

INTRODUCTION
THE SLEEPLESSNESS AND POETRY OF WITNESS

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A distinct image, a fragment of memory: I stand in the foyer of the splendidly dilapidated Kazina Palace in the center of Ljubljana, the capital city of Slovenia. The palace houses the offices of the fortnightly student publication *Tribuna*, of which I was the editor in the early 1980s. The newspaper was one of the few independent intellectual forums in Slovenia.

But wait, hold your horses! What is Slovenia?

Slovenia was in the 1980s one of the six constituent republics of what was a larger federal state, Yugoslavia. Except for a few political experts, academics, and adventuresome German, Italian, and British tourists, nobody in the West really knew then what Slovenia was or what its culture was like. In the fog of the Cold War, it was only a marginal part of East European *terra incognita*, but today the country is an independent nation-state and a member of the European Union. Thus, a brief outline of the vagaries of Slovenian collective existence is perhaps in order.

In July 1991, Slovenia made the headlines all over the Western world. Its mercifully brief “Ten-Day War,” together with the larger convulsions of the Yugoslav breakup, brought about a major change on the map of Europe. Riding on the heels of the disintegrated Soviet Union, the end of the communist *ancien régime*, and German unification, Slovenia held a public referendum, rooted in the natural right to self-determination, which formed the le-

gal foundation for its seeking independence from the moribund Yugoslav Federation. For the first time in the history of this tenacious Southern Slavic people, Slovenians were free to live in a state of their own. This event had been hoped for and, against all odds, anticipated by many Slovenian writers for years.

ROMANTIC FOUNDATIONS

As in other Central and East European countries, writers in Slovenia were traditionally invested with the obligation and the attendant risk to act as the keepers of the national flame, guardians of our moral, social, and spiritual values. Specifically, it was the language itself that represented our most cherished national treasure. Why? Because Slovenians lacked full-fledged political, economic, or social institutions that would have helped maintain a sense of national unity. Naturally, this sense tends to be better developed in countries that have—at least historically—attained some form of statehood or another. Slovenians have been less fortunate. They've lived under royalist, fascist, and communist regimes, respectively, as they failed to reach a goal to which all European regions aspired: statehood.

But the Slovenian people, its language, and its books were around long before the independent Republic of Slovenia was established. Squeezed in between the Germanic, Italian, and Hungarian cultures, and ruled by often predatory political regimes, the Slovenian language was more or less the only buffer against the threat of collective obliteration. Small wonder that today six thousand books are published annually for and by a tiny population of two million,

an industry in which “elite” poetry collections routinely come out in editions of five hundred, while “popular” books of verse may be published in editions of up to three thousand.

The forests that cover more than fifty percent of Slovenia continue to provide raw material for printers, just as the contradictions of its collective life continue to provide material for its literary achievements.

These achievements arise out of processes long underway. The dominant one must be seen in a history that lacks splendid military victories but is replete with linguistic resistance to foreign rule. For all practical purposes, Slovenian history is the history of the Slovenian language. It is a language that, in addition to singular and plural, also uses a rare dual form. In other words, it’s made for intimate, personal, and erotic confessions.

Although written records in Slovenian (sermons, confessions, poems) had appeared sporadically from the eighth century on, these were little more than fragments. It was fifty years of Protestant Reformation that gave Slovenians a systematic orthography, alphabet, and standardized language. The first book in Slovenian appeared in 1550, one of twenty-two that would be written by the father of Slovenian literature, Primož Trubar: a Protestant preacher who had fled to Germany from the religious persecution in his native land. Thanks to his efforts, Slovenians could read the Old and New Testaments in their mother tongue half a century before the publication of King James Bible.

However, after the aggressive Counter-Reformation, it was Roman Catholicism that became the dominant in Slovenia religion. Its entrenchment in our culture was facilitated by the

Habsburgs, the Catholic rulers of the Austrian—later Austro-Hungarian—Empire to which Slovenia traditionally belonged. The Napoleonic regime came between 1809 and 1813. The French instituted the teaching of the Slovenian language in elementary schools, promoting it as the idiom of the middle class to an extent that would have been inconceivable under the German-speaking Habsburgs.

