
The Misfortune of the Gypsies

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Feri Lainšček belongs to the generation born at the beginning of the sixties and is one of its most productive Slovenian prose writers. He writes poetry, short prose, novels, plays for children and adults, radio plays, and edits a publishing programme. Unlike his peers, who have turned against modernism and its loose linguistic, verbalistic and playful variation as the two dominating literary movements at the beginning of the eighties, Lainšček's prose is miscellaneous and it reflects the entire course of the development of Slovenian prose after World War 2. His prose can be traditionalistic, modernistic or metafictional and it occasionally leaps into the literary genres when it can even flirt with the New Age principles. Yet his prose is undoubtedly most outstanding when it bears the stamp of his authorship, when it is autopoetic and evades any comparison, when it is impregnated with local colour, which, however, reads not as a document but as a large metaphor that goes beyond the local and becomes global. On account of that Lainšček is lately being linked and compared to two other literary names, to Vlado Žabot and Marijan Tomšič, because they all draw on and describe particular and recognizable regions with their atmosphere. Tomšič has chosen to verbalise Istria, the glowing Mediterranean landscape, where superstitions and rituals are still preserved and are mostly linked to the conflict between evil and good. The conveyers of the conflict are experts at the supernatural, yet common people somehow endowed with a natural gift for magic and its rituals. The prose of Lainšček and Žabot reflects a different locale, the region of Prekmurje, which is more grim and stifling, and less impetuous and temperamental. Here the pagan rituals and people's simplified beliefs are lying low within the Christian tradition and persevere by being stuck to it, by parasitizing Christianity. The creepy atmosphere which is present in the prose of both writers often feeds itself on the transgression, the conscious violation of the rules. However,

it is padded with melancholy, the feeling of being lost; the melancholic flatness of the landscape seems to enable the avoidance of giving final answers and reaching goals. Its surface offers no possibility for upsurging or surveying, and we may find such uncrossable and overgrown parts that one is tempted to tiresome wandering, yet a long persistent travelling goes through the marshes and morbid, hazy places which are seemingly hostile to man. Together with the literary characters we constantly find ourselves on the edge of grim unreal places inhabited by something living and lurking, evil and vicious, which annihilates beforehand the success of any action.

Despite Lainšček's mastery of different prose strategies and literary tendencies, there are also several constants present in his prose. Above all there is either his characteristic fascination with the marginals in the social sense, with the people who live on the edge of society, particularly when the setting is urban, or his fascination with the marginals in the psychological sense. His characters often tend to move on the edge, within the borderline psychotic states, in a world where they find it difficult to take sides, where their identity is uncertain, which can also be said for the reality itself, which is elusive and all the time borders on the miraculous and the fantastic. Dreams and illusions are often its constituent parts and are hardly separable from what actually goes on.

His first novels are already characterized by the marginal. *Peronarji (The Platformers)*, written at the beginning of the eighties, is a story about young people who get stuck in railway station buffets, in the common meeting places of drop-outs. At the bar they spend their empty days lacking purpose but never emotions and they experience different picaresque things. It is a realistic novel, the social marginals are free from any particular talents, they are no god's children, they are working-class people, declassed losers who withstand the demands for success and productivity. His two subsequent novels, *Razpočnica (A Slit)* and *Raza (A Scratch)*, written in the mid-eighties, are similar. In the latter the main character's identity undergoes so many changes caused by the situations and events that he bears no permanent name, he gets his names after the situations and events. In both novels the characters lead their lives on a slippery and rugged terrain, where the reality slips,

