in the language of poetry. The two subsequent Kovič's collections (**Premature Day**, 1956, and **The Roots of Wind**, 1961) can be termed the poet's intensive "training period", when not only all the most important fields of meaning of his lyrical poetry took shape, but also his specific poetic expression was formed, based on contrast and paradox, on the incompatible (and inseparable) disparity of two notions, elements and qualities. In his panoramic survey of Slovene lyrical poetry (**Slovene Lyrical Poetry 1945 - 65**, Ljubljana 1967), Boris Paternu described **The Roots of Wind** collection:

The Roots of Wind represents a considerable improvement and inner crystallization of Kovič's poetry. Here he has finally exceeded the bounds of the melancholically passive, in many ways still traditionally romantic disillusionment, and opened up to alienating dissonances, while at the same time challenging them and in his way subduing them.

These are also the elements which marked the core of Kovič's above mentioned turning-point collection **Firewater** (1965), but the poet intensified the relation between the lyric subject and his position in the world to the utmost. After three collections of selected poems (**Anemones**, 1970, **Poems**, 1973, **A Small Reader**, 1973) Kovič again surprised us with another crucial collection. **Labrador** was published in 1976, in the middle of a decade usually referred to as the "leaden seventies" due to the final attempt of the Communist Party's systematic repression of Slovene culture. With its poetic topics the collection responded to the deaf time in the only suitable way: It

spoke of man's hope. While prior to that, Kovič had used predominantly free verse, his poetic messages in **Labrador**, with the exception of the first three cycles, are also formally subject to a solid structure in terms of poem, stanza and rhyme, which indicates Kovič's approach to the poetry of Postmodernism, although he maintains all the while his original emotions and raises issues outlined in the fields of meaning created in his first creative period.

Two new collections of selected poems (1976, 1981) were followed by the **Lands** (1988) and **Summer** (1990) collections, which represented a new phase in terms of form and meaning and at the same time, a noticeable shift in Kovič's poetry. Familiar questions and familiar fields of meaning are formally further purified, crystallized, while in his newly organized speech everything redundant seems to fall off, all the ballast of former times; the collection most enriched in its content with new variations of topics is **Summer**, about which I wrote the following when I reviewed it on publication:

The Summer collection may have most approached the severity and inner tension of Labrador, but its starting point has shifted in many respects, its manner of presentation is purged, its poetic means are more rational and dedicated to the space of wonder springing from between the modernist subject and his postmodernist shadow, verbalized and referentially fixed by the poet's various starting points.

Between two new collections of poems, **Seasons** (1992) and **The Hunter** (1993), there is a third collection which corresponds both to **Labrador** and **Summer**, viz. **The Siberian Cycle** (1992), marking a transition to a new period which could be called a consistent and systematic survey of all the essential poetic, axiological and ontological issues previously engaging Kovič's poetry. To this should be added his new poems from his latest period, published in magazines or still in manuscript form, which significantly complement the selections in the four languages (the poems **Die Ablöse**, **Rain**, **Die**

Veteranen/Los veteranos, Noch habe Ich nicht/No me dormí bastante, Windslob, Ich ergreife die Flucht/Me escaparé, Die Trauer/La tristeza, Diese späten Zimmer/Estos cuartos tardíos, and Die Züge/Los trenes).

All that has been said so far only broaches the most exposed issues through which Kovič's lyrical poetry encounters the eternal questions of the significance and role of poetry, its status and essence, which became particularly numerous in the twentieth century: Has poetry reached its "end", has Plato's more than two-thousand year old thesis that poetry makes man diverge from the essence of things thus been confirmed, has its essence been wholly drained into existence, which in turn retreated with finality from the area of other existences, thus becoming actually nonexistent for man, merely a beautiful thing, a mere linguistic modus incapable of changing anything in reality any more? Furthermore, can language, which is aware only of its penetrating, almost aggressive transcendence but forgetful of its earthly origin, its limitations, its usability, express the radical and intensified sensations and feelings triggered in humanity by the horror of the Holocaust? These and related questions speak in favor of the assumption that the classical "romantic" poetic structures can no longer be persistently summoned, but new landscapes must be sought where poems can settle, while at the same time enough courage and adroitness must be displayed so that they can be humanized. And this is where the basic "mood" of Kovič's poetry lies hidden, particularly in the poems comprising **Labrador**, or those of a later date.

However, a summary overview of Kovič's poetry, despite the implicit raising of such and similar questions, describes primarily the shifts in contents and formal complexes of individual periods and collections, while the field of meaning of his poetry can be presented to the reader only by topic complexes and their variant examples.

Four poems, **The Water of Life**, **The Little Boy**, **A Visit**,

Mon père, are included in all four selections. The first one, **The Water of Life**, could perhaps be called the trademark of Kovič's lyrical poetry, since its structure unites contrasts whose active presence is actualized in the poem and thus placed into new relations; of a former realization, written in the anthology poem **Firewater** - *The world is firewater* - only hopeful knowledge remains - *I am the water of life* -. An incomplete, "half" self, who has forever "lost" his opposite and his other half. And this is a specific homage to poetry which enables us to feel in things, objects, notions beneath the rough skin of their everyday meanings, a new presence of matter, the miraculous matter they are composed of. The contrasts in their dynamism form a basis for "poetic work": A frequent subject of Kovič's poems is an insight into poetry (**Regole del gioco, Verteidigung der Dichter, Das Ende des Buches, A Visit**). We are always transported into a world of special freedom: *Poets may live freely/ And irresponsibly. (Verteidigung der Dichter)*, but also of bitter disappointment (**The Unpleasant Message**).