The relentless pressure of Germanic culture and continuous political subjugation made it difficult to envision Slovenia's survival as a discrete entity. The oft-spoken prediction of the time was that the Slovenians would pass into oblivion as a distinct ethnic community. But early in the nineteenth century, Slovenian literary journals began to be published in Ljubljana, the focal point of modern Slovenian life. National self-awareness reached its predictable peak in Romanticism, neck and neck with other Central and East European peoples.

The work of France Prešeren (1800–1849), perhaps the most celebrated Slovenian poet, best encapsulates the community's longing for freedom and independence. Admittedly, his work in English translation sounds like derivative Byronism, but for Slovenians, Prešeren is paramount. A free-thinking lawyer, he wrote in German, the Central European *lingua franca*, as fluently as in Slovenian. Slovenian, however, was more than his mother tongue. It was his language of choice, signaling his political commitment. Prešeren is thus more than a literary icon. He's the founding father of modern Slovenian self-understanding. He addressed all Slovenians and prompted them to recognize themselves as members of a single community, beyond their attachments to various regions of their largely rural existence.

Prešeren's "Zdravljica" ("A Toast to Freedom") is today the Slovenian national anthem. Back in the 1840s, the censors in imperial Vienna correctly identified the revolutionary potential in this poem in which Prešeren called for the unification of all Slovenians and the necessary defense of their independence, up to and including the use of violence, resulting in its being excluded from Prešeren's one published book of poems. Despite this, and despite the fact that *Poezije* sold pathetically—a mere thirty-odd copies in Prešeren's lifetime—he nonetheless managed to accomplish two historic feats: a symbolic unification of the Slovenian ethnicity and the radical invention of its high aesthetic standards. In poems where national and individual destinies blend into a universal message of freedom, Prešeren transformed his mother tongue from a means of expression into the political foundation of national identity.

The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 compelled Slovenians to make a pivotal choice: either go it alone, a route for which they were ill-equipped, or else seek refuge in yet another collective state—that is, together with the other Southern Slavs (except the Bulgarians). The die was cast. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians became their common home. It was later renamed Yugoslavia.

Its vibrant cultural life reflected the aesthetic trends of Paris and Vienna, Munich and Prague. Literary debates on expressionism, constructivism, and surrealism were, however, imbued with a political hue. This uneasy bond between politics and literature became a question of life and death after the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941.

Having lost credibility, the royal family and its government fled into exile. Most, though not all, writers joined the anti-Nazi guerrilla units, the Partisans. They printed their books, newspapers, and magazines in makeshift print shops, set up in liberated rural and forested areas. They organized literary readings, published periodicals, and, by design, engaged in nationalist and communist propaganda.

AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Partisan resistance proved victorious. After the War, several writers rose in the Yugoslav political hierarchy. A renowned poet, a high-ranking partisan and Christian Socialist, Edvard Kocbek (1904–1981) was a minister in the federal Yugoslav government until he fell out of favor. Educated in Slovenia and France, Kocbek was the first to expose the most fiercely guarded communist secret: that the war of liberation was, to a considerable degree, a civil war as well. Simultaneous with the anti-Nazi struggle, a tragic fratricidal war of “reds” (communist-led partisans) against “whites” (Axis-collaborators), took place primarily in and around Ljubljana.

After the War, uniformed collaborationists and their civilian sympathizers retreated to the Allied-controlled southern Austria. The Allies under British command returned them to Yugoslavia. There, up to twelve thousand people were soon thereafter indiscriminately killed by special units of Josip Broz Tito’s communist regime. Against the official imperative of silence, Kocbek’s was a dissenting voice. He publicly denounced this criminal act of wild vengeance. The poet

ultimately won over the statesman. Kocbek thus remained indebted to the legacy of Prešeren. Only after a loss of direct access to the mechanisms of power was Kocbek able to tell the complete truth.

In a way, the civil war was a reflection of traditional antagonism between secular liberalism and Roman Catholic conservatism, the two major mental paradigms in Slovenian history. A dangerous though crucial subject, it occupied many writers throughout the communist years, even though it necessitated the use of Aesopian allegories, designed to fool the regime's censors. The late fifties and the early sixties saw an outburst of creative activity. New literary journals were established. They gradually became strongholds of independent thought, facilitating the growing political dissent that in 1964 exploded in a massive popular protest.

