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# Neo-Romanticism in the Time of Josip Murn

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The oeuvre of Josip Murn, an eminent Slovene lyric poet, belongs to the Slovene ‘*moderna*’ period (1899–1918) and in some respects mirrors the tendencies of European neo-romanticism. In order to facilitate Murn’s placement in European literature for the English-speaking reader, these pages provide a short survey of contemporary movements in British literature. The short survey is preceded by an account of the Slovene *moderna*, the group of writers to which Murn belonged.<sup>1</sup>

European literature between 1899 and 1918 saw a parallel development of diverse trends. Realism and naturalism were still important, particularly in fiction and drama: they may have lost their central role in France and Germany, but they continued to dominate both prose and drama in British, Scandinavian, and Slavic literatures. While the realism and naturalism of the time already contained admixtures of neo-romanticism, it was in this very period that European literature

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<sup>1</sup> The text draws particularly on the following sources: Janko Kos, *Pregled svetovne književnosti* [A Survey of World Literature] (Ljubljana: DZS, 1991); Janko Kos, *Pregled slovenskega slovstva* [A Survey of Slovene Literature] (Ljubljana: DZS, 1992); Bernhard Fehr, *Studien zu Oscar Wilde’s Gedichten* (Berlin, 1918); Ian Ousby, *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1994); Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London and New York: Longman, 1998).

produced a number of important works based mainly on realist principles. Exemplary authors in Great Britain include Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy and George Bernard Shaw, and, in the United States, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson and Upton Sinclair. Poetry and partly drama, by contrast, were dominated until 1918 by a strong current of neo-romanticism: elements of decadence and symbolism left their stamp on many leading poets, dramatists and prose writers from various European countries, among them, William Butler Yeats. To sum up, while the European literary background against which Slovene regions developed the period of *moderna* and of its contemporaries was varied indeed, fiction undoubtedly focused on realism and naturalism, and poetry – and to some extent drama – on symbolism.

The period 1899–1918 was dubbed the ‘Slovene *moderna*’, after the term *die Moderne* had been adopted in post-1890 Germany and Austria to denote German naturalism, and later decadence and symbolism – those movements, in fact, which broke with the older poetic realism, with romantic epigons and academic formalism, and introduced modern life into literature. In Slovene literary theory the term is used more narrowly, encompassing those literary impulses which rejected, in 1899 and later, epigonic romanticism, realism, and naturalism *in Slovene literature*. This is not to say, however, that romanticism, realism, or naturalism were rejected entirely, much less in their original forms. The Slovene *moderna*, which comprises Dragotin Kette (1876–99), Josip Murn (1879–1901), Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), and Oton Župančič (1878–1949), was

not a unified trend: after the deaths of Kette and Murn in 1899 and 1901 respectively, the works of Cankar and Župančič took the Slovene *moderna* in directions far removed from their common beginnings. Thus it is mostly in their early works that similarities between these four authors are readily observed, and even here considerable differences appear. Focusing on Murn, our discussion shall limit itself to lyric poetry and ignore the genres not tackled by Murn, such as fiction and drama, although these two genres developed in the *moderna* period with no less vigour than lyric poetry and represent watersheds in the evolution of Slovene literature (a case in point is Cankar's dramatic oeuvre). Contemporary with this group of authors was of course a wide circle of poets and prose writers who were often influenced by the *moderna* and accepted its initiatives, but nevertheless maintained the established literary premises: the 'contemporaries of the Slovene *moderna*'.

The lyric poetry of the Slovene *moderna* reached its apogee in the works of Dragotin Kette, Josip Murn, and Oton Župančič, which were unmatched by any of their contemporaries. Their favourite poetic forms were short atmospheric and erotic pieces, often in sonnet form, and short reflections, which were only expanded into longer philosophical or hymnic poems by the mature Župančič.

The poetry of the Slovene *moderna* was the hub of several literary currents. One was the tradition of romanticism with its subjectivity, evocation of folk songs, and relaxation of melody and rhythm. This tradition was revived by the Slovene *moderna* representatives in opposition to the prevailing academic formalism,

impersonality, and narrative poetry. Once more, feeling triumphed over regularity of form and tendentiousness of idea. The patterns to be emulated were found in folk songs as well as in Mikhail Lermontov, Heinrich Heine, Adam Mickiewicz, France Prešeren, and other romantic poets from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet the revived romanticism was no mere imitation: on the contrary, it tackled the contemporary experience of life, and was interwoven with elements of decadence and the impressionist style. This trend – the old romanticism with elements of impressionism, decadence, and incidental symbolism – came to dominate the work of Dragotin Kette.

