

“It is love...but love with a terrible fate.”

Tomó Virk

Feri Lainšček is one of the most prolific and praised novelists in Slovenia's current generation of writers. He was born in 1959 in the Goričko region and lives in Murska Sobota. His creative opus is extremely varied and includes not only novels but short stories, poetry, children's literature, and plays for both stage and radio. A number of Lainšček's novels have been successfully adapted to the screen, most notably his early novel *Namesto koga roža cveti* (made into the film *Halgato*) and *Petelinji zajtrk*. The latter was the literary basis of the eponymous film which broke Slovenian box-office records in 2007 and 2008.

Lainšček's novels are also varied in terms of style and genre. Some, for example *Skarabej in vestalka*, possess qualities that are characteristic of science fiction; others, such as *Astralni niz*, have qualities associated with crime novels; *Peronarji* was written in a more traditional style, *Raza* and *Razpočnica* in a modernist style, while in *Grinta*, the author drew on a number of postmodernist literary methods. His novels are set in a variety of social settings: provincial, urban, sometimes foreign; some unfold simultaneously in two settings, for example *Skarabej in vestalka*, his so-called “dual novel” which takes place in both contemporary and pre-historical times. Nevertheless, residing at the centre of Lainšček's novels are several homogenous and constant auto-poetic features. Many of his works are physically set in the Slovenian region of Prekmurje, the Pannonian plains that dominate the northeast of Slovenia (either in the countryside or in the Prekmurje capital of Murska Sobota) and in various ways evoke the particular atmosphere of this region. The first of these novels, *Raza* (1986), the starting point of a planned trilogy that includes *Muriša*, tells the story of a man who lost his memory and his identity during the First World War. He

returns to what he presumes to be his homeland, none other than the ethnically diverse Prekmurje, in a state of Kafkaesque alienation – similar to what we find in Muriša. This same geographical and cultural sphere is revealed somewhat differently in Lainšček's extremely successful novel *Namesto koga roža cveti* (1991) which takes the reader inside the lives of the Roma community (Prekmurje and Dolenjska being the two Slovenian regions with the largest Roma populations) and introduces a number of magical elements. These magic or supernatural elements are particularly present in the novel *Ki jo je meгла prinesla* (1993) and in others works from the same period and generally have some connection to the folk beliefs of the local people, paganism, and not least the Christian religion. The inclusion of these elements in Lainšček's novelistic world is spontaneous and self-evident, making his work similar to that of certain Latin American writers of the nineteen-sixties, seventies, and eighties (Garcia Marquez, Asturias, Fuentes, Rulfo, Cortazar, etc.) It is no surprise that Slovenian literary critics – and to some extent the author himself has supported this interpretation – have understood Lainšček's work as the Slovenian version of magic realism (some critics have used the term 'regional fantastic'). In his most recent novels and in particular in *Ločil bom peno od valov* and *Muriša*, the first two parts of the abovementioned trilogy, Lainšček continues to reveal the unusual and mysterious world of Prekmurje. Only its mystery and strangeness is no longer expressed as miraculous, fantastic, and supernatural, but rather as an extremely particular local way of life, one that might be best described by the phrase *irrational fate*.

Lainšček's novelistic opus has another constant that is perhaps more important than setting but is always indirectly connected to it. All of his novels, from the first to the last, take *love* as their central theme, generally passionate love, but without exception fatal, incomprehensible, unattainable love that (as in *Namesto koga roža cveti*) is characterized by both the particular Roma *čEIF*, pleasure in and acceptance of what is given, and the Slovenian *hrepnenje*, a melancholy yearning that can never be satisfied. In Lainšček's novels, this emotion – or so it seems to this reader – is inextricably linked to the feeling of the individual being small, isolated, and lost in the midst of the endless Pannonian plains. The sense of

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being lost, uncertain, and unfulfilled is negatively expressed in the following words from *Muriša*: “...people here wanted nothing good for each other. They were fonder of misfortune, and though they perhaps had both, they were more nourished by the pathos of suffering, more consoled by the grudging pity of others, and their own bitterness that naturally emerged.” The same quality is present in *Ločil bom peno od valov*, although in a more metaphysical and less banal, quotidian, and earthly manner. “Life may be bountiful though there is always something that is unattainable. It must be so, even if it is only the longing for it. Otherwise things would begin to lose their meaning.”