frays and gets lost; we never know where hallucinations end and where the unreliable memory begins, all the events are sifted through perception which is full of holes and schizoid blackouts. However, Lainšček employs a poetic language and an intensive style to manifest his subjectivity and extraordinary sensitivity for the aesthetic, for the sensual, as the world we have entered is the world without a perspective and is consequently a series of relatively sensual phenomena. This prose is entirely committed to the modernistic understanding of perception as the only and the unstable, the fluid foundation of the elusive reality. His next novel, written at the beginning of the nineties, *Grinta*, is metafictional; he is playing with the difference between the author's manipulation of the reader and the narrator's faking ignorance, which springs from his involvement in the course of events. At the same time the unlimited and uncommitted fictionality of literature itself is revealed. It is a story about a man who falls in love with a whore from the railway station, who answers an old advertisement for a sitting model. The femme fatale and her pimp, who turns out to be her husband, drive him to behave unreasonably, to commit crime, to rob and even to murder. However, this is not quite true, because in the end it turns out, or rather, there is a possibility that all has only been a hallucination he has had because of the neuroleptics he takes during his treatment after a suicidal attempt. All in all, there is a strong oedipal undertone present, with a symbolic patricide combined with competing for his mother's love. In *Grinta* Lainšček plays with the stereotypes about a fatal, elusive and mysterious woman; he plays with the narrative strategies, with some basic psychoanalytical problems, which may be simplified on purpose. The result is that the reader is tricked into a seemingly simple story and his projections are played with as well. Lainšček's writing in literary genres is noticeable as well. It approaches the New Age speculations about the karmic debt, about incarnation, about life as the recurrence of one of the eternal, constant archetypes; one of these archetypes is followed in the two parallel stories in the novel *Skarabej in vestalka* (*A Scarab and a Vestal*), where a contemporary woman endowed with the ability of identifying herself with stories from the past actually relives the story of her predecessor from the prehistoric age, she reconstructs the story of one of her own previous incarnations, and thus she literally repeats her feminine

unselfish sacrifice for a man she loves; instead of a man's sacrifice in the name of his people, of the idea, of higher goals, we get a woman's endless sacrifice for an individual she is committed to and who, naturally, betrays her. The astral plot is at first sight a crime story, but at the same time it is a prose trip into the world of paranormal phenomena since the wrongdoer of the investigated crime is a spiritual being and not at all a material one.

Lainšček's two subsequent novels about the region of Prekmurje are undoubtedly his masterpieces. *Ki jo je megla prinesla* (*She, Who Was Brought By the Fog*) is a story of a damned and doubting priest, who after giving away the church assets in his parish, and after a long and wearisome roaming comes by decree into the sinful godforsaken village of Mogoš to reconstruct its church and gather its scattered community. After a number of morbid events which testify to the presence of widespread sin and damnation, and despite enormous difficulties he manages to accomplish his mission but gets involved in a crime, in debauchery. The local people, more or less sinful, refuse to support him, and what is more, there are signs of the devil himself. He gives up and on his leaving the flood occurs. What is left of the world he is leaving behind is a reconstructed church in all its glamour, but the rest goes under the water. The biblical theme of the fall and the flood, the story of Job, are all skillfully mixed with the popular understanding of the tradition and with the superstitions. The end is surprisingly optimistic: the world of Mogoš is obviously cursed and has therefore been exposed to destruction, the priest's search and efforts are rewarded with the proof of God's presence, which redeems and gives sense to all the past actions. *Ki jo je megla prinesla* is a novel about the grace of God in the Christian, confessional sense, and its end is one of the more optimistic ends closing Lainšček's stories since the integration of subjectivity is achieved, the search ends successfully, the existence is made complete and given sense.

In 1991 he published his novel *Namesto koga roža cveti* (*Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom*), which was awarded the Kresnik prize for the best novel of the year. The title was taken from the lyrics of the song, written by Vlado Kreslin, a songwriter and singer from Prekmurje, and it serves as an introduction to

the novel itself. It alludes to the fact that everyone is alone and on his own, and any effort to be for the others is fruitless; and furthermore, the more we trust and sacrifice ourselves the more we understand another person's behaviour, his or her independence and individualisation, as an act of betrayal.

Again the characters are marginals, who are at the same time an ethnic minority - the gypsies. Lainšček does not take the gypsies for the sake of their exoticism but for the sake of their actual life, which is described by the writer who is closely and well acquainted with it, and who avoids the folkloristics and the romantic idealisation of their nomadic, off-civilization, kind of life; their life is made an overall symbol of man's mistaken existential position and of the failure of his action. The literary characters are individualised to such an extent that they become everymen, their passions and their adventures, their sentiments and their actions are close to everyone. It turns out that sooner or later their lives are guided and directed by fate, which prevents them from getting out of the a priori present. It seems that we are told the story of two half brothers, Pišti and Halgato, who choose separate ways out of the cursed gypsy life, to primarily understand that fate is something we are born with, something that comes with the misfortune of being born (as a Gypsy), with the inner determinacy, with mentality, and that fate is like quicksands - no matter how hard we try to reach the solid ground, we go under - deeper and deeper. The characters have fate in their hot, heated blood, however, not in the naturalistic sense, not genetically, but in that the action of an individual - particularly one driven by the eros and his hypertrophic sense of honour - is doomed to transgression, to excess. And as such it works against any planning of the future, it is vandalistic and spasmodic in relation to the community, it is a violation of the written and unwritten rules, and it often opposes its own ethical principles.