Another current within the Slovene *moderna* was neo-romanticism in its double guise of decadence and symbolism. While merely grazing Kette, it exerted more influence on Murn, Cankar, and Župančič. In the case of Murn, it merged with echoes of the old romanticism and the folk song, drawing on decadence and to a lesser degree on symbolism: its outstanding feature was its impressionist style. Decadence proved a stronger influence on the young Cankar and Župančič, but its elements were soon eclipsed by symbolist features. For all the diversity of the currents converging in the Slovene *moderna*, its principles and practices were dominated by the subjective orientation of the so-called *fin-de-siècle* with its rejection of the objective, rational, matter-of-fact descriptive quality that informed the 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism and naturalism.

A clear-cut neo-romantic, Murn bases his writings on subjectivity with its moods, feelings and dreams. Short atmospheric or confessional pieces are a suitable vehicle for this content. The images are delicate, hazy,

refined, which may be attributed to the influence of decadence. The individual phenomena of the material world have a symbolic significance, but not in terms of a higher metaphysical world, such as imbues Mallarmé's French symbolism: Murn's content is simpler in both feeling and experience. His is an impressionist style, built on minute impressions of the outside world, which are linked together and accompanied by the poet's mood. These may develop into a free-standing reflection or meditation. An important role in his style is assigned to the sensory impressions of sight and hearing, which again go back to decadent aesthetics. Another typical feature of neo-romanticism is Murn's penchant for countryside motifs, a penchant familiar to the old romanticism as well, since it springs from a romantic desire to pit reality against an ideal image of picturesque life and genuine emotions. It was thus that Murn arrived at a particular neo-romantic type of naive poetry, which is in fact not naive at all but decadent and impressionist in style, sometimes even symbolic: the poet artfully assumes the seemingly naive subject matter, mentality and emotions of a rustic, yet always sounding underneath this artificial naivety is his sense of loneliness, melancholy, and alienation. Murn's impressionist approach is further attested by his style, which – particularly in his countryside poems – abounds in allusive, opaque and sometimes illogical word phrases and sentence meanings. This opacity is in fact a major trait of his poetry.

We shall continue by considering the contemporary literary movements in the European English-speaking world and their individual proponents. It should be noted that literature written in English had little direct

impact on Slovene authors: in Murn's short lifetime, the territory of present-day Slovenia belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Slovene men of letters were thus mainly influenced by the German-speaking world. Indeed, even non-German influences, such as (originally French) decadence and symbolism, came via German and Austrian mediators. The impact of decadence and symbolism began after 1896, namely, with the arrival of some Slovene *moderna* representatives in Vienna, where they became acquainted with Paul Verlaine, Friedrich Nietzsche, Richard Dehmel, Maurice Maeterlinck and Oscar Wilde. But despite this cultural distance, a summary of the developments in the larger European space may help to place Murn in a wider context.

In the light of Murn's own oeuvre, the discussion shall focus on neo-romanticism and its precursors. Neo-romanticism had begun in France in the 1850s, spreading to other countries over the following decades. An important precursor was the French writer and art critic, Théophile Gautier (1811–72), who abandoned his original romantic approach and became an advocate of the *l'art pour l'art* principle: literature should be freed from all external constraints and led only by the desire for pure beauty. In his own lyric poetry, Gautier strove to elaborate the form and to describe his responses to art works graphically, precisely and objectively. Thus he forged a major link in the progress from romantic subjectivity to neo-romantic aestheticism and impressionism.

Reacting to realism, neo-romanticism reintroduced romantic tendencies and developed them to two extremes: sensuality (decadence) and spirituality

(symbolism). The former fostered a well-nigh pathological excess of sensuality and emotion, seeking to render it through visual, auditory and other devices; the latter created a symbolism of concepts, notions and visions, which should convey to the reader a suprasensual world of ideas, accessible only through symbols. These symbols were to hint at subtle associations and affinities, particularly between sound, sense and colour (as in Charles Baudelaire's sonnet 'Correspondances' or Arthur Rimbaud's sonnet 'Voyelles') or between the material and the spiritual. The notion of correspondences led to an interest in the esoteric and to ideas about the musicality of poetry, according to which the theme of a poem is orchestrated by the evocative power of words. Both decadence and symbolism favoured the inner life and imagination over reality; both revived images and figures from the past, exoticism, fairy tales and legends. The two strands could be indissolubly fused, as in the work of Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), the leading poet of French neo-romanticism, or a single strand might prevail, as symbolism prevailed in Stéphane Mallarmé's work (1842–98). Both strands are marked by an impressionist style which seeks to capture momentary sensations and impulses through sound, synaesthesia, and imagery.