The communist leaders put these demonstrations down, banned the magazines, and arrested several people, including Tomaz Šalamun (1941–), who is today the most internationally admired Slovenian poet. At the time, however, he was a fledgling *enfant terrible* with many parodies of canonical patriotic poems to his credit. Šalamun's talent for poetic absurdity, irony, and playfulness made it possible for him to declare, following his spiritual godfather Arthur Rimbaud, that all dogmatic tradition is the "game . . . of countless idiotic generations." His contested emancipation of verse from under the shackles of obsessive, single-minded nationalism had far-reaching consequences for the nascent autonomy of Slovenian writing.

As a result of the political clampdown, the writers of the '70s retreated from the public arena to rediscover "language as the house of being." They explored the limits of lyrical and narrative techniques, the vertigo of linguistic transgressions, the abandonment of coher-

ent plots. In these works, irony and poetic absurdity were employed as protection against, not as a challenge to, the external reality.

After a decade of passivity, the patience of our intellectuals wore thin. The early 1980s saw the launching of another new magazine, and the reviving of public literary debate. Called—appropriately—*Nova revija* (The New Review), the poems, novels, testimonies, and short stories published in its pages helped to gradually peel off the layers of institutional lies. The leading poetic voice was that of Dane Zajc (1921–2005), a doyen of dark premonitions. The horrors of Titoism, a political system then much admired among the Western left, were laid bare.

In the larger Yugoslav state, Serbian political appetites began to be seen as a threat to the other nations in the federation. The communist-dominated Serbian government took over the federal administration, appropriated more than half of the federal hard currency reserves, attempted to alter the educational curriculum in favor of Serbian authors, and imposed brutal apartheid on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Slovenia called for a political cohabitation that would satisfy the constituent nations but retain the Yugoslav frame. The increasingly arrogant Belgrade authorities, alas, glibly dismissed the possibility of compromise. Slovenia had to choose: either remain under the heel of a corrupt communist authority or establish an independent state.

Following passionate public debates, writers led the democratic opposition in drafting the declaration of Slovenian independence. Stimulated by such actions, even the Slovenian communists began resisting the centralized government in Belgrade. After a public referendum, the independent nation-state of Slovenia was declared

in July 1991. The Ten-Day War ensued. Despite the shortness of the conflict, it was by no means small: it spiraled into brutal excesses that engulfed the entire region, and hostilities still simmer beneath the surface of the ex-Yugoslav states, despite the Dayton accords in 1995 that nominally ended the wars for Yugoslav succession.

But now, at last, back to *Tribuna*. Tito, the undisputed leader of Yugoslavia, died in 1980. The decade between his death and up to the Yugoslav breakup in 1991 was marked by the rise of civil society and an increased critique of the communist regime. The student paper I was editing at the time eagerly joined the fray. *Tribuna* was guided by youthful naïveté and a dissident attitude that didn't take long to incur the wrath of the communist authorities. The paper was brought under the close scrutiny of government censors, and the editors were assigned "shadows," secret policemen meant to scare us off the task at hand.

So, standing beside me in the foyer of Kazina Palace one day was a bespectacled and black-bearded poet, nodding with understanding of and support for my commitment to both *Tribuna's* politics and my own creative ambitions in poetry. Even today I can vividly remember the gentle, soothing tone of his voice and the confident though not self-aggrandizing things he said. He spoke as a man with both experience and faith, as a man who had followed the "moral imperative" within him as well as the starry sky above.

I trusted this poet, in short, because I felt I understood him—though he was a generation senior to me. I liked his writing and his many lyrical translations and was impressed by his performances at the numerous informal critical groups that made up literary life.

His name was Boris A. Novak.

Novak was then chief editor of *Nova Revija*. Gathered around this monthly magazine were most, if not all, of the best and brightest in the Slovenian intellectual community. Novak's leadership coincided with the period of a government crackdown on *Nova Revija*, which had become a serious thorn in the side of the ruling elite. Despite pressure on him exerted through both informal channels and mass media campaigns of character assassination, Novak never abandoned his commitment to the political ideals of an open and democratic society.

Novak's attitude was shaped by his immersion in two cultures and two languages, the byproduct of a childhood spent in the then-capital of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, a Serbo-Croat-speaking city. Novak was born in Belgrade in 1953 and attended elementary school there. His adolescent arrival in Slovenia necessitated a rediscovery of his mother tongue. His family's urbane tolerance and his father's past as a high-ranking officer in the Partisan anti-fascist movement during the Second World War are all prominent forces that cemented Novak's commitment to the universal, if utopian, values of solidarity, equality, and brotherhood.

