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# A Note on *Fragments* *From Slovene Literature*

*Vanesa Matajč*

The first documented trace of a language recognised by experts as Slovene is represented by five manuscripts, the oldest of them being the *Freising Texts* from late 10th century. But since these earliest records in Slovene served purely ecclesiastical or legal purposes, they are not given a place in our anthology beyond the present note, despite their crucial role in establishing the Slovene historical identity. *Fragments from Slovene Literature* thus opens with Prešeren's Romantic retelling of the folk song of the Fair Vida. This motif went on to develop into one of the central myths of Slovene culture and has been used in literature, directly or indirectly, ever since Romanticism, occurring even in the second half of the 20th century. The beginnings of literature "proper", on the other hand, are represented by extracts taken from Protestant works. The latter affirmed, in the spirit of Luther's teachings, the legitimacy of Slovene as the language of the Christian religion, which predominated in the Slovene-speaking territory. Moreover, the Slovene translation of the Bible (1584) proved the expressive power of the language, while Protestant essays and sermons revealed the creativity of their individual authors. The year 1550 - the publication date of the first printed books in Slovene, the *Catechism (Katekizem)* and *Primer (Abecednik)* by **Primož Trubar** - is thus considered as the approximate beginning of literature proper in the language, which the present anthology seeks to trace with its selection of fragments up to the present day. The first important move towards the modernisation of Slovene literature was made by the playwright **Anton Tomaž Linhart** and his 1790 retelling of the famous comedy *La folle journée ou le mariage de Figaro* (by P.A.C. de Beaumarchais, 1785), which contains undertones of social criticism.

Almost five hundred years of Slovene literary tradition are of course impossible to compress in a single slender volume.

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The selection of texts is therefore highly fragmentary, omitting many authors whose artistic quality and deliberate commitment produced and preserved Slovene literature in the earlier periods, as well as a number of contemporary writers whose works reveal the ramification of contemporary Slovene literature into a variety of specific “minority discourses”. The lyric poetry of Slovene women poets through history, for example, is presented in the 2004 anthology *Lirika slovenskih pesnic*, edited by Irena Novak Popov (available in Slovene only), while Slovene gay lyric poetry is gathered in the 1990 anthology *Blue Light (Modra svetloba - likewise only available in Slovene)*, edited by Brane Mozetič. An *Anthology of Contemporary Slovene Youth [and children’s] Literature* is available in English.

As the editor realises, the present anthology, with its limited compass, does least justice to the part of Slovene literary production attesting to the undeniable presence of Slovene culture in those areas where Slovene is not the majority language: to the strong literary creativity of the Slovenes in Italy, Austria, and Hungary, as well as Slovene emigrant literature.

Of the authors who have written outside the borders of present-day Slovenia, in conditions often far less favourable to cultural creativity, it is thus imperative at least to allude to those not represented through extracts in our (hopefully) first and uncertain compilation of Slovene literature in English. Within present-day Italy, Slovene literature is and has been produced by poets, prose writers, and playwrights, often prolific and of high aesthetic value: **Marij Čuk**, **Dušan Jelinčič**, **Aleksij Pregarc**, **Marko Sosič**, **Sergij Verč**, **Stanko Vuk**, **Aldo Žerjal**, **Irena Žerjal**, and others. Present-day Austria has yielded such authors as **Lev Detela**, **Milena Merlak**, **Janko Messner**, and the brilliant woman poet **Cvetka Lipuš**, while the vigorous Slovene cultural creativity in the Raab district, within present-day Hungary, is described in some of the works by **Miki Roš**. Moreover, after World War II and the considerable - mainly political - emigration of Slovenes, the emigrants to Canada, the USA, Argentina, and Australia in particular committed themselves to the demanding task of “transplanting” their native Slovene culture. They are represented by such figures as **Tine Debeljak**, **Pavla Gruden**, **Ruda Jurčec**, **France Papež**, **Ludve Potokar**, **Bert Pribac**, **Tone Rode**, **Milena Šoukal**, **Vladimir Truhlar**, **Narte**

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**Velikonja**, and many others. Writing far away from their home country, they have only begun to be recognised in the canon of Slovene literature during the last fifteen years. Emigrant poetry from the literary canon established after Slovenia's declaration of independence is presented in the 2002 Slovene anthology by France Pibernik, *A Word over the Ocean* (*Beseda čez ocean*), while the anthology *Words Remained like Seeds* (*Beseda so ostale kot semena*), edited by Igor Grdina, was published as early as 1990.