The English neo-romanticism evolved partly from Pre-Raphaelitism, which emerged around 1848 with the aim of renewing romantic religious and aesthetic tendencies (later championed especially by critic John Ruskin), as well as from aestheticism (as established by Walter Pater), and partly under the influence of French decadence and symbolism. The Pre-Raphaelite

movement inspired Algernon Charles Swinburne, while British neo-romantic literature peaked in the work of Oscar Wilde.

A good place to start is the Aesthetic Movement and one of its most prominent proponents. Classical scholar Walter Pater (1839–94) was an essayist and critic, as well as the central figure of a narrowly circumscribed aesthetic circle at Oxford. The Aesthetic Movement, which found expression in poetry, prose and painting, developed in the Great Britain of the 1880s as a reaction to Victorian optimism, to utilitarianism fuelled by industrial progress, and to belief in morality in art. In stark contrast to these Victorian traits, the movement was tinged with melancholy and pessimism, adopting as its credo the slogan ‘Art for Art’s sake’ (*l’art pour l’art* in French). It was intrigued by exotic art forms, novel precepts and remote cultures; anti-bourgeois, escapist and dandyish, it placed form before content and favoured ornamentation, colour and intensity, ever in search of aesthetic originality. The movement progressively stressed pure sensation and extolled the intensity of the moment. It was strongly influenced by the contemporary French art, that is, by neo-romanticism with its strands of symbolism and decadence as well as impressionism.

It was largely by virtue of the self-effacing Pater that the Aesthetic Movement achieved prominence. The year 1873 saw the publication of Pater’s first book, the essay collection *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Its notorious ‘Conclusion’, which he was forced to withdraw from the subsequent edition, became a gospel of British aestheticism. Life was described as a state of flux, with art (its creation or appreciation) as

the only means of securing a measure of stability. All that surrounds us and seems perfectly solid and reliable in fact dissolves into a group of impressions – of colour, smell, texture – in the observer's mind. Thus we must strive to absorb every moment with all senses, for 'not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us [...] is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening'. Pater's account was so vivid that his aesthetic creed exercised an enormous influence on the younger generation of poets, including Oscar Wilde, and many of them responded like Wilde himself: they wrote about fleeting states, seeking to capture and arrest the moment through art. It was such *carpe diem* ideas as well as the misrepresentations of his disciples that brought upon Pater an aura of hedonism. But this image is exaggerated: while he did value the understanding and apprehension of beauty, coupled with a melancholy recognition of the brevity of human life, he never wholly abandoned the ethical implications of aestheticism.

Another of Wilde's role models at Oxford was the then Professor of Art, John Ruskin (1819–1900), a hugely influential and prolific art historian and critic. His five volumes of *Modern Painters* secured critical acclaim for William Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, a group of painters and poets who crucially influenced the young Wilde. Yet Ruskin was connected to the Pre-Raphaelites in still another way: his discovery of moral and social values in medieval architecture and his defence of the craftsman's dignity against the spread of mechanisation paved the way for the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain, which stressed traditional techniques as opposed to the encroaching

mechanical production. And the leading advocate of the movement was one of the closest supporters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: poet, artisan, designer and architect William Morris (1834–96).

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1848 by a group of young painters: Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dante's brother William Michael Rossetti, Frederick George Stephens, James Collinson, and Thomas Woolner. Dissatisfied with the prevailing artistic canons in England, they sought to return to artistic standards prevalent before Raphael. Their aims were to express genuine ideas, to study and render nature in the closest detail, to produce pictures and statues good by their own standards, to oppose conventionality and routine, and to revolutionise the use of colour. Their production, marked by symbolism and the love of remote, romantic subject matter, attracted still other artists and thus developed into Pre-Raphaelitism. Although the Brotherhood itself lasted only five or six years, it had a distinct influence on later 19<sup>th</sup>-century artists and writers.

A dominant figure in the early stages of the Brotherhood was Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), painter, poet and translator. His paintings – of Dantesque subjects, religious scenes from both Testaments, Arthurian motifs – are symbolic, spiritually charged and evocative of the past, of mysticism, of remote worlds. His poetry is crafted in the same manner: detailed, symbolic, permeated with medieval colour and remote themes (Arthurian legends, Dantesque mysticism), occasionally couched in archaic language and at times steeped in erotic sensuality.

The Pre-Raphaelites, in particular Rossetti, left the deepest mark on Oscar Wilde's first poems. Despite his Protestant roots he became fascinated with medieval mysticism, the Roman Catholic services, and the spiritual mysteries hidden behind the intoxicating luxury of liturgy. Moreover, Wilde was attracted by Rossetti's favourite poetic form: the ballad, based on the Scottish ballad whose burden progresses from seemingly meaningless sonority to powerful suggestion. It was one of Rossetti's innovations to introduce slight variations into the – originally unchanging – ballad burden, thus subtly adjusting the shades of mood.

