

## SLOVENIAN POETIC TRADITION AND EDVARD KOCBEK

### Precarious National Identity

What was once Yugoslavia, the former home for all the Southern Slavs except the Bulgarians, has been ridden with conflicts since its very inception. Out of the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Ottoman empires, the independent country of Yugoslavia emerged in 1918; the new multinational state incorporated six different nations, five different languages, three major religions, and two alphabets and was thus always a **state of nations** and not, like the United States of America, a nation of states.

Several ethnic groups have historically supported distinct linguistic, religious, and social life styles: from the Roman Catholic **Slovenians** and **Croats** in the northwest to the indigenous **Muslims** in Bosnia, the heart of the country, and the Eastern Orthodox **Serbs**, **Montenegrins** and

**Macedonians** in the southeast. Although they always managed somehow to understand each other, they also preferred to champion even the most minuscule differences.

The fierce and continuing debate over issues of ethnic identity had been, following World War II, silenced by a communist regime. However, the vehement efforts to amalgamate a "Yugoslav supra-nation" through the repression of separate ethnic identities proved ill-fated.

This set of circumstances provides an origin and explanation for the paradoxical status of poets and poetry in former Yugoslavia which in 1948 successfully ditched Stalin's straight-jacket and increasingly fostered ties with the West. Thus, for her literary colleagues to the East, Yugoslavia represented a substitute for the West. Books and ideas from the Western side of the once-impermeable "iron curtain" were ex-

changed at the many writers' conferences in Yugoslavia where Polish, Czech, Romanian, Hungarian, and Slovak *literati* traveled and assembled under less restrictive conditions than those which the authorities of their own countries placed upon them when they expressed a desire to see the "true" capitalist West.

On the other hand, the poetic imagination of Southern Slavs has commanded among Western readers no greater or different attention than that paid to the poetry from Soviet "satellites". Seduced by the idea of a common suffering under totalitarianism, Western intellectuals have indiscriminately lumped together these many distinct national and cultural traditions under the convenient misnomer of "the other Europe".

In this context, it is not surprising that the Slovenian poetic vision never appeared to Western eyes as a separate, distinct and genuine literary tradition with its own language and its own symbolic economy. For all too long, Slovenians have been perceived by the outside world of the West simply as "Yugoslavs".

And it's no wonder. Slovenians have not had their own nation-state since the distant times of independent kingdom of *civitas Carantania* in the seventh century.

## Poets instead of Generals

Even today, Ljubljana is perhaps the only European capital where a visitor would look in vain for monuments of generals and victorious cavalrymen. Despite the war of liberation and the revolution, Slovenians continue to be more attracted by the pen than the sword. Instead of generals, Slovenians placed poets upon their most privileged pedestals.

Many streets are named after celebrated masters of the pen and their faces gaze solemnly from Slovenia's newly-issued banknotes. During the Second World War many Slovenian partisan brigades were named after poets and writers, another historically rare, if not unique, example of the vital importance of literature to this small nation.

From this vantage point it becomes possible to understand how poets and writers assumed the role of not only the high priests of language, but also that of politicians in disguise. In the absence of official political, economic, and cultural institutions, poets and writers took on the role of the **guardians of the mother tongue and individualism, moral independence, and national integrity.**

The history of Slovenians is thus not the history of great victories on the battlefield but the history of a te-

nacious guerrilla resistance to foreign rulers: literary and linguistic guerrilla warfare, that is. For all practical purposes, Slovenian history is first and foremost spelled out as the history of Slovenian language: a language which, in addition to singular and plural, also uses a dual form—one of the two world languages that boast of such rarity-making it extraordinarily suitable for intimate, personal, and erotic confessions.

However, the Slovenian language was forced to take on a far more pragmatic role. It was continuously compelled to give voice to ethnic and national sentiments. Due to centuries of domination by foreigners, mostly Germans, these sentiments were often expressed in a voice more akin to a whisper than to a shout.

National identity remained at the core of the popular imagination buoyed by the unrelenting confidence that the articulation of one's national and ethnic identity is a self-evident right. Today these rights are viewed as absolute in spite of the unfortunate fact that Slovenian history profusely demonstrates that there have been precious few rights that Slovenians have ever been able to take for granted.

Franks, Bavarians, Hungarians, Teutons, Charlemagne, and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire, became enemies whose belligerent armies

advanced towards the warm waters of the Adriatic Sea through the doors of Ljubljana, establishing political and economic institutions and struggling to dominate the riches, the lands and the souls in the heart of the Slovenian country.

In spite of this continual onslaught, the ethnic island of Slovenians survived through the present day. It is nearly a miracle that Slovenians managed to preserve their own specific identity despite this long history of German, Italian, Hungarian, and Balkan domination.

In the absence of a nation-state of their own, the only real home for Slovenians was carved out of their **language and poetry.** The preservation of their distinct national identity had to overcome a sea of political, historical and social obstacles.

