
Afterword

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Not including his plays and film scripts, Marjan Rožanc's (1930-1990) literary opus numbers fourteen books of narrative prose and seven books of essays. His first short story collection was *Mrtvi in vsi ostali* (The Dead and the Rest, 1959), and his first essay collection was *Demon Iva Daneva* (The Demon of Ivo Danev, 1969). There was a similar pairing at the end of his life, for alongside the novel *Umor* (Murder, 1990) two essay collections appeared – *Manihejska kronika* (Manichean Chronicle, 1990) and *Brevir* (Breviary, 1991), the last of which remained unfinished. It was published posthumously by the author's friend Mihelač, in an expanded version that included Rožanc's last magazine articles. In between, Rožanc wrote "Essays on Slovenian Myths," from *Iz krvi in mesa* (Of Flesh and Blood, 1981), the autobiographical *Roman o knjigah* (A Novel about Books, 1983), "Essays and Legends," from the collection *Europe* (1987), as well as the collection "Diary Entries" from *Svoboda in narod* (Freedom and Nation, 1988). The selection of essays presented here contains work from all seven of Rožanc's collections. The first essay, "Nothingness in Slovenia," stems from his early period and before now it had been published only in the Trieste journal *Most* (Bridge, 1967); for this text Rožanc was sentenced to a conditional discharge of two years for having "disturbed the public order."

The decade between Rožanc's first fiction and his first book of essays was a decade of tribulations in which his writing became more personal in form. He was a sort of two-headed "Janus," like many, from Levstik and Cankar, to Kocbek and Jančar, who have taken up the pen in Slovenian. His initial pages were *belles lettres*, ambivalent writing of "fictions," that is, recounting paradigmatic or exemplary but also course pseudo-real stories, "as life writes them." Then there was the

analogous side, when in the 1960s Rožanc began, intensively and increasingly systematically, to devote himself to the “other,” “paraliterary” form of expression which ever since the Renaissance and Montaigne has been known as the essay. These are texts which are less about “life” than they are about the writer himself, meaning that they are not “pure” literature, but the author’s “subjective standpoint” towards things: reflections and self-reflections in the broad spectrum between critical registering of modern social phenomena and subtle meditations on human and divine “eternity,” moral exclamations and religious contemplation, contemporary political discourse and theological tractates, among them, angry glosses and apocryphal “legends,” autobiographical confessions and diary entries.

In short, this is not a literary image of the world, but an idea(ology), the writer’s intellectual interpretations and concepts.

Rožanc himself thematised the difference between “pure” and essayistic literature, the duality which so decisively marked his engagement with the Word. Two of his formulations seem most serviceable here. The first, from an interview with France Pibernik (*Čas romana* [The time of the novel], 1983), reads:

“It is probably no coincidence that literature and the essay are two independent literary genres. If fiction nourishes itself directly from life, the essay gives birth while being read, that is, as one compares one’s own recognitions in life with those of others, as one verifies and confirms this recognition. If literature is an irrational act, the essay is a rational one. If literature is questioning, the essay is answering. If literature is essentially a discovering of the world and an alighting in the world, the essay is also a dissatisfaction with and a critique of the world. And that’s why my opting for the essay is entirely understandable. For I am not always a writer, that is, not always a man who trusts in the irrational and who is satisfied with alighting in the world; that would be great arrogance. I am also an essayist, a man who offers rational answers.”

The second formulation was articulated in a 1990 interview with Branko Hofman for *Srce in oko* (The Heart and the Eye), a few months before Rožanc’s death. It takes up the first one, but also relativizes it. “Literature is an open world, whereas the essay always wants to be a particular answer,”

says Rožanc, repeating his original thought. But he adds, “We know how it is with answers: they are all interesting, and they are all wrong.”

Crucial is the addendum that the “rational answers” on which essay-writing is based are always “wrong.” This does not, of course, mean that there is nothing to be gained from answers or rationality, or that the positive value of the essay lies in a sort of unbinding “curiosity,” as Rožanc states, not without irony. Rationality cannot be renounced and the interest in the essay is of a deeper, binding sort, especially if the writer is not only an intellectual, critic and activist, but also a believer, a doubter and a heretic.

