

## A Dialogue with Maja Vidmar's Poetry

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THE 1970S AND most of the 1980s were dominated in Slovenian poetry by modernism, which was intensely involved with language at several levels, sonority as well as morphology and syntax. At the same time, the mid-seventies already witnessed the emergence of poets whose poetic practice diverged in many respects from the established approach. These authors replaced their predecessors' "transmental" idiom with a more direct one, an idiom which, to put it simply, (re)enabled them to express in verse the world and themselves within that world. One of the strongest and most distinct poetic voices of the then-younger generation certainly belonged to Maja Vidmar.

Maja Vidmar, born in 1961 at Nova Gorica, a town by the Slovenian-Italian border, lives as a freelance poet in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has published seven poetry collections in Slovenian and as many in translation, her poetry has been included in approximately seventy anthologies worldwide. Her work has been recognized with a number of national and international prizes. The former include the highest honor for a book of poetry in Slovenia, the Jenko Award, and the national award for literature and art, the Prešeren Foundation Award, for her collection *Presence (Prisotnost)*, as well as the award Velenjica—Cup of Immortality (*Velenjica—čaša nesmrtnosti*), which marks a decade of outstanding poetic work. Her international prizes include the Hubert Burda Foundation Prize for Young Poets (Offenburg, Germany), the Umberto Saba Award at the international poetry contest Trieste Scritture di Frontiera (Trieste, Italy), and the Prize of the Network of Literary Cities (*Nagrada mreže gradova književnosti*, Pazin, Croatia). In addition, she received a Vienna scholarship in the framework of the Großer Preis für osteuropäische Literatur.

Maja Vidmar attracted the notice of critics and readers with her very first poetry collection, *Distances of the Body* (*Razdalje telesa*, 1984). As the title suggests, the poems in *Distances of the Body* take place in the field of the intimate, with an emphasis on physicality and on the coming together and moving apart of two bodies, male and female. Contemporary criticism classified the collection as predominantly erotic poetry, which it certainly is, but it must be noted that eroticism has never been merely a physical issue for Vidmar: the poetry in *Distances of the Body* is often permeated by intense, borderline emotions, such as pain, fear, or jealousy. An important prefiguration of her subsequent poetic trajectory is the cycle of poems written as a dialogue between lovers, since it is precisely dialogue, as this essay will show, that forms a central characteristic of her poetry.

In her next two poetry collections, *Ways of Binding* (*Način vezave*, 1988) and *At the Base* (*Ob vznožju*, 1998), Vidmar significantly expanded “both the thematic and aesthetic dimensions of her debut,” according to the poet Niko Grafenauer. The poems grow more dissonant, introducing new themes and motifs. Roughly speaking, *Ways of Binding* explores alienation, a world in which a love relationship between two people is merely one of the many possible ways of connection, and as such for many reasons and in many respects arbitrary. The collection *At the Base*, on the other hand, addresses subjection, either to a man or to God, which implies inequality. Thus Vidmar’s poetry gradually loses its intimate character and comes to embrace distinct social themes as well, such as the theme of war in *At the Base*.

The trio of Maja Vidmar’s early poetry collections left a substantial imprint on the Slovenian poetry scene. Indeed, it was her work that established women’s verse on the map of contemporary Slovenian literature: even while her poetry, like the poetry of her fellow women authors, still tended to be addressed in Slovenian criticism as a “variant of male poetry,” that label was being increasingly placed in parentheses. For various historical and cultural reasons, women poets had been an exception rather

than the rule in Slovenian literature, and the image of woman in literary texts had largely reflected the traditional notions of woman and her role in society. This view teetered in the 1980s, when Slovenian society began to foster individual identities in addition to the dominant national identity. The process of society diversification was somewhat slowed down by Slovenia's break away from Yugoslavia, which called for the unification of male and female citizens on a national basis, but it could not be stopped. The issue of partial identities was foregrounded again at the close of the millennium. From this perspective, too, a seminal poetry collection of the period was Maja Vidmar's *Presence* (*Prisotnost*, 2005).

The poetry book *Presence* (2005), which opens the present selection, represents a watershed in the author's oeuvre. Although Maja Vidmar remains a lyric poet, that is, an author of short poetic texts polished to verbal perfection, there are major shifts within the narrowly circumscribed space of the poems. If her previous poetry was characterized by a relatively frequent use of rhyme and assonance, thus occasionally evoking the rhythms of folk songs, rhyme and assonance give way in her recent poems to a more pronounced free verse, which slows down and relaxes the rhythm, at the same time reinforcing and sharpening it. The language register is lowered: her poetry, which has up to now, especially through aposiopesis and omission, owed much to the modernist ideal of a "self-referential poem," is invaded by everyday speech. "Make use of ordinary words / and used-up metaphors / the way I use them," she writes in the poem "Devices." And with the coming of everyday phrases, her poetry is decisively infiltrated by social considerations. According to literary critic and poet Petra Koršič, the poems from *Presence* can be described in relation to Vidmar's previous poetry as "a shift from microcosm to macrocosm, whereby the poet moves from private to public." Gender, never limited in her poetry to the biological gender alone, begins to grow with *Presence* into a social gender as well. Eroticism, the soil from which the bulk of her

poetry springs, thus transcends the intimacy between two lovers, expanding into a field in which “dramas” are enacted between various social roles. Maja Vidmar’s poetry evolves into a distinct dialogue between various characters and *personae*, who are almost always portrayed in their relation to others: the reader thus encounters a woman among women, a woman among men, a woman in the role of a partner or mother, etc.

