
Ten Slovenian Poets from the Nineties

Peter Kolšek

The anthology presents the poetry of ten Slovenian poets who first appeared in the poetic arena in the nineties, and whose books (or just a single one) published so far foretell that they will be heard of in the first decades of the 21st century as well. The poets are not so very young: the oldest poet and poetess are nearing forty, the youngest three are entering their thirties. Therefore, they belong to the generation which has reached their first or even second creative climax. The first three collections, which were the basis for our anthology, came out in 1991, in the year when Slovenia gained independence, and the latest ones in spring 2002.

We are talking about the poets who spent their early childhood during the disintegrating socialism and in their youth watched it collapse; when they grew up, the world around them had already changed. Admittedly, the year 1991 in Slovenia did not mark the beginning of a new counting of the years, especially not in poetry, and yet the external circumstances do have a specific internal signification, which is also reflected in the poetry of the above-mentioned generation – the first which matured in the new social and political situation or just before it emerged. The point is not only that Slovenia had moved away from the former Yugoslav federation and its cultural context, and entered into globalisation flows; another thing that radically changed was the awareness of one’s own position in the world. We, Slovenians, found ourselves on the old and familiar spiritual terrain, but with new borders, which no longer needed be experienced in the sense of yearning for “freedom”, but could be “freely” moved – naturally in accordance with the actual creative power of the Slovenian nation. In other words: when Slovenia became an independent national state, its spiritual creativity became committed to itself and its power. This newly emerged situation

was first and most obviously reflected in literature - partly because this was also the sphere which foretold the change and prepared the grounds for it with its ideas of independence.

In a way, literature was the most important Slovenian spiritual project. The reason for this is complex, and yet simple: until Slovenians acquired their own state along with its institutionalised attributes of power, the function of supreme national "co-ordination" had been assumed by the awareness of a unified language, the existence of which was most clearly manifested in literature. This is why, from the mid-19th century onwards, literature was a kind of substitute for the Slovenian yearning for independence. With the help of literature Slovenians - as well as other small nations - resisted external political pressure (Germanisation, Italianisation, Nazi-fascism, Yugoslav centralism) as well as internal exclusivistic ideologies (clericalist Catholicism, communism). Therefore, when we speak of Slovenian literature - the predominant form of which, since the Romantic expression of the great poet France Prešeren (1800-1849), has been poetry - we primarily think of the traditional art discipline, which in specific historical circumstances was much more than that: it was the fundamental way of national existence.

This much about the past. The generation presented in the anthology did not enter the new situation totally unprepared. On the one hand, they were growing up in the ideologically more indulgent times, during which the national function of culture was altering before their very eyes into ever more convincing ruins; on the other hand, their starting position was relieved of the authority of traditional literary canons. Namely, they had been done away with by the intense modernism with elements of the neo-avantgarde in the seventies, followed in the eighties by the postmodernist initiative with sufficiently paradigmatic patterns applied by their Slovenian colleagues belonging to the previous poetic generation. And another thing: this is probably the first generation which - taken as a whole - learnt an equal or even larger share from foreign poets than from Slovenian ones. The ten poets we are presenting here are related to the "old" Slovenian cultural story by a single, yet determining factor - the national language!

This, of course, means that they cannot be expected to provide a unified - literary, national-ideological or provocatively manifestative - approach. No; their poetry is not bound by the generational principle, which is logical, because it does not need to defy anybody or anything. Big and small revolutions - concerning either social or “only” cultural and aesthetic issues - belong to the past. And although the poetry of their older colleagues still reveals visible traces of those past revolutions, it is unlikely that a new revolution is on the horizon. This is why the ten poets from the nineties share a single common denominator in terms of content: the absence of hyper-personal engagement. In other words: poetesses and poets now - for the first time in the history of Slovenian literature - can self-evidently dedicate themselves to themselves, to their inner and outer worlds, without this poetic position being specifically noticed, let alone evaluated. The external reflection of this “freedom” is probably visible in the fact that there are hardly any inner correspondences between the poets presented. They all speak for themselves, and none of them either can or wishes to speak for them all.