The years 1865–71 formed the first important period in the work of Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), an English poet, playwright, novelist and critic. Swinburne's work blends together the elements of Ancient Greek poetry, Elizabethan drama, Pre-Raphaelitism with its medieval colour, French neo-romanticism (especially Baudelaire and Gautier) with its blasphemous and sexually perverse subject matter, and political rebellion. The last emerges in poems written in support of democracy and various independence movements, most notably the Italian struggle. His first period is most intensely marked by his regular stylistic features: lavish imagery, metrical feats, and musical, suggestive cascades of words to illustrate the themes. A prime example is a later poem, 'The Sunbows', in which the metre and the predominance of short, alliterative words conjure up the dance of reflections and rainbows in the sea spray.

Turning his back on the Victorian taste, Swinburne thus revolutionised technique and content to chart a new direction in English literature: the *fin-de-siècle*

or neo-romanticism, which was to reach its apogee in Great Britain with Oscar Wilde (1854–1900). Like other neo-romantic poets, Wilde – who died one year before Murn – interweaves decadence and symbolism with impressionist style. Many of his poems are inspired by painting; while some of them are pure visual impressions, others juxtapose images or similes which are visually related only by their colour or lighting, thus evoking a prevailing mood rather than a physical picture. The role of such images is to establish symbolist, Baudelairesque correspondences which may raise the reader to a higher plane of perception: a plane on which every thing perceived is infinitely evocative.

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# A Huge Sigh – of an Unknown World

*Dedicated to the Poems of Josip Murn Aleksandrov*

*Brane Senegačnik*

## I

The entry on the poet Josip Murn Aleksandrov provided in the *Slovene Biographical Lexicon* includes the following:

‘Murn Aleksandrov Josip, poet, b. Ljubljana, March 4, 1879, d. June 18, 1901. Illegitimate son of a worker at a Ljubljana firm, Marija Murn, who left after his birth to work in Trieste; the father, employed by the same firm, married another woman 2 months after the child’s birth. Thus the boy was consigned to the care of strangers from the very beginning: first to an elderly woman at Zadobrava (now a suburb of Ljubljana), then to a railway servant’s family in Ljubljana, and finally to a Ljubljana student landlady, Polona Kalan, to whom he returned after spending some years at a nearby elementary boarding school where he had been accepted in 1884. In 1895 the two moved to a disused sugar factory by the Ljubljanica River, the so-called *Cukrarna*. Murn attended the *Staatsgymnasium* in 1890–98. Uninterested in school subjects, he remained an average student. However, he did apply himself to languages, in particular Slavic ones. After graduation he obtained a Ljubljana Chamber of Commerce scholarship and travelled to Vienna, where he enrolled at the Export Academy but soon left in dissatisfaction.

After considering veterinary medicine, agronomy, and military service, he finally decided on law studies. His straitened circumstances (the Chamber of Commerce scholarship was revoked) induced him to leave Vienna after the first term and enroll the next year at the Prague Faculty of Law, but he never made it so far: his insidious disease, tuberculosis, was becoming increasingly pronounced, and his sojourns in the Upper Carniola (Gorenjska) region and in the town of Vipava had no effect. In February 1900 he obtained a stenographer's post with Dr Šušteršič, a Ljubljana attorney, and at the end of 1900 the position of a clerk at the Chamber of Commerce, but soon even this work proved too exhausting. Financial support came mainly from his mother's sister Marijana, who served in Ljubljana as a maid; moreover, he soon began to eke out a modest living by tutoring and writing. He died at the *Cukrarna*, of the same disease as his fellow poet, Dragotin Kette, 2 years earlier. His remains were later transferred to the tomb of the Slovene *moderna* poets in Ljubljana's main cemetery, together with Ivan Cankar and Dragotin Kette.