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Muriša (2006) has a direct predecessor in the novel *Ločil bom peno od valov* (2003), the first part of Lainšček's planned trilogy about life in the Slovenian settlements along the Mura River during the periods of great historical upheaval that shook this part of the world in the twentieth century. Stories from the first novel clarify certain details in the second one. The narrative about Julian's father Ivan, a supervisor at the waterworks, who comes to Prekmurje from some unknown place before the First World War, is fleshed out in the first novel. He soon becomes a bigwig in the region, some sort of local mafia godfather, who, in addition to his official job, pans for gold in the Mura River, and, in addition to panning for gold, is involved in some other suspicious activities. He falls in love with Elica, a poor girl living with her half-mad mother in the countryside, and marries her. They have a son Julian, which is what Ivan always wanted. With the passage of time, the two become estranged from each other (Ivan is primarily guilt for this because, although he provides for the material needs of the family, he is otherwise remote, strict, and rarely at home), and Elica becomes involved in a love affair with a young maimed guard named Andi. This turns out to be more than a mere affair – it is the “real thing” – great, unique, passionate, fateful love. The novel ends with the lovers' flight across the Mura River into Hungary. Elica leaves Julian with his father. Only in *Muriša* does Lainšček reveal how much Ivan actually loved his wife.

In *Muriša*, we encounter Julian, an engineer who, like his father before him is professionally involved with the Mura River, not as the chief water inspector but as a “tamer” of the river, a builder of bridges that cross over it, and flood walls that block its currents. Julian falls in love with Zinaida and they become entwined – again – in a fatal love. In the stormy period before the eruption of the Second World War in Prekmurje, the two make plans to escape into Austria and then Hungary. But several hours before their flight, Julian learns the horrible truth: that Zinaida is his (half) sister. He keeps the secret to himself and decides to leave alone but is captured and arrested during his escape. During the first chaotic hours of war, Zinaida dies defending “his” bridge.

Although *Muriša* is a continuation of the novel *Ločil bom peno od valov* and although we can conclude from its ending that Julian’s destiny is not over and we can expect a third installment to this Prekmurje saga, *Muriša*, regardless of its central position in the planned trilogy, can be read as an independent work. Not only is the information from the first novel that is necessary to understand *Muriša* conveyed at the beginning in Julian’s “statement for the investigative proceedings of 1946,” but more importantly *Muriša* is complete in its fictional and thematic narrative and in its ideas and message. The fateful story revealed in the novel is so strong and expressive that it can stand on its own.

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As mentioned before, Lainšček’s second novel *Raza* narrates the story of a man, a soldier from the First World War who was wounded and lost his memory and identity. He finds some of his identifying documents and on the basis of these concludes who he is and returns to what he thinks is his “home” in the region of the Mura River. His “parents” and his “wife” notice that he is not their “son” and “spouse.” Nevertheless his “wife” (*Raza*) – for reasons that are not entirely clear – takes him in as her husband. His true identity, which he is constantly struggling to establish, is not revealed until the end of the book. This is a fanciful notion taken to its extreme. But what in *Raza* appears to be a fanciful notion, Lainšček later develops into the symbolic characterization of

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the setting of the novels *Ločil bom peno od valov* and *Muriša*. Prekmurje is a sort of corner, an out-of-the-way place between Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary, a place where, as we read in *Muriša*, there are “Slovenians, both the native Prekmurje-born and the newcomers, and then Hungarians, Germans, Jews, Croats, Serbs, Turks and Gypsies, and all of these groups had never really come together.” It is an international, intercultural Central European “melting pot.” (One could add to the list above Russians who fled from the Bolshevik revolution and are burdened by past persecution. Contemporary Slovenian prose is filled with such characters: Skobenski in Andrej Hieng’s novel *Čudežni Feliks*, Turbin in Drago Jančar’s *Smrt pri Mariji Snežni* who, like Ivan Vasiljevich Kozlov in *Muriša*, commits suicide when the Soviet Army marches into Prekmurje.)

Like many other Central European spaces, Prekmurje is a paradigmatic medium and setting for feelings of not belonging, homelessness, uncertainty, existing on the border, walking on the edge, possessing a vacillating identity in not just the ordinary but the metaphysical sense of the word. In both of these novels, the quality of the space is heightened by the historical era which is also uncertain and subversive, and like the physical setting exists on the border. In *Ločil bom peno od valov*, it is the chaos of the First World War; as for *Muriša*, it teems with premonitions of the horrors that are to come in the second. The love between Julian and Zinaida comes to life in this atmosphere: two “ordinary” young people for whom documented and adopted identity and belonging (political and national) carries no interest. They are only interested in what seems to them most important: love. But eventually, for their shared fate, it becomes clear that identity is destiny. They – like Oedipus – are guilty without guilt and yet, because they (only Julian but not Zinaida) discover their actual identity too late (they are brother and sister, both children of Elica and therefore in an incestuous relationship), they must, as in the ancient myth of the tragic hero, accept their “punishment”: the impossibility of their continued love and more fateful still: Zinaida’s death.