Thus it may be concluded that literature written in Slovene, emerging from the Slovene cultural context, is far more rich and complex than this slender compilation of fragments can reflect. In fact, the limited extent of the book even excludes many excellent 20th century authors from predominantly Slovene cultural areas, such as **Anton Leskovec**, **Stanko Majcen**, **Ivan Mrak**, or **Anton Novačan**, who were deemed “ideologically controversial” and thus barred from the Socialist canon, or at least considered “problematic” (e.g. **Ludvik Mrzel** or **Milan Pugelj**, and in the second half of the 20th century **Igor Torkar** and **Andrej Capuder**). Still other authors, whose single or collected works represent some of the highest accomplishments in contemporary Slovene literature, are not illustrated through extracts because of their highly specific language, style, or cultural references, which could hardly survive translation into the English language and its own cultural context. Such examples are the brilliant “Istrian” novel *Women of Šavrinija* (*Šavrinke*) by **Marjan Tomšič**, or the narrative corpus by **Saša Vuga**.

Other important authors not presented in the anthology include **Prežihov Voranc** (1893-1950), **Peter Božič**, **Pavle Zidar**, **Jože Snoj**, and **Milan Vincetič**, who have contributed significantly to the modernisation of Slovene post-war literature; **Draga Potočnjak** and **Matjaž Zupančič**, who have helped to modernise Slovene drama; and **Polona Glavan** and **Mojca Kumerdej**, who belong to the youngest generation of Slovene short-story writers. Highly individual voices in contemporary poetry include **Marjan Strojjan**, **Tone Škerjanc**, **Gregor Podlogar**, **Jurij Hudolin**, and **Jure Jakob**.

While this modest anthology is the first attempt at an English compilation of extracts or poems covering almost five hundred years of Slovene literary tradition, it does not deny

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its sometimes barely acceptable “makeshift” solutions in regard to both the previous periods and the “plurality of discourse” in the most recent literature. Its approach in this respect is conservative, based on the already extant selections and translations of Slovene literature into English, while the choice of new translations follows the established national canon marked by the (often) socially committed and (always) nationally constitutive functions of Slovene literature. The latter is best expressed in the historical novel genre, which was developed (in addition to the authors illustrated through extracts) by **Ivan Tavčar** and **Fran Saleški Finžgar**, while a contemporary variant, not marked by commitment, is emerging in the work of **Katarina Marinčič**.

Since the cultural identity of the Slovene people has not been protected or fostered by a sovereign state of its own until recently, the nationally constitutive role of its literature has been crucial and correspondingly prominent ever since its Protestant beginnings. In the 20th century, the preservation of Slovene cultural autonomy through literature was greatly aided by the Slovene PEN organisation, founded in 1926: many intellectuals numbered among its members played a vital role in protecting Slovene cultural autonomy from the centralist policy of the Kingdom, and later the Socialist Federal Republic, of Yugoslavia. A keystone of the cultural and political activity of the Slovene PEN is represented by the essays and criticism coming from one of the central figures in its history, **Josip Vidmar**, particularly his famous essay *Slovene-ness as a Cultural Problem* (*Kulturni problem slovenstva*, 1932).

The activities of the Slovene PEN members, both literary and extraliterary ones, may thus be said to reflect the complexity of Slovene literature. The editor hopes that, despite the limitations dictated by space, the present edition has succeeded in outlining at least its essence.

The varying length of the selected extracts was largely determined by our aim to present coherent pieces of narrative.