Although the general literary definition of the ten poets - particularly given the decade they belong to - of its own accord imposes itself, i.e. postmodernism, we must be cautious in using the term. On the one hand, this straightforward characterisation of the poetry collected here seems “natural” as the poets outwardly present very differing attitudes both towards classical as well as towards modern traditions, while inwardly they display the full mutual plurality and heterogeneity of their poetry. It is more than obvious that from around two thousand verses it is impossible to distil a central thematic core or a unified stylistic quality. This situation makes one think of the typical fluidity of poetic strategies, and yet this is true only of the sum of the ten poetic contributions, which - as a whole - definitely represent the character of (postmodernist) times. However, if we look more closely at the substance of particular poetic bodies, the label “postmodernism” hardly ever fits, especially concerning the essential criterion: the absence of foundations and substantiality of the lyrical subject and related variability of lyrical strategies. In this sense the poets presented here are closer to classical modernism (Korun, Kramberger, Čučnik, Hudolin, Šteger),

to historical symbolism (Senegačnik) or to post-war Slovenian intimism (Semolič) than to postmodernism. The greatest amount of external postmodernist stimuli – but not essential principles – is contained in the poetry of Uroš Zupan (story-telling supported by intimate reportage), Lucija Stupica (filigree-like palimpsest) and Miklavž Komelj (interpolation of historic themes).

This classification of lyrical interests among the younger generation means only that Slovenian poetry – regarding the immense internal force it demonstrated through truly great poetic names quite comparable to the great names in contemporary European poetic arenas (although, sadly, pressed into the relatively anonymous logic of “small” national languages) – found itself in the most natural creative position, after a century and a half, and after the end of big universal stories. From the dis-centered world, this poetry is gravitating towards individual aesthetic centres represented by concrete names. We have selected (only) ten of them, but it needs to be stressed that around two hundred books of poetry are published in Slovenia every year, a third of which definitely deserve attention, and a tenth of which belong to elite production. – But let us now have a closer look at the chosen ten poets from the nineties, who undoubtedly open up certain paths into the new century.

BARBARA KORUN (1963); her collection *The Sharpness of Gentleness* came out relatively late (1999). However, it is never too late for a voice so imbued with elemental erotic charge, particularly because no similar voice of a comparably high expressive frequency has ever been heard in Slovenian women’s poetry. Korun’s poetry in a concentrated way combines nature and culture: though nature is predominant, it is conveyed through cultivated language and reflection which harnesses spontaneous animalism. In Korun’s work, Slovenian erotic – not love – poetry has reached one of its climaxes, hardly ever found in the work of her male counterparts.

UROŠ ZUPAN (1963); regarding the volume of his poetic output as well as his expressive power Zupan is a central poet of the generation (and most often translated). This position was granted him by his very first collection *Sutras* (1991), and his

later publications (*The River, The Opening of the Delta, Succession, The Tree and the Sparrow, Crude Oil*) only reinforced his leading role. In his early poetry Zupan combined Whitman-like pathos and the revolt of the Beatnik generation; however, he placed neither in the function of changing the world, but used them to establish his free and wide poetic existence. In his later collections, along with the intimate themes from his childhood and home environment, he included his reflections on the general civilisational and topical cultural phenomena. The central question in his poetry is the role and power of poetry in modern world, which makes him one of the most sincere followers of the Orphean stance. His poetic statement "My only life is poetry, and the more it wins, the more I lose" expresses the essence of his vocation (as one of the few freelance literary artists in Slovenia, Zupan actually lives his vocation). He is a poet who - in an elevated, yet comprehensible language - addresses contemporary consumers in order to convey the message of intangible and eternal things. After the publication of his third collection of poetry Zupan won the highest state award for art - the Prešeren Prize.

BRANE SENEGAČNIK (1966); his collections of poetry published so far (*Coat-of-Hearts, 1991, On the Dark Threshold of Hope, The Bird of Black Stars*) established Senegačnik as a poet of classical erudition corresponding above all with the tradition of symbolist and spiritual poetry. In sonnets, and later in free verse, he treats existential questions, which he skilfully develops into shocking existential stimuli. In this anthology Senegačnik's poetry is the strongest link with the Slovenian poetic tradition, which managed to survive the post-war ultra-modernist exclusivism. Senegačnik composes intimistic and spiritual lyrical poems supported by aesthetic sublimation defying the hullabaloo of flowing time - a rare, but welcome phenomenon in the nineties.

PETER SEMOLIČ (1967); his poetry represents the strongest link with the so-called intimism - a generic epithet for a large part of post-war Slovenian poetry, which abandoned the great social and revolutionary themes, and returned to Man as an individual and to his intimate life. Semolič's poetry reverberates with the elementary language of the heart, expressed in a concise way with strong emotional persuasiveness. In his col-

lections (*Tamariša*, 1991, *The Flowers of Byzantium*, *House of Words*, *Circles on Water* and *Questions of the Path*) Semolič has linked together a good many intimistic motifs complimented by a cosmopolitan perspective (the poet lived in Paris for a while), which accentuated its emotional universality. Semolič's poems are profound, yet communicative. His collection *House of Words* won a national poetry award.