SHOW OF SOUND AND MEANING

No less important, however, Novak never abandoned his commitment to the idiosyncratic aesthetics of sound and meaning, which he propelled to ever more beautiful heights. Novak's first book of poems, *Stihožitje* (Still Life with Verses), was published in 1977;

its untranslatable neologism of a title metaphorically closing the distance between the term *still life* and the magic of verse. This was followed by sixteen further collections to date, most of which have enjoyed the approbation of literary critics and the general reading public alike. In addition to these collections, Novak has published an enviably large number of children's books, puppet and radio plays, and works for the stage. Additionally, Novak assisted in staging numerous plays in the most important theaters in the country, and was employed for several years as a literary adviser at the Slovenian National Theatre.

In his poetry, Novak often explores the aesthetic potential of traditional verse forms, pursuing the mysterious connection between the sounds and meanings of words. Which is to say that he seeks nothing less than poetry's true source. His poetic language successfully appropriates everyday words, using them in new combinations and coaxing unrealized possibilities out of them. He thus allows us to see how extending the limits of what is said can broaden the limits of the known. It was for an innovative paraphrase of the *Arabian Nights*—*1001 stih* (1001 Verses), a book published in 1983—that the author received the premier literary prize in Slovenia: the Prešeren Award.

BEARING WITNESS

After a year-long teaching stint at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga, Novak returned home to become president of the Slovenian PEN Center. He led this prestigious organization dur-

ing the period of escalating conflicts between the republics of the former Yugoslavia, and in the shadow of the increasingly totalitarian ambitions of Slobodan Milošević, who strove to dominate the entire federal entity in the name of all Serbs. This desire for domination eventually led to the eruption of the aforementioned Ten-Day War in the summer of 1991. Then, with a flick of the dragon's evil tail, war swept into Croatia as well, and, later, with particular cruelty, into the towns and villages of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Novak quickly organized the Slovenian PEN Center as a key distribution point for all the international assistance (collected at national PEN centers around the world) sent to ease the suffering of writers in besieged Sarajevo. Small wonder, then, that Novak responded to the Balkans wars in a poetic idiom: first in his poetry collection *Stihija* (Cataclysm, 1991), and later, at the height of his creative career, in *Mojster nespeđnosti* (The Master of Insomnia, 1995), which is populated with harrowing images of individual despair in the face of violence. Still, the book exudes an aura of fragile hope, without which its readers might be overwhelmed by apathy and moral indifference. Such moral indifference was a staple in the agendas of many Western governments, a legacy of the brutal realpolitik lodged in European minds since the Munich Agreement of 1938: an earlier episode of the West's failure to rise to a historical challenge. It seems that only poets who speak in their own name and from their own experience are able to respond to such challenges with both aesthetic validity and ethical integrity. Their ethics are revealed or—to be more precise—contained in their poetics.

The following anecdote should illuminate the chasm that yawned between Slovenia's defensive attitude and the militaristic policies of

Serbian national mythology. During the brief period in the summer of 1991 when columns of Yugoslav Army tanks were attacking Slovenian towns and villages, Boris A. Novak sent a letter to the Serbian PEN Center in the hope that he would receive verbal support for the legitimacy of Slovenian resistance against aggression. The response of his literary colleagues in Belgrade was the first, though certainly not the last, great disappointment for Novak during his tenure at PEN. “This is war,” came the reply. “During war, people die.” An ethical revolt against just this kind of cynicism was what drove Boris A. Novak, despite his own pain, to work tirelessly to help all of those who, in besieged Sarajevo, could not help themselves.

Novak understands that hope and fear provide both individual and collective access to a narrative by which “the soul of generation after generation seeks the way.” Hence the necessity for a coherent narrative about the past in order to reach an understanding of the community’s present and future. Yet there are two distinct approaches: that of history and that of poetry. Poetry always tells the story of the specific. Thus it is “more true” than history—that is, more accurate than the story of the nonspecific, of the general.