'In appearance M[urn] was of medium height, slim, oval-faced and slightly freckled, with thick auburn hair and a sturdy beard which he later allowed to grow. He had childlike, melancholy, pensive blue eyes and a timid, mistrustful glance. His voice was unsteady, and when reciting he would stress syllables as if scanning. His character was sincere, tender, proud, in need of support, his conversation humorous and ironic. Throughout his life he was plagued by a restlessness and dissatisfaction with himself. He showed an inclination to pessimism and an upright and just, albeit rebellious

spirit, with a penchant for merrymaking. He formed sensible conclusions but was slow and uncertain when deciding. Mistrustful and circumspect in communication, he was nevertheless susceptible to everything that could affect his emotions, which made him easy prey to external influences. All his life he was plagued by the tragic lot of an illegitimate child, and especially by his mother's indifference. He was further determined by his sexual precocity and inwardly riven nature: a townsman born and bred, he always longed for the country, the dreamy home which he found beautiful and good only from a distance and at long intervals; even the simple harmony of nature could not satisfy him for ever. Unable to find peace or his own self, he remained an eternal wanderer who leaves full of yearning and returns in disappointment: hence the changeability and diffusion of his feelings and thoughts, hence his vivacity of temperament and, on the other hand, his extreme exhaustion.<sup>1</sup>

## II

Poetry is difficult to explicate without references to the author's biography and his coordinates in literary history. The very act of reading seems to stir up questions about the poet's life and reading, about the time and place where his texts were conceived, the people and

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<sup>1</sup> *Slovenska biografija* [Slovene Biography] (Ljubljana: Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts, Scientific and Research Centre, 2013), <http://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi381539/#slovenski-biografski-leksikon> (accessed November 28, 2016). The entry was written by literary historian Silva Trdina, the first systematic researcher into Murn's life and work.

ideas by whom they were influenced. That having been said, even the most exhaustive knowledge of this kind cannot compensate for the living contact with the text. This applies especially to lyric poetry, which relies for its effect on sound and mental image no less than on meaning. Of all genres, it is lyric poetry that demands from the reader the most direct approach, suspension of intellectual distance, identification with the mood of the poem (not quite the same thing as identification with the speaker's or author's convictions). More than any other form of literature, it thrives in direct contact: in reading or listening, which is in fact the primary mode of its reception (the sonority of Murn's poetry, too, begs to be read aloud). Reading literary historical surveys thus sometimes resembles walking down the corridor in a block of flats: the identical-looking doors reveal nothing about the size, shape, furniture of the flat, or about the life that goes on inside; the door signs often create false impressions and deceitful expectations... And yet we would be lost without them.

Growing up parentless in foster homes, never feeling truly accepted, left clear traces in the themes and motifs of Murn's poetry: *The one who loves you in the world is – you... Where are you, silent home...* etc. These circumstances must have influenced the atmosphere of loneliness which permeates many of his best lines; it is, moreover, reasonable to suppose that they enhanced his introvert character and that confrontation with them may have shaped the peculiar pride of a slighted genius.<sup>2</sup> The preceding essay in this book

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<sup>2</sup> Not only in literature but in life – as might be inferred from certain statements by Oton Župančič (two letters to Ivan Cankar, dated August 22, 1897, and March 21, 1898), from Murn's own reference to the opinions supposedly held about him (letter to

brings a concise account of his poetics, his mode of articulating his existential experiences and other subject matter, and outlines his main stylistic traits ('decadent and impressionist' poetry) and aesthetic ideals, the general characteristics of the Slovene *moderna* and contemporary European literature, as well as the major influences.<sup>3</sup> All of this, however, takes us but to the door behind which lyric poetry is taking place. Or, to use another image: detailed information on the climate of a place may tell us much about its natural world, but we have to visit it ourselves to know it truly. This is corroborated by the words of Dušan Pirjevec, an eminent Slovene literary historian and theorist as well as the editor of Murn's collected works. Pirjevec arranges the lyric poems excluded by the poet from his collection<sup>4</sup> in three cycles – impressionist, erotic, confessional – with the observation: 'But with a poet like Murn, who steepes even impressions in his own moods and feelings, thus generally reshaping the outside

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his friend Ivan Prijatelj, a Slovene literary historian and essayist, dated November 23, 1899), from Andrej Gabršček (letter to Ivan Prijatelj, dated May 23, 1898, which was provoked by Murn's 'extremely insulting letter' concerning the gymnasium almanach *Na razstanku*, *At Parting*, in which the young Murn published c. thirty poems), and from the reports on his response to publisher Bamberg's rejection of his manuscript (cf. Josip Murn, *Zbrano delo* [Collected Works], ed. Dušan Pirjevec, 1:368).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Lermontov, these notably included the poet Aleksei Vasilievich Koltsov (1809–42), a 'Russian Burns', who was a profound influence on Murn's 'countryside poems'.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to a reprint of the collection *Pesmi in romance* [Songs and Romances], edited by Ivan Prijatelj and published in 1903 by the Lavoslav Schwentner publishing house in Ljubljana, *Zbrano delo* (1954) contains all other Murn poems discovered so far, 'arranged by criteria of content and form: the texts from the collection are followed by lyric, narrative lyric, narrative, and occasional poems'.