TAJA KRAMBERGER (1970); her first collection *Marzipan* (1997) for a while redirected the attention towards Slovenian poetic modernism, which - as a reaction to the enforced traditionalism - gained ground in the sixties, was supplemented by neo-avantgarde elements in the seventies, and gradually faded into inflationary patterns in the eighties. The young poetess, with her fresh linguistic energy and in the form of long rhythmical intervals resurrected the state-of-the-art "pansemantic" verse composed by the leading representative of Slovenian poetic modernism, Tomaž Šalamun. Kramberger's second collection no longer emanated the same energy, and her latest poems reveal a shift from modernistic reminiscences and a search for existentially more direct and intellectual expression.

LUCIJA STUPICA (1971); her collection *Cello in the Sun* (1971) is one of the most pleasant surprises of the poetry of the nineties. Although Stupica's poems - in terms of meaning - are recognisable organisms, they belong to those works of word art, which are closest to music: their true source is thought, solitude and silence. Stupica's is the poetry of minute and carefully chiselled existential impulses; the second-person address leaves an impression of gentle harmony with the world regardless of its disharmony, even when she talks about love. Extremely pure style gives her poetry the meaningful density of fine crystal: the poem *Three minutes for tea*, for instance, contains the entire human world! On the one hand Stupica's poetry is closest to the (Slovenian as well as foreign) symbolist tradition, and on the other it displays postmodernist transparency of an utterly disciplined kind.

PRIMOŽ ČUČNIK (1971); Čučnik is a poet of metaphysical unrest. He also encounters this unrest in the poetry of contemporary Polish poets, with whom he is well familiar and whom he translates. However, his is not an uncritical perception:

Čučnik expresses his own existential ecstasies and humanist vision, which is probably most visible in the poem *Ships*. The ecstasies grow from the feeling of insufficiency provided by the modern world. Čučnik's poems published in his first collection *Two Winters* (1999) are an attempt at painful breakthroughs into the fullness of life. His expression is moderately modernist, while in terms of content his poetry fits in the framework of European metaphysical poetry. In his latest collection *Rhythm in Hands* the breaking through smooth civilisational surfaces was redirected towards wider European and American reality; particularly the latter, Čučnik selectively rejects.

JURIJ HUDOLIN (1973); in his generation Hudolin is a representative of poetic bohemian life and related stylised decadence. In his early poetry he cultivated the cult of a maladapted individual identifying himself with the aesthetics of ugliness, but in his latest collection *A Woman Speaks* (2001) he transferred this cult to the typical town environment charged with conflict, and placed it face to face with the sensually conceived eroticism and spiritually conceived art. His poetry reaches its peak where spontaneous existentiality is superposed by the cultivated form of trivial poetic genres.

MIKLAVŽ KOMELJ (1973); Komelj was only eighteen, when he already presented the world his totally mature poetry - the book of sonnets entitled *Light of the Dolphin* (1991). Classical form did not hinder the true inspiration given only to very young poets. Komelj's inspiration came from the most direct experience of life dominated by young love, and yet the eruption of spirit managed to be framed in a number of classical styles and established rhetorical stances. Komelj's creative impulse also inspired his second book of sonnets, *Amber of Time*, while the poems in the latest collection, *Dew*, published eleven years after the first, are composed in free verse. Komelj still draws inspiration from mythology, but the position of the lyrical subject has changed: while before the subject freely moved through various perspectives of human destiny, now it stops at the point where the poet meets his own destiny, pain and death.

The ethical dissonance of the modern world - in its concrete manifestation, not only principal mood - found the strongest expression in the poetry of ALEŠ ŠTEGER (1973). Šteger as well

appeared in the arena of poetry relatively young; his first collection *Chessboards of Clocks* came out in 1995. Under the modernist linguistic dregs it was possible to discern the poet's true moral sensitivity, which became even sharper and more concrete in his second collection, *Cashmere*. Šteger's latest book, *Protuberances* (2002), reveals the veiled conflicts in modern societies in a wider European space. Šteger's moral engagement expressed in the language of cold and matter-of-fact descriptions is not a tendentious stance - it produces a definite effect with its reserved elegiac tone. Šteger's - like Zupan's - poetry probably reaches furthest out beyond the Slovenian world.

Translated by Lili Potpara