Without a doubt, this applies also to Rožanc’s essays, which from the very first texts are based on questioning any apodictic, purely rationalistic “answers.” Moreover, Rožanc’s essays are even derived from the thought that new-age man, with his unique, inimitable personal individuality as well as his socio-political being, is placed into an open, free, uncertain world in which there are no longer, and no longer can be, any “more” priori, self-understood and unambiguous “transcendent” values that might, from the outset, afford man a firm point of reference, thought or, for example, a home. But, as Rožanc’s essays recount, because man in his very humanity is a religious being without an “absolute” in a merely “finite” world he cannot endure; he is unnerved just as much by the anxiety of death as he is by “eternity,” and the undeniable knowledge of his finiteness unnerves him just as much as the challenging hidden God... The great eschatological projects, as conceived and born in modern new-age history, have all revealed themselves as a “humanistic,” (self-)deceptive, simple, constantly-repeating ideological lie and as holy wars: as human violence against the individual, concrete man who is everything that is truly and reliably human.

Precisely this sensitive individual man is faced with his finiteness and at the same time pierced by the thought of “immortality,” obsessed with freedom, with a subjectively unlimited will to power, but at the same time he is definitively condemned to powerlessness; he is a paradoxical being of terrible arrogance, but also a being of anguish and piety – that strange, vulnerable human creature that is trapped with his spirit within a mortal body, but at the same time mindlessly tuned in to a

superhuman “beyond,” tending always again from his “humanistic” freedom with its religiosity – always again in vain? – into infinity, which is on the other side of death, and aimed at the hidden God... that’s the hero of Rožanc’s essays.

This also means that Rožanc’s essays, rather than offering “answers,” offer up “questions,” and, rather than offering a rational and solid “truth,” put before us an uncertain, changeable image of man’s world, namely, as a fundamentally paradoxical world.

Paradox is – as we read in Rožanc – constitutive, the most authentic and authoritative characteristic of man. It is written into man’s “flesh and blood,” placed at the very centre of his religious bonds, both with neighbours and the great, mysterious Other. It is a part of human social obligations and also of his inalienable individual spirit, with which he can be truly bound and responsible only to himself, to his personal God – but it is a part also of his physicality, in which, for all the transcendental stance of its existence, he is always condemned to a solitary death.

A paradox is open, dynamic, but it is also the only knowledge that is full and productive; or, as we read in one of the essays from *Iz mesa in krvi* (Of Flesh and Blood):

“We must be earthly and material, but without ever renouncing the spiritual, and we must be spiritual without despising the earthly. We must take up societal work, because we are only a fraction of the whole and we are subordinate to the community and the communal good; but at the same time we must be, with the deepest appeal from our personal self, with an appeal for the eternal and for absolute goodness, superior to communal work and give it its final aim. And in this position we must not be seduced by either the blessedness of the earthly or the happiness of the heavenly.”

Perhaps the essence of Rožanc’s engagement in both “pure” literature and essayistic literature lies in this thought. Man cannot renounce transcendentalism, since the tendency to overcoming the given, the “absolute” or the “divine” is one of the primary, strongest driving forces of his existence. Man, however, cannot – in the name of his free spirit – become disloyal to the immanent, “the earthly and the material,” because his spirit is alive when he stands eye to eye with death; he is “absolute” and “divine” only to the extent that he is also

bodily and finite. He must believe, even if he senses that the sky above him is empty. He must hope, even if his thoughts of eternity and redemption are doubt-laden. He must love, even if full loving surrender to another is impossible. As Rožanc's essays, but also his short stories and novels, recount, man is thus a dual and completely paradoxical creature. From the circle that the "immanent" and the transcendent" draw all around him, personally and collectively, generally and personally, historically and eternally, existential and religious, terms, in freedom and in God... he has nowhere to exit.

In Rožanc's essays the image of the paradoxical duality, which is always very intensively filtered through personal existential experience, is authentically "literary" and not in the least inflexible and doctrinal: through its precise and, indeed, rational discourse, it articulates what remains to all "humanistic" faith (self-assertion and self-satisfaction), even though the human world is irrational and inexpressible.

The book *Of Freedom and God* contains those Rožanc essays that most directly, clearly and fully speak of this. They should be understood as the "other" side, as the author's dialogue with what he recounts in his "pure" stories, for example, in the novels *Ljubezem* (Love) and *Umor* (Murder).