Another poem, **A Visit**, also represents one of the fundamental insights into Kovič's poetry; it addresses the basic auto-poetic problems: How to persevere in the hope which is brought but also withdrawn with every poem, how to overpower the voice of eternity with words, how to return to the state of innocent, childlike ignorance and trust. Kovič's wondering about the essence of poetry in a world which has renounced poetry is not in the least tragic, since he always bases it on childlike guileless ignorance, on hope which grows from an unpredictable game into a poignant defense of one's own and the other's existence.

This very issue of innocent childlike ignorance, which is the (light shedding) key to every poem, is placed into the core of the poem **The Little Boy**. The poet's return to childhood is a return to a landscape of *blue* and *dark voices*, which through its contrasts, through the dynamic opposites, through the rhetoric of seemingly superfluous questions settled in the harsh

present, again seeks its pure, genuine starting point, which is also the central subject of the **Elderberry Hours** cycle (poems from this cycle are absent only in the German selection), where the images of childhood and childlike images are again contrasted with the realizations of a mature view, no longer sheltered by the *elderberry hours*, but given over to the *anguish of eternal light*.

Childhood is the first memory of the expiration, the flow of time. Childhood is also the first memory in which a *you* appears next to the *I*. From this childhood memory eroticism is born, which also typically marks Kovič's poetry. **Navi dorate** (one of the anthological poems from the **Firewater** collection) speaks of the *sacred violence of love*, while the poem **Das Land der Ölbäume/Il paese degli ulivi** subjects the eroticism to a mature view, where the relations between the lyrical subject and the loved one grow to an unimaginable, almost inexpressible intensity, marked by a concise, nominal language. This image of eroticism, torn between oneness and multiplicity, is complemented by the cycle **Ballads of Brother and Sister (Laborador)**, which are virtually untranslatable into other languages due to their metric structure.

The fourth poem, **Mon père**, does not only express realizations concerning the eternal relations between generations, but also speaks of the anguish which settles within the sense of emptiness after the termination of existence: **Mon père, / There was no one like you. / So alone, / So mine, / So father, / Lost in this world / Like me**. A number of other poems - **Noch habe Ich nicht / No me dormí bastante, Ich ergreife die Flucht / Me escaparé, Die Ablöse, Die Züge / Los trenes** - place us in the space of time running out, which the poet halts with words of a pure incantation, and transforms into a touching structure of the relation between the lyrical subject and the *quiet wasting of the world*. The poem **Time Flow**, caught in nautical metaphors, intensifies the sensation evoked by **Mon père** with its symbolic language, and its perception of a being on

the boundary between life and death opens up a new dimension of existence: *All the images are connected by/ Verbs of motion*. Through the poem **Time Flow** a view of a new subject opens up, which has accompanied Kovič's poetic journey from the very beginning, an "inner view" of creation. It is not an exaggeration to claim that all of Kovič's poetry, in particular since the **Firewater** collection, has been subject to the paradox of poetic creation and the impulses which this creation summons into awareness as the only still active reality.

Do not write for eternity/ Write/ As if what/ You have to express/ Might also remain/ Unwritten.// These are the final verses of the poem **The Unpleasant Message**, and in the poem which follows, **Vertedigung der Dichter**, (both were published in the **Summer** collection) we can read: *Poets may live freely/ And irresponsibly*. Kovič's attitude to the poetic profession opens two big fields of meaning: On one hand writing poetry is the ultimate free space, the poem has retreated to some distant places, to the north of our existence (**Labrador, The Siberian Cycle**), but on the other it was in the world without oblivion or comfort that it first found its meaning, although the poet seems to have given in to his fate (**Noch habe Ich nicht/No me dormí bastante, Ich ergreife die Flucht/Me escaparé, Die Trauer/La tristeza**). All the anxiety of the poetic "profession" is depicted in the poem with the simple title **A Poem**, in which the relation between the creator and his message is raised to a higher level of sensibility, outlined in the opening verses: *How difficult it is to part/ With a poem/ Which you have made love to for at least one night.*

Kovič's poetic world is composed of seemingly very simple, everyday things, objects, of very inconspicuous creatures, animals (**Rain, L'ulivo, Mad Dog, Fruits of Summer**); in this world the poet talks to memories and images of times gone by, addresses those who are already gone and walks the landscapes which evoke exotic feelings in the European man (**Sansibar**). On the other hand his poetic world is full of pro-

found realizations, strung to the "nothing" of a pure, aesthetically sharpened imagination, realizations born in the quiet, apprehension-filled hours of poetic loneliness, distress and silence, when the spiritual view is flooded by visions and horrible images of mutilated existence (**Robots, Dead Soldiers' Autumn, Die Ablöse**). In this hour of lonely distress he still preserves hope, which allows the poetic subject to write down new, unknown languages, like the one brought by the poem **Anleitung zum Schlafen/Instrucciones para dormir/ Istruzione per dormire**: *To go far away./ To the end of the world./ To the frontier of dreams and nondreams./ And perhaps/ Still further://*

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