Lainšček's literary characters are bearers of a sentiment and temper of a kind entirely different from the one that characterises the Slovenian mentality, the one which is the foundation of our national feeling, and which until recently secured the pragmatic survival under the overrule of major forces; our mentality is characterised by yearning, a desire without an object, whose final and often unconscious aim is to gain once-

lost wholeness, to surpass the sexual differences, to merge into a hermaphroditic unity of contrasts. However, such yearning is passive, because it has no object, its "goal" is the original entirety and wholeness, which "has always been lost and is lost for ever" as the philosopher Tine Hribar says in his book *The Drama of Yearning*. The passivity of yearning is the consequence of the desire moving within its own enclosure, and it diverts from any action as its intermediate goal is removed, invisible and inaccessible. The literary characters in the novel behave differently, which is best reflected by Halgato when he learns that Pišti has ended up in jail: "he knew that God concedes nothing else but humbleness to the Gypsies. They are blessed by his goodness and granted a little bit of happiness only if they squat in their sheds and creep around. All their hopes are instantly made heretic. And if one of them happens to raise his head, either out of arrogance or ignorance, he gets what is coming to him. Like a dog which forgets itself and barks at its owner, he ends up with his tail between his legs. Because such only is their fate. The rest is nothing else but wiseness, and the gypsies buying it end up miserable." (p. 157, V/1) Halgato speculates that the gypsies are to be humble, because their God wants them to be like that, however, the nature of their God and his demands are never clarified or explained, no commandments are made known to us. The workings of God are rather demonstrated in practice, in an unenviable and outcast position of the individuals and the community, which is caused by a number of mistaken acts. On the other hand, Halgato informs us about what kind of characteristics and values are expected from them by the surroundings where they live, by the majority community to which they offer their services as fiddlers, knife sharpeners or tinkers, the community that, as we all know, swears by "diligence", by hardworking, which with properly regulated effort and work enables gradual, careful spreading and an improved standard; gratitude and piety are ever present. Nevertheless, even those who belong to the ethnic majority, who become snobbish and want too much at once, are stricken and beaten as is shown in the novel by the example of Iza's father, who is to accept "the black gypsy" as his son-in-law. The majority community swears by being sensible, by making sacrifices, by labouring today for tomorrow's better crop, by being modest, careful - and by waiting. On the other hand, all the front char-

acters in Lainšček's story behave contrary to these commandments, their actions are passionate and temperamental, care-free, they act wholeheartedly and wholebodily without thinking over the consequences; they are led by the eros, which is lighted up by its wild, dark and uncultivated shadow. That is why their actions border on autodestruction, their passions, their lust directed to everything, are excessive, and when the passion, the revenge, or the lust, are triggered, any calculation becomes absent and pushed back. While yearning restrains from acting beforehand and is directed into the world of privacy, of nostalgia, of the cultivated, of the noble melancholy, the sentiment of Lainšček's characters, on the other hand, gives up conciliation, being at peace, and conforming beforehand. Hence we get the feeling that they whine about their misfortune because they do not know when and where they will be punished for pursuing lust and pleasure, but they know they certainly will be punished. And the biggest delight is nourished by the act of lust, which knows that the pleasure will stop and that it will sooner or later have to be paid for, at a high price, with one's life even, with destroyed friendship and a ruined fiddler's career. The delight is so much bigger because it is aware of its high price, it is aware of how high the stakes are. Consequently, the liveliness goes hand in hand with the deepest sadness, the skilful bargaining and shrewdness go hand in hand with the fear of punishment and condemnation to marginalisation, and that is why the desire instantly converts into horror, which puts on different masks, mainly in the form of a grim and grinning, a widely laughing grimace. Lainšček's Gypsies externalize their suffering, in which they exaggerate, and in which there is already a cry of despair and helplessness, of being entrapped, because the action is doomed to success, and the success is an unavoidable transgression.