I can think of no reason to doubt this Aristotelian verity. So it’s no wonder that, rather than drowning in the supposed neutrality of political economy, and then the fickleness of national rhetoric, I prefer to delve into poetry. I believe that it is possible to find in poetry’s lyricism the trembling grace of a special light that can even give meaning to the wars of Yugoslav succession—in much the same way that this tragedy rewrote, and scarred, the lives of all who live in the region. *The Master of Insomnia* carries such a light. Here the poet successfully weds form to content, achieving an enchanted equilibrium. Hidden within the pages of this book

is the key to one of history's great enigmas, which Boris A. Novak slowly reveals before our bewildered eyes.

While a river of Bosnian refugees flowed into the uncertainty of foreign lands, while European diplomats washing their hands like Pontius Pilate became the symbol of the 1990s, while unscrupulous war criminals shook hands with the leaders of "the free world," Novak—as president of the Peace Committee of International PEN (he was appointed to the position in 1994) no less than as a poet—wrote a personal testament of a happy childhood, the only true homeland for the artist. Indeed, the poet dwells in his own ivory tower, but not, as might be conventionally thought, in order to escape the brutal terror of history, but rather to gain the vantage point needed to bear witness.

The poet's personal story is more precise and more revealing than any of the various histories written at strategic institutes or political offices. The poet's voice is singular and doesn't hesitate to utter the existential truth that the individual's story is also the story of the world. He sings with simple and mature beauty: "I am the rapid disintegration of the world."

It's been too long since the poet has slept. Instead he gathers details of unspeakable cruelties and tries to rescue them from oblivion. *The Master of Insomnia* exists because the devastation won't let the poet sleep. He poet doesn't know sleep because he is the witness of the world: not for an instant will he be lured into the magic circle of dreams. His wide-open eyes must watch over both the beauty of this life and the horror of its destruction.

LOVE AS POETIC FORM

Oscillating between civic engagement and poetic solitude, Novak helped establish the Society of the Friends of Lipica, an association tasked with protecting the endangered Lipizzan horse. A co-founder was Monika van Paemel, a Flemish writer. Soon, the two fell in love.

Is there a better method to madness than love? Is there a better way to fend off our catastrophic social-historical reality than with the fragile unity of two souls and bodies? Novak's recent collections, such as *Alba* (1999), testify to the fact that our insomniac poet has found a reinvigorated belief in the possibilities of the good and the beautiful in this most intimate of all human bonds. Having fallen in love with a woman, the poet has mustered his formal skills and lyrical talent to craft a movingly exuberant display of unfettered celebration: celebration of woman, her mystery, and her destiny.

Alba follows in the footsteps of medieval Provençal troubadours—a focus for Novak in his academic career as well—carefully reinventing verse discipline while praising precisely the kind of freedom that knows no limits and is entirely invested in the pursuit of a common joy. It is a jubilant, highly personal, and liberatingly intimate poetic account of two different identities merging into one. However short these moments of unity may be, they are worth preserving in a number of innovative coinings with troubadour roots, including the refrain *alba*, the glow of dawn that greets lovers at the morning farewell.

Saying farewell is, of course, and in a profoundly painful way, just as much a part of the vagaries of love as joy. The past must be

embraced, however disfigured. Novak's recent collections, *Žarenje* (Glowing, 2003), *Obredi slovesa* (Rites of Farewell, 2005), and *MOM: Mala Osebna Mitologija* (LPM: Little Personal Mythology, 2007) are clear windows onto Novak's acceptance of the past—his family's and his nation's.

Here, his meditations on the moments of his courtship give way to the kind of poetic discourse that can no longer hide its crucial dependence on social and political reality. The happy unity of the two lovers in *Žarenje* becomes an island under threat. Sinister shadows lurk in the corners and the collective stereotypes of West and East rear their ugly heads as the traces of war and dislocation upon our faces turn into treacherous bromides that help people explain everything and understand nothing.

Novak, a migrant between literary-historical periods and between the “meaning” and “sound” of poetic idiom, has come liberatingly close to accepting migration as a key process that defines the human condition in the contemporary world, shaped as it is by shifting borders and apocalyptic premonitions. Bearing witness to humanity's most evil aspects may be, in the end, the only foundation for the hope that we might to transcend them. Novak's political engagement, personal experience, and, above all, his sophisticated lyrical voice offer such a foundation.

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