About the Author

Marjan Rožanc (1930-1990) was a Slovenian writer, playwright and essayist who was born near Ljubljana in Devica Marija v Polju. In 1947 he began his training as a graphic artist, and in 1950 he was employed at the “Ljudske pravice” publishing house in Ljubljana. That same year he departed for his year-long military service at the Reserve Officers’ School in Požarevac, in then-Yugoslavia. In 1951, the military court in Belgrade sentenced him to three and a half years in prison for hostile propaganda. After returning to Slovenia in 1955, he worked at a publishing house in Maribor as a lithographic artist and as an archivist at Maribor’s *Večer* newspaper. It was at this time that he began publishing in a number of magazines. After 1956 he earned his living by writing, albeit without the status of “free writer.” He gained this official status – as a “free writer” – in 1960. Between 1962 and 1963 he was a member of the editorial board of the magazine *Perspektive*, and for the 1962-1963 season he led the experimental theatre Oder 57. This company ceased operations in 1964, when the authorities banned the play *Topla greda* (The Greenhouse) for political reasons. The government also shut down *Perspektive*, and Rožanc withdrew from the cultural-political scene.

In 1968, he was sentenced to a two-year conditional discharge for the essay “Nothingness in Slovenia” that was published in the Trieste journal *Most*. Between 1969 and 1970 he was a member and secretary of the editorial board of the magazine *Problemi*, and from 1974 to 1981 he was the secretary and head of the *Slovan* sports association.

In 1980, he bought an old farmhouse in Volčji Grad in the Karst region, renovated it, and from then on spent most of his free and creative time there. After his death, Rožanc’s wife left his extensive private library to the Komen Public Library. His house was bought by the painter Mario Palli.

His final works, which are primarily sketches and short stories, tend to describe less affluent urban areas and to deal with the existential concerns of “little men.” They are imbued with social and moral criticism. This is in contrast to his early short stories, collected in *Mrtvi in vsi ostali* (The Dead and the Rest, 1959), where he writes about his prison experiences. At that time Rožanc was influenced by Gustave Flaubert.

Already crucial in Rožanc’s early narrative texts are autobiographical elements relating in particular to the author’s intimate affiliation with the social and spiritual environment of Ljubljana’s Zelena jama workers’ district. In this context the short story “Pravljica” (Fairy Tale) is characteristic. Later, the author broadened and deepened the story’s material to form one of his key works, the novel *Ljubezen* (Love), which is a nostalgic portrayal of the narrator’s youthful circle of friends that also depicts the events and atmosphere in Zelena jama during the occupation. The main theme of the novel is a young person’s loving relationship to his home surroundings and its people, in spite of the tragic consequences of war. In 1984, Rajko Ranfl used the novel as well as the short story “Pravljica” as the basis for his film *Ljubezen*

Freely reworked autobiographical elements can also be seen in other works by Rožanc, for example, in the short novels *Hudodelci* (Evil-Doers), based on the author’s prison experiences (Franci Slak film version stems from 1987), *Metulj* (Butterfly), *Sentimentalni časi* (Sentimental Times) and *Roman o knjigah* (A Novel about Books), in which Rožanc reflects on the books and authors that have spiritually shaped him, while connecting these reflections with philosophical comments such that the work borders on the essay form. Indeed, characteristic of his narrative fiction is the inclusion of extensive and independent inserts in essay form.

Since the mid-sixties, Rožanc increasingly devoted himself to essays, first publishing them in magazines and soon also in book form – the main collections include *Iz krvi in mesa* (Of Blood and Flesh), *Evropa* (Europe), *Manihejska kronika* (Manichean Chronical) and *Brevir* (Breviary). Their themes comprise key questions of modern European humanism, politics, culture, morality, art, as well as philosophical, literary, historical, existential, religious and metaphysical questions – questions that arise to the sensitive, believing and sceptical

man living in a modern “Godless” time. But he also wrote essays about sports. When it came to sports, Rožanc was more concerned with the process of bringing people together than he was with results and success. Rožanc articulated his personal experience in sports in the essay collection *Demon Ivo Danev* (The Demon of Ivo Danev), where he writes of basketball and football while allocating sport a position in our everyday lives. He himself was involved in sport and was an avid football player.

As a teller of tales and as a playwright Marjan Rožanc was highly critical of society, depicting, in a realistic style, the mental states of lost individuals. His plays have an air of Anton Chekhov, while evoking the masterful and grotesquely tragic mood of Samuel Beckett. His prose and works for the stage are imbued with existentialist sensibilities. He also wrote a number of film scripts.

In 1980 Rožanc received the Prešeren Fund Award for the novel *Ljubezen*, and in 1991 he was posthumously allotted the Prešeren Award, the highest Slovenian national award for achievements in the arts, for his life work. Since 1993 the Rožanc Award for the best Slovenian essay collection has been awarded annually.