If we now take another look at Lainšček's novel, we can see how all its characters, from Halgato's parents to his sisters-in-law, are ruined on account of the enormous, unstoppable desire, which is powerful and uncontrollable; Halgato's father Mariška is killed by the members of the national security service (UDBA), for he has killed one of them, probably in self defence, but certainly in the outburst of a great passion, resulting from the adultery with his wife. Halgato's stepfather, Bumbaša, is sent to jail when he kills two Gypsies; the first

one is killed because he - despite the fact that one of Bumbaša's daughters he has raped gets pregnant and despite the threats and the subsequent reconciliation ending in marriage - rapes the other daughter as well; the other one is killed in the heat of passion because he haunted Bumbaša as a ghost. Bumbaša, a good-natured and quite picaresquely cheerful man, is driven into a crime because of honour, revenge, and because of his realization that doing wrong twice cannot stay unpunished. To Halgato's mother her husband is not enough, and vice versa, which causes conflicts in the gypsy commune. The two protagonists are destructive as well; Pišti, encouraged by Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*, sacrifices himself after a traffic accident, ends up in jail, where he loses his temper, kills a warden, and his career in the big world finishes here. Despite his efforts to get an education, to adapt to the surroundings, he is ruined, and in the eyes of the society he becomes problematic, marginal, and slips to the place which fate and society have always intended for him. Halgato is half autistic, listening to the voices inside, he is terrified of the world - still he rapes Pišti's fiancée while firmly demanding justice and truth; despite his relative inexperience, his instinct and his need to take revenge, because she has stolen from him the only person he feels close to, are stronger. The realization that he can be substituted by a woman, who means everything to his friend, a home, a mother, a mistress, and even more than that, and the libido, which he fails in time to suppress by self torturing, by symbolic castration, make him unreasonable just once. It has a terrible consequence for the three characters.

The fate of a gypsy is made even more hopeless with the literary characters being doubled; Halgato's introversion, his restraint, his musical talent - all could protect him from repeating his father's destiny; and the same could be said for Pišti's self-confident, pragmatic break into the world, into school, supported by both communities, the majority and the minority one. However, there is no place where they can avoid their own destructive behaviour and their fate, be it in *Velka veja*, in *Lacka roma* or in town: they both succumb to that. It is in the novel *Namesto koga roža cveti*, where Lainšček introduces his doubling technique, which results in the characters of Vankoštanc, Černelč and Agasi, and then again in the novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla*, where beside the vicar there is also Mali,

who is hypersensitive and has a natural talent for all that does not quite belong to this world. Lainšček uses the above mentioned technique to test the possibility of a complete existence in the literary worlds of two characters, from two points of view. Nevertheless, a lot of pessimism is shown as to the possibilities of one's purposeful and full life on account of the fact that different characters are ruined, the introverted and the losers, as well as those who seemingly start with a will and the possibility of succeeding. The pessimism is even deepened when Iza, Pišti's fiancée, is ruined or at least she drops out of the sexual exchange, although she ignores the prejudices of her surroundings and tries to bridge the gap between the two worlds, the one of her own and the one of the gypsies.

Halgato, Lainšček's narrator, starts his narration from the marginal position, absolutely marginal on different levels; he is infinitely alone and lonely, excluded from both the worlds, he is in the waste land between Lacka roma and Velka vejsa, he is sleepless on account of his feeling guilty for things he has triggered or even caused, and he is inclined to illusions on account of his search for the right moment at night when his enchanted violin is going to give its sweetest sound. When it is going to weep. He has not slept for a long time, and the story - divided into books and chapters, which we follow - is seen by him in retrospective through his blurred consciousness; the different realistically and animatedly described episodic characters from the two separate worlds appear and sink into oblivion. However, despite the above described marginal position, this novel is formally more traditional than the previous ones as we follow the story chronologically, without any substantial doubtful spots, to its completion which ends with a vision, which is, however, a negative one. It ends with Pišti's wealth and selfdestruction because, despite everything, he cannot get the only thing necessary for happiness - love. We get the feeling that Lainšček's story springs out of a song and its tune, it is lively and temperamental, rhythmically changeable, lyrically slowed down, then it is dramatically intensive again, but throughout supported by pain and melancholy. All is successfully intensified by metaphors and powerful, suggestive symbols, which are more or less in the service of premonitions; we have a fiddler in the middle of the reeds, the moon in the sky, the sounds of birds, the marshes, and

finally the haziness, which adds to the illusion and the uncertainty, to the unclarity of the whole thing. The narration is further broken because it is composed of pieces of adventure and of prose fragments, stirred by lively dialogues, which are very persuasive because, despite the moderate usage of dialect words, the characters can clearly be identified; there are characteristic repetitions, gradations, omissions, and exaggerations, the juicy language, and the belief that all is alive, which enables expressive addressing of natural phenomena, the moon, the birds, and all that participates in this great story about the two unsuccessful efforts of the characters who try to escape the cursed life they were born into by climbing onto each other's shoulders.

Translated by Irena Zorko Novak