## Historical Perspective

Although historical records written in the Slovenian language (sermons, confessions, poems) have emerged from as early as the 10th century, it was only during the fifty years of the Protestant Reformation that Slovenians developed a systematic orthography, alphabet, and standardized language. The first book in Slovenian appeared in 1550; only a few years later, Slovenians could read the Old

and New Testaments in their mother tongue.

Primož Trubar, the Protestant preacher and writer, laid the foundations for Slovenian literature. Taking advantage of the liberating Reformation movement, which firmly anchored Slovenian culture to the paradigm of Western civilization and literature, Trubar published his twenty two books.

Ironically these books, although written in the Slovenian language, were published in Germany as Trubar had fled the religious persecution of the Catholic counter-Reformation in his native Slovenia. From there he smuggled books in barrels and carts to Ljubljana which were later clandestinely distributed across Slovenian lands.

The first Slovenian poet, Valentin Vodnik (1758-1819), although a Catholic priest, did not write exclusively for religious purposes, but was devoted to the secrets of nature and quotidian life. It was no accident that his distinct poetic voice was developed under the influences of the Enlightenment.

Slovenian national self-consciousness reached its peak in Romanticism. In this respect it did not lag behind the other Central European peoples which emerged from "the Spring of Nations". However, relentless pressure exerted by the German

culture accompanied by continuous political subjugation from the House of Habsburgs made it difficult to envision the very survival of the Slovenian nation.

Two prominent French travelers, Cyprien Robert and Hyppolite Desprez, were simply stating what seemed patently obvious when they recorded in 1848, during their travels through Slovenian lands before and after the "Spring of Nations", that Slovenians could not endure much longer in their resistance against German cultural, economic and political domination.

The common wisdom was that Slovenians, as a distinct ethnic community, would soon pass into oblivion. The stubborn Slovenians proved these speculations wrong. In the mid-19th century Slovenian literary magazines and journals began to be published in Ljubljana, Gorica, Celovec, Maribor and other towns. These publications cautiously, yet with increasing persistence, struggled to come to terms with national and political identity. Having been traditionally denied a national identity, Slovenian writers placed this concept at the core of their work.

The personality and work of France Prešeren (1800-1849), the greatest Slovenian poet, best reveals this longing for freedom and independence. By profession a free-minded

lawyer which is to say a social outsider, by vocation a Romantic poet of the most ambitious kind, Prešeren wrote in German, the Central European *lingua franca*, as fluently as he did in Slovenian. Yet for him there was no dilemma: Slovenian was not merely his mother tongue but his language of moral choice. It was his **article of political faith**. In Slovenian he created, in the best Orphean tradition, the ever-lasting works which are known to every Slovenian.

A genuine Romantic poet of great creative power and prodigious drinking habits, Prešeren's private life was defined by a disillusion. His desired and ethereal Laura was the daughter of a respectable bourgeois household. Her name was Julia and, in spite of all the beautiful and passionate poems he wrote for her, she married a German nobleman. However, what Prešeren failed to achieve in his private life, he accomplished on the national level: he failed to win his beloved Julia but he succeeded in uniting all Slovenians within one community.

It is thus safe to say that writers were, historically speaking, the embodiment of the political institutions and Slovenians recognized them as the true and sole authorities. The artistic work of this writers was invested into the fulfillment of a sin-

gle aim: to raise national consciousness. This was far from a simple task as theirs was a small nation where the middle class communicated mostly in Italian and German while the Slovenian language, was as a rule, utilized by the lower classes. Or as Edvard Kocbek ironically and ever so poignantly expressed it in his wonderful poem **Lippizaners**, it was a language reserved "for peasants and horses".

### Poetry of Political and Metaphysical Dissent

Edvard Kocbek (1904-1981) is a great example of a contemporary public poet who cannot prevent himself from oscillating between politic and aesthetic considerations, a continuation of a long Slovenian tradition.

Kocbek's enchanting poetry, already known to readers in German and French translation, has been rather neglected in English translation. Although there had been a scattering of translations of individual poems, Kocbek's verses were brought for the first time in a substantial format to an English-speaking readership in the fine bilingual edition of **Na vratih zvečer/At The Door At Evening** (Dorion/Ljubljana 1990. The Muses Co. 51 Rue de l'Eglise, Dorion, Quebec, Canada;

translated by Tom Lozar) which was short-listed for the prestigious Glasco Translation Prize, given annually by the Literary Translators Association of Canada.

The present publication is thus the second book-length volume of Kočbek's poetry in English translation. The timing could not be more advantageous. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the disintegration of Soviet Union and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, the old political divisions might seem to have become obsolete but the experience of totalitarian limitations on the freedom of the human spirit lingers on in different forms, from new fascism to militant nationalism, from ethnic chauvinism to anti-Semitism.

The onslaught of the Serbian national Communists upon the democratic-minded independent republics of Slovenia, and more brutally upon Croatia and Bosnia, is a bitter testimony that the darkness of historical evil, alas, still remains with us.