world in his own image, it is sometimes difficult to establish whether a poem belongs predominantly to this or that group.<sup>5</sup>

### III

For the non-Slovene reader, a peculiar – and thus intriguing – genre may be Murn's so-called 'countryside lyric poetry'. Interweaving the motifs of country life, customs and beliefs with his personal feelings, it creatively imitates the typical forms of folk song, that is, of pre-literary song. Borrowed from the folk song, the metrical schemes and rhetorical figures are imbued with the poet's own individual tone. But despite the picturesque folkloristic motifs, Murn is not bent on ethnography or nation-rousing poetry, although it was as such that his collection was hailed by some readers immediately on publication.<sup>6</sup> All of Murn's poetry, the countryside pieces included, is stamped by his individuality: rather than a renewal of antiquities, these poems are a form in which the poet's pulsating self merges with a half-real, half-idealised rural community, thus finding a temporary backdrop to a full-fledged existence, reconciled to the outside world. But this is no more than an instant in his poetics – agitated, terse but dynamic in form and theme, deeply

<sup>5</sup> *Zbrano delo*, 1:441.

<sup>6</sup> To cite an example: in the *Slovenski narod* [Slovene Nation] newspaper, another Slovene man of letters, Cvetko Golar (his review was published on March 27 and 28, 1903; the quote as given in this note is taken from *Zbrano delo*, 1:340), emphasises Murn's 'healthy national feeling' and writes: 'In recent poetry, *Aleksanderov* was the buttress of [...] the individual Slovene poem richly embellished with national colour.'

individual, perhaps even individualistic. It is a blissful stop on a restless journey through poetry and life, a journey lacking any real destination, goal, or compass ('Epitaph'). Even among poets it was much later, decades after his death, that Murn gained great popularity and recognition as a major Slovene lyric poet. As readerly perspective gradually changed, it unveiled the true power of his verses, especially those radiating the genuine existentialist experience *ante litteram*: the feeling of being cast upon the world and out of society – a feeling that is most conspicuous in such poems as 'The Counterpart', 'Song' (beginning with the lines 'Dazzling, dazzling, this bouquet'), 'How Lovely', or 'Where Are You, Silent Home'. Today it is an established fact that Murn took the first steps towards a radical modernisation of Slovene lyric poetry, carrying the 'logical' articulation of traditional poetry to the utmost extremes.<sup>7</sup>

While Murn certainly was an important innovator in contemporary Slovene poetry,<sup>8</sup> he can hardly be called innovative from a European perspective (it should be noted, though, that Slovene poets are practically precluded from establishing novelties on an international scale by the lack of Slovene-speaking readers). In the European context, his novelties

<sup>7</sup> This aspect of Murn's poetry – and perhaps his overall poetic stature – may have been most incisively illuminated by another poet, Jože Snoj, in his essay 'Simbolizem Josipa Murna' [The Symbolism of Josip Murn], in Josip Murn, *Pesmi* [Poems], ed. Jože Snoj, 227–306.

<sup>8</sup> 'The line of "Winter" is a groundbreaking discovery for Slovene poetry. Metre and rhyme are gone [...] The enjambment enables the poet to use sentences almost belonging to prose [...] Sentences may end in mid-line or just before the line ending, leaving no trace of the line as a traditional metrical frame,' notes Jože Snoj, *op. cit.*, 277.

of form, content and idea would hardly be noticed. Still, this novelty is not decisive for the poetry he believed in and fostered, although he intensely reflected on poetic techniques and studied various authors. Rather than in those elements of his poetics which can be extrapolated, evaluated and observed outside poetry, his chief distinction lies in a peculiar formation of the mindscapes in his poems and in a subtlety of experience, which is inextricably entwined with his expression in the Slovene language (that is why his poetry, with its deceitful simplicity, certainly presents a major challenge to the translator). Murn is not considered a classic master of language: on the contrary, his early interpreters expressly stressed his difficulties with form and metre.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some of his poems doubtlessly belong among the most euphonious texts of Slovene literature; examples include 'Woodlands Growing Dark', 'In the Park' (beginning with the lines 'Deepening shades. / On the tips of its toes / the scenery fades'), the first two poems from the cycle 'Nights' (beginning with the lines 'Even-paced / are slowly fading' and 'Listen, listen: / how the soul longs'), and 'Ah My Pines'. But even the metrically unpolished poems with their irregular, occasionally interrupted rhythms are filled with a characteristic 'music'. More than mere sonority, this music is composed of the particular way in which the words build a 'unitary