In any case, *Muriša* is – as was *Ločil bom peno od valov* before it – a story about an immensely deep, beautiful, unselfish love that, as Zinaida says, “is worth dying for”

(which is exactly what she does). It is a story about the feeling which Julian describes to himself as “occurring only once, but, despite not having been experienced before, is immediately recognized.” But it is a love that precisely because it is born of longing (from an emotion that by its nature can never be fulfilled because, by definition, we always long for something that cannot be fulfilled) can be experienced only for an instance and can never have a happy conclusion. This is, of course, what happened to the love of Elica and Andi in *Ločil bom peno od valov*. “These were the places into which, because of the kind of love that she was speaking about now, his mother Elica Sreše had disappeared years ago and his father, Ivan Spransky, had slipped after her.” And now Julian is also marked by the same kind of love, the emotion between Zinaida and him being condemned to fail. Zinaida in her letter to Julian writes that “from that nightmare nothing beautiful could ever be born.” True love, love for which it is worth dying, love that is the only form of perfection in an imperfect world (in Lainšček’s novels this imperfection functions as a counterpoint to the purity of longing), cannot exist. The failed love of Julian and Zinaida is not a repetition of the failed love of Elica and Ivan, or of Elica and Andi, but the failure of each is the perfect response to the longing for love. Lainšček is therefore not interested in love as such (although, as mentioned above, it has always been at the centre of his novels, always present in a different context, and always soul-stirring in and of itself), but as a mechanism that inevitably comes with an unbridgeable barrier. “It is love. Yes, love. But love with a terrible fate,” says Sidonia Kozlov, and thus defines, almost casually, the moving force that otherwise compels such love but at the same time does not allow its fulfillment: namely, fate. Fathomless, unforeseeable, unplanned, but fatal compulsion thrust Julian and Zinadia into the longing and love for which they are willing to sacrifice everything, even life. (Not only Zinaida but Julian who after her death plays the dangerous game of “peek-a-boo,” a sort of Russian roulette – a detail that recalls *The Deerhunter* – and eloquently reveals what remains of life after love is lost.) Love consumes them like moths. They approach the flame, like Oedipus, guilty without guilt, driven by a force that they don’t understand. There is something in

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the novel that brings together all these threads. We sense all the while something functioning behind the scenes. It is fate.

The characteristic style of Lainšček's writing from *Raza* onward, emphasized especially in the novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla*, strives to evoke something transcendent, unfathomable, untamable that penetrates human desire and always comes unexpectedly. But the author does not achieve this with style alone. He does not always express things directly but often with his characteristic lexicon, with the frequent use of words such as fate and premonition. In the novels *Ločil bom peno od valov* and *Muriša*, fate is represented with the help of a powerful image, a metaphor that is likely to be the central or linking metaphor of the entire trilogy when it is completed. In addition to the other female characters in *Ločil bom peno od valov* and *Muriša*, there is one other: the Mura River. Ivan Spransky, at the height of his powers, dedicates himself to the river, and even after the tragedy, after the departure of Elica, he renounces his work and doesn't go home to sleep but instead spends all his time beside the river, looking into her waters. The water plays a similar role in *Muriša*: not only because all of the most fateful events, including Zinaida's death, are connected to the Mura, but also because Julian dedicates all of his attention, both professional and personal, to the river. He is driven by the desire for vengeance since the river, or so he thinks, took his mother. But at the end of the novel, his feelings about the Mura have changed: “He had hated the river since he was small. It was the reason for his singlemindedness. Julian's argument with the river was his sole purpose and now he had to admit that he had been wrong to hate it, wrong to curse it.” Yet the river, as Rêži Bágár says, is guilty of nothing; it is here and it flows. It is neither good nor bad, only calm, almost unnoticeable. But nevertheless it is an inevitable accompaniment to each event that takes place in the novel. It flows quietly through the background – dark, mysterious, unpredictable, powerful, invincible – just like fate which, following the rules of a game that it alone knows, makes something terrible out of a pure and beautiful love between a young man and woman.