Kočbek's poetry, as well as his personal and political biography, is a remarkable witness to and a document of the modern dark ages on the territories of the former Yugoslavia in particular and of Eastern-Central European countries, in general. As a vice-president of the republic of Slovenia, a minister in the federal

Yugoslav government and a leading Christian Socialist, Edvard Kočbek was one of the founding fathers of the Slovenian Liberation Front, a pluralist organisation which after the Nazi attack on Yugoslavia in 1941 provided a common frame for various Slovenian resistance groups until 1943. At that time the Communists, in a clever underground *coup d'état*, seized power and began to run all of the resistance groups, regardless of ideological orientation, as an extension of their party.

While in basic political agreement with the Communists' determined resistance to fascist and Nazi occupying forces, Kočbek nonetheless remained aware of the failure of Communists to live up to their utopian program. In a series of comprehensive war memoirs, Kočbek exposed the deep-seated existential dilemmas which were evident in the vagaries of the revolutionary Partisan movement and, after becoming increasingly critical of his once-dear comrades, he was publicly and viciously humiliated in 1952 in an orchestrated campaign of "character-assassination". He was subsequently forced to leave political office.

Although the creative work of Edvard Kočbek was ultimately widely acclaimed, no literary fame could help him to escape the fate of an internal exile deprived of publish-

ing opportunities and of contact with his readership.

### Aesthetics of Witness

Kočbek fell out of favor with Communists because of his refusal to give up his genuine literary mission. His numerous poems, short stories, and popular journals movingly bear witness to his courage to criticize his former colleagues's black-and-white dramaturgy which was characteristic of Communist aesthetics. Once stripped of his political obligations, Kočbek devoted himself entirely to his first love, poetry.

Kočbek was also the first who dared to publicly reveal the most carefully guarded of Communist secrets in public: the war of liberation against Fascist and Nazi occupation in the whole of Yugoslavia and in certain regions of Slovenia itself was, to a considerable degree, also a civil war between the "reds" and the "whites". Since his was a poetic pursuit of truth and a struggle for metaphysical freedom which would protect and save language from authoritarian newspeak, the poet in Kočbek ultimately won over the statesman.

Kočbek thus remained indebted to the time-honored legacy of Prešeren: only after having lost direct access to the mechanisms of power and having become a non-conformist and a

dissident, was he able to tell the bitter truth, the full truth.

Kočbek was, to be sure, at the forefront of Slovenian literary life before World War II as well as after. A brilliant essayist, educated in both Slovenia and France, and a highly respected mind among non-Communist progressive intellectuals, he nevertheless remains best remembered for his mystically inspired poetic vision.

Kočbek's poems bear witness to the human condition in a revolution-torn country better than any historical record. A writer of not only wit and clarity of style, but of considerable substance, he is concerned with the depth of his metaphysical contemplations on the nature of compassion, suffering, and hope.

His poems, nearly epic in form but vulnerably lyrical in contents, convey the sense of correspondence which put the most intimate love relationship in the larger social and spiritual perspective with the urgency of the great masters.

However, his poetry is by no means overtly political. On the contrary: it is precisely in his subtle manipulation of symbols and delicate images, more often than not drawn from a peasant culture and a rich tradition of folk songs, that the tragic social dynamics of his country comes effortlessly to life.

Insofar as moral habits are embedded in the intricacies of historic allegory and allusion, the unfettered urge to stress them expressively is beside the point. The poet's task to recognize history and its discontents is always present. It makes its way into the poem by virtue of language and tradition.

Kocbek is indeed a great poet in the time-honored tradition of narrative folk poetry where an account of important happenings and troublesome events is given through personal revelation or, at times, inspired confession disguised as a sermon.

Kocbek has a strong spiritual bent. Regardless of his life-long allegiance to a highly individualized version of Roman Catholicism, one is compelled to say that a more cosmological than religious longing runs through his poems in a way which calls to mind the mythological consciousness of the writings of greatest modern Southern Slavic poet, the late Vasko Popa of Serbia.

Kocbek offers a frame of reference within which his poems become a true witness: the courage to be true to himself, a courage which is stronger than any ideology, political party or historical project.

Herein perhaps lays the reason why Kocbek's poetry remains a source of inspiration among contemporary Slovenian literati, a poetry to strug-

gle with and to emulate, but one whose aesthetic and metaphysical power is never seriously called into question. His dark sentiments of melancholy, depression and nostalgia for the time when man was not a stranger in paradise do not preclude him from keeping a commitment to the harmony of the individual and the world even when this commitment turns against the dominant mode of expression.

It is this rebellious yet deeply intimate writing that has made Kocbek a poet of "...extraordinary originality and vision who deserves a place in the pantheon of modern literature", as Pulitzer-prize winner and a distinguished American poet Charles Simic points out in his preface to *Navratih zvečer/At the Door At Evening* (1990).

Kocbek's poetry is a poignant account of times when limitations of all sorts reigned supreme. Yet its point of departure is the strongly-held conviction that there exists no serious limitations to poetic liberty in its ability to narrate the story of the world as it was, as it is and as it always will be.