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Prijatelj, ed., *Pesmi in romance*, xxxvii. In the bibliographic entry quoted above, Silva Trdina goes so far as to claim the following: 'As for the form of his poems, M. has not matured yet: he is often unable to conceal his innate lack of musicality. His images disperse in a nervous volubility. Nor does he command metre: for the sake of rhythm he neglects rhyme, and consequently carefulness and precision in phrasing.'

reality',<sup>10</sup> where the elements of the physical, mental and spiritual worlds weave into a living verbal fabric. 'Alone I stand in fields of yore, / feet sinking in the snow' ('Where Are You, Silent Home'); 'The warmth calls forth a note [...] inside my heart lights up again / all that is far and near' ('By the Raibl Lake'); 'Just like a breast grown warm / with blood, pure white, / the buckwheat smells in bloom / of young delight' ('A Song of Buckwheat'); 'Larks are declaiming / aloud anapaests [...] with health, elemental, / is bursting the lea...' ('Morning'). This is but a handful of examples displaying Murn's poetic 'logic', by which every theme, ranging from love, subtle landscapes and picturesque village scenes to loneliness and hopelessness, allows a mysterious glimpse of the world's totality. The images, perspectives, dynamism of the voice, mood – they all change, but what remains is the world, the huge, 'principal enigma of the world', in the words of that most outstanding of Slovene philosophers, France Veber.

#### IV

A special role in Murn's poetry is assigned to the moment. Far from being a mere category of time or typical element of impressionist aesthetics, the moment is the means through which man is touched by the transcendent, unknown, true. While this is explicitly stated in several poems, such as 'A Flash', 'The Night

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<sup>10</sup> This concept was formed by a German psychologist, Erich Neumann, in his book *Creative Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). It denotes the specific experience when the psychological and physical, 'internal' and 'external' are no longer felt as separate dimensions but as a totality.

Walk’, or ‘In the Park’ (beginning with the lines ‘Deepening shades. / On the tips of its toes / the scenery fades’), it is his letter to Ivan Cankar, dated March 1898, that is particularly revealing. Because of its importance for our grasp of Murn’s autopoetics I quote the key passage:

‘I’m a rum fellow indeed. Outer life strikes me as something that is not mine but merely intriguing – This mental reflex may help you unravel many a poem – Sometimes that life strikes me as vast and beautiful, filling me with admiration and trembling in a sacred hush, but at other times bleak, empty, dead... I’d cry my eyes out, kill myself! People seem to me something horribly – I don’t know how to express myself – These impressions sometimes change in a moment, and I was smitten by your sentence “But what the heck, this landscape can strike one as beautiful and vast, and the next moment as dead and empty” – smitten because you brilliantly captured my inmost feelings. Sometimes I think I’m mad. I’m seized by *ein dumpfer Zustand* – Then I see myself sunk in a heap of mud, everything in me dissolves, my eyes gape – Everything seems foreign, voiceless, unbearable. At still other times I seem to envelop the world, to float in endless circles above the earth, mocking her with repulsive contempt and spitting in her face. (Perhaps this alienation echoes the gloomy, estranging circumstances in which I grew up so strangely...)

‘You go on by saying that you can’t tell what I’m aiming at or where I stop. Dear God, if I were aiming at all, these poems would be different indeed. But it hadn’t even occurred to me. I tossed on the paper single moments and impressions, and the painful

worldview of my soul. Moments, mere moments! Often I cannot even recognise myself in them – they seem a huge sigh – of an unknown world.’

Fortunately Ivan Cankar did not carry out Murn’s instructions to burn the letter. Thus has been preserved the most precious document of the poet’s self-reflection and perhaps the most important of hermeneutic guides, one which does not refer to interpretation of individual poems but to a holistic attitude to writing poetry. Admittedly, not all authors are the best interpreters of their own work; indeed, we have grown used to thinking that the text does not belong to its author at all or even that we have seen the death of the author.<sup>11</sup> What is at stake here, however, is something else: rather than refer to the secret meaning of his poetry or suggest an interpretive key, Murn’s account describes the process by which the poems come into existence, the mood from which they spring, and their purpose (or rather the lack thereof). His account addresses the psychology of the poet’s own creativity and even his ontological situation. While a critic may choose to neglect all this, such a choice can have far-reaching and highly problematic consequences, for its extreme form may lead to violating the fundamental principles of pragmatics and to arbitrary or ideological adaptation.

To comprehend lyric poems, it is not enough to immerse oneself into the speaker’s psychological world

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<sup>11</sup> For an in-depth critique of these convictions, which were widely disseminated by poststructuralist theory, see esp. two studies by Seán Burke: *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) and *The Ethics of Writing: Authorship and Legacy in Plato and Nietzsche* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

and social position, or to accept his perspective of values. What they express is something more complex and fundamental: special, ecstatic moments, in which the poet does not recognise himself, and man's most profound relationship with a world that is, at bottom, an unknown quantity. In Murn's verse, this unknown world expresses itself through momentary, vaguely articulated (even wordless), emotionally charged sounds, sighs. Who, then, is the stranger talking in the poem? And who is talking at all – the poet or the world?