The collection *Rooms* (*Sobe*, 2008) seems to suggest the poet’s return to the first-person narrative, but this return may well be specious: according to literary critic and writer Lucija Stepančič, “the impression prevails that it is all happening to a variety of people in a variety of circumstances.” Like Vidmar’s other collections, the book is meticulously arranged to form a gathering of rooms as well as of other spaces, such as cellars, bomb shelters, or tunnels, which witness the intimate dramas enacted within and between the protagonists of the various poems. Being scheduled for full-length publication in English, however, the collection *Rooms* is not included in our selection.

In her collection *How You Fall In Love* (*Kako se zaljubiš*, 2012), Vidmar takes a step further, positioning herself in a love relationship with various objects, material or immaterial—a child, death, herself, a beloved man—as well as with the past and future, dog and man, and more. Thus her poetry often reaches beyond social roles, shedding new, surprising light on the objects of her poems and on their mutual relationships. Her next collection, *A Minute Head Start* (*Minute prednosti*, 2015), takes as its point of departure social labels, curious as to what lies beyond them.

In *A Minute Head Start* the poet again plays through a variety of roles, which has by now become her distinctive feature. The poems take place in a socially and culturally marked intimacy, the writing springs from the subject’s deep, erotic, well-nigh tactile attitude to the world. This is highlighted in the very first poem of the collection, “The Drumroll Rehearsal”: “Be a robin / fluttering off onto a thin branch / of the flute,

and a flutist / holding her breath. / Then breathe through all / the possible swaps / . . . ” Her use of the *persona* significantly departs from that in her earlier collections. At first the speakers are animals, but not in the tradition of animal fables. While the poet admittedly cannot help humanizing them somewhat by the very act of placing words into their mouths or beaks, she also recognizes the uniqueness of their relation to the human world. Continually addressing the subject, the animals in this collection evade the established use of the *persona* as well as repeatedly turn the subject into object. This use of the *persona*, an innovation in terms of poetry, results in a world which is no longer anthropocentric but centers on animals rather than humans: on a scorpion, fishes, a fawn, and others. A parallel process is the decentralization of the subject, particularly evident in the poems featuring allegorical figures which express certain aspects of the psyche, such as “the Worrisome Man,” “the Sorrowful Man,” or “the Cynical Man.”

What is enacted before us, then, is a drama of decentralization—first of the world and then of the subject. The world is unstable, crumbling into images which are no less unstable, porous. A similar fate befalls the subject, dismembered into individual functions with which the “I” is in perpetual dialog. This dialogue, however, seems riddled with misunderstandings and accompanied by a silent struggle to control the functioning of the disintegrating subject, a subject which dissolves by the end of the book into a dialog of undefined and unidentified voices. No animals or allegoric figures are left to lend shape to the voices talking past each other, or to offer them the shelter of the—at least partly—familiar. The subject, which has up to this moment maintained a certain transparency to itself and to the reader, which has still been capable of talking about being “lost,” is now truly lost. “Who are you?” is a question obsessively repeated throughout the concluding poems of *A Minute Head Start*, while the replies lack any clear starting-point or clear reference: they are but a multitude of voices quavering on the edge

of the hearing field. Beginning with the “swaps,” continuing with disintegration of the anthropocentric world and dismemberment of the subject, the collection fades out into formlessness and solitude.

Indeed, it is this basic mood of solitude that pervades Maja Vidmar’s latest poems, gathered in the present edition under the heading “A Child and Other Phenomena.” These poems boldly continue to develop certain aspects of her poetics. A case in point is her handling of animals. Animals feature in her early poetry as well, but mostly for the qualities which supposedly connect them to the human world. The collection *How You Fall In Love*, on the other hand, introduces an important gap between subject and animal: the animal may symbolize innocence or “a healed world,” but it is already in the process of becoming mostly itself, that is, something different from us. This process of animals’ “emancipation” from our notions about them reaches a new phase in the *A Minute Head Start* poems: here, the animals already are the Other but continue as *personae* as well. In the latest poems, however, the animals fully emancipate themselves, becoming an absolute Other. Indeed, their acts as documented on our part run counter to our established notions about them, dumbly confronting us with the question: Who are they? And through that question with another, the one encountered at the conclusion of *A Minute Head Start*: *Who are you?* This question has never been limited to self-examination, never intended solely for the subject or the author: it has always addressed us readers, too. Who are you—beyond all the roles you play, beyond the labels assigned to you, who are you in relation to the human, and not merely human, world?

It is this question that seems to lie at the core, or at least very close to the core, of Maja Vidmar’s poetry. It recurs again and again, always in a new way: sometimes through metaphor, sometimes directly, sometimes through the use of a *persona* or a startling change of perspective. Rather than from an identity crisis, the question springs from her perceptive contemplation of

the self and of language. By contemplating herself and language, she also contemplates the Other, establishing a relation to the Other—a relation which enables her to contemplate society as a whole. And this contemplation of society reveals to her both her own self and language in a new light. Last but not least, this question springs from contemplation of the human world, which leads to contemplation of the animal world, which in its turn again leads to contemplation of the human world.

The poetry of Maja Vidmar is a poetry of relation(ship)s obtaining between different entities and different aspects of the same entity. While her poetry addresses communication and is communicative itself, it is at the same time evasive, elusive: providing no answers, it nevertheless knows how to pose the right question, again and again, at the right time and in the right place.

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