## V

The philosophically educated reader will of course notice that Murn's reflection is based on a belief in the existence of selfhood. Murn's thoughts may call to mind some famous views on the origins of poetry and on what happens within it: the ancient inspiration theories of Democritus or Plato, or the even older phrases introducing the Homeric epics. One may be reminded of Nietzsche's elated words on inspiration in his ironically self-laudatory autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, or of the terse statement from Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny: 'Je est un autre.' Yet there is no tangible evidence that Murn knew any of these works. One may speculate that he could have imbibed some ideas unconsciously, indirectly, inasmuch as they became part of the common culture. But this is mere speculation. On the other hand, strikingly similar descriptions of poem creation may be found even in works which he *could not* have known.

'A good poet is a stranger to the self he meets in his poetry,' wrote Sir Herbert Read in his late period.

He understood a poem as a ‘total happening’ of experience and recording, with no premeditation or planning.<sup>12</sup> Much more ‘down to earth’ and graphic are the words of the poet A. E. Housman, who nevertheless discusses the same phenomenon: how lines of verse materialise of their own accord, how they may bubble up from the pit of the stomach during a walk when the brain is resting. It is only when they do not suffice for a whole poem that they call for brain work, which may take months and requires countless attempts.<sup>13</sup>

These surprising correspondences with Murn’s autopoetic letter, where any possibility of historical influence is ruled out, are again attributable to the network of ideas which has linked European culture for centuries and shaped similar notions of life and poetry even without direct familiarity with sources and without direct contact. But this does not explain why such notions emerged in the first place. Moreover, it is highly questionable whether their ‘hardiness’ can be explained merely with the inertia and power of institutionalised culture. The authors of various periods depict the uncontrollability of poetic inspiration in the light of their own experiences, from different perspectives, in the varied colours of their time and of their unique individuality. Such is Murn’s testimony (I use this term on purpose): steeped in personal experience, even emotionally affected, unsparing of the poet and lacking historical references or pretensions to common applicability. While the conclusion of his letter to Ivan Cankar does mention a different and increas-

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<sup>12</sup> ‘The Poet and His Muse’, in *The Origins of Form in Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), 132.

<sup>13</sup> A. E. Housman, *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 49–50.

ingly recurring state of mind (*'ein Werden*, a certain fullness, a conquering dominance'), he never deserted his original poetics:<sup>14</sup> the famous poem 'A Flash', which well-nigh programmatically tackles exceptional moments in human life, is dated in his notebook with May 15, 1899.<sup>15</sup> For Murn, such moments were not only a source of poetry but a form of a vastly different life: more intense, open to infinity, unfathomable. This event cannot be fitted into the framework of any critical or theoretical discussion but only entered – through the door of a poem.

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<sup>14</sup> Note that Murn only lived to be twenty-two and thus died at an age when most poets are still intensely searching for their own expression, striving to shape their autopoetics. The first critics of his poetry, including Ivan Prijatelj, claimed that he had died before fully maturing. Another telling detail is the change of attitude undergone by two of his fellow writers and leading representatives of Slovene *moderna*, Ivan Cankar and Oton Župančič, a month before his death; the fairly sharp and unfavourable criticisms of Murn's poetry were replaced by a shock at his condition (cf. Cankar's May 17, 1901, letter to his brother Karel, written from Vienna, and Župančič's letter to Cvetko Golar, written between May 9 and June 1, 1901). After Murn's death, their judgement on his poems mellowed as well (cf. Cankar's July 10, 1901, letter to Zofka Kveder, a prominent Slovene woman writer, and Župančič's poetic homage, the eight-part cycle 'Manom Josipa Murna-Aleksandrova' [To the Manes of Josip Murn-Aleksandrov]).

<sup>15</sup> The poem was set to music by an eminent Slovene Expressionist composer, Marij Kogoj. Murn's texts have inspired many Slovene composers, including such authorities as Benjamin Ipavec, Gojmir Krek, Emil Adamič, Slavko Osterc, and Anton Lajovic; cf. Danilo Pokorn, 'Odmev poezije Josipa Murna-Aleksandrova v slovenski glasbeni literaturi' [The Echo of Josip Murn-Aleksandrov's Poetry in Slovene Music Literature], *Muzikološki zbornik* 17 (1981): 123–34.