
The Key Witnesses

Looking at the Younger Slovene Prose
at the Turn of the Millennia

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Looking back at the period around the year 1990 from a ten-year distance, we can already establish that it was one of the most intense periods in Slovene history. Decades and even centuries of the firmly anchored national constant were turned into dust in no time. Similarly to other countries of Eastern Europe, Slovenia as well saw Communism – i.e. its Yugoslav version – retreat almost overnight to give way to factional parliamentarianism; alongside this the Slovenes got their own state for the first time in the history. We got Slovene passports, the Slovene army, membership in international organisations, the flag at the Olympics, our own banknotes as well as other state attributes. A fast and in many ways uncontrolled privatization started, huge shopping centres mushroomed, new kilometres of motorways were celebrated. The physiognomy of the statelet on the sunny side of the Alps was instantly changed. Despite our embracing the new times with euphoric enthusiasm, we could never imagine how radically these swift social changes would influence our lives. For decades Yugoslav communism had been consolidating a precisely specified system of social roles: from informers and high officials to church dignitaries, hippies and dissidents of all kinds. We had been supposed to play our social role to the end of our life. Moreover, our following generations would be replaying the roles for-unimaginably-ever. The game was suddenly over, its players had found themselves in the clearing of freedom. Consequently, many are quite shocked and confused. A journalist having been so careful not to say too much for years, a dissident who after having been imprisoned for a few years resumed grumbling – where is their executioner now, whom they have internalized in the course of time and have got used to like to an unnoticed pet without which they cannot imagine their everyday life? Hence all the

clumsiness and the clownishness in the young Slovene state, which displays all the symptoms of typical children's diseases as has been benevolently observed by Zorko Simčič, a writer who spent long years in Argentina.

Following Slovene independence and the simultaneous democratic changes people seemed to appreciate most the voice of the writers. On the one hand, this was partly due to the fact that the Slovene language - with literature as its supreme articulation - is one of the essential parts if not even the central constitutional element of the national identity. On the other hand, it had been the role played by the literary field in the times of communism that undoubtedly resulted in the high value of the writers and literature. Literature had been one of the rare oases where a certain form of resistance against the totalitarian system had been possible and where the ideas about the freedom of an individual and about fundamental independence in relation to each of the ruling ideologies could be cultivated. However, it has to be said at once that the splendour of resistance had had to pay its price not only in social sanctions but in the very nature of literary works as well. Drama and prose are what I have specifically in mind. Unlike poetry they are always quite closely linked to the social context where they come into being. Criticizing the authority and its strategies was sometimes less sometimes more metaphorical, and there had been little direct cursing for understandable reasons. If we limit ourselves to the postwar Slovene prose, the pressure of a heavy millstone can always be felt behind, the pressure of a monolith and its weight, pressing on numerous spheres of a character's life. The latter never stops to find original ways of defense. It is manifested either as a direct confrontation, as lying-low and lurking, or as a desperate escape. The postwar prose at its best had given us epochal chronicles of the tension between an individual and a totalitarian system, a catalogue of numerous unusual situations which could befall an individual in the communist society. From today's point of view there is something magnificently fatal and almost heroic in the dialectic of an individual and a condensed social mass. However, such an ambitious tone is not just a caprice of a local literature born in the communist milieu. It goes unbelievably organically hand-in-hand with the contemporary trend of the world modernism which, taking into account the phenomenological findings and limitations,

has tried, once and for all, to disentangle the destiny of the world by the vivisection of a fragment, accessible to the perception of an individual. Therefore, it had not been circumstantial that the leading Slovene prose writers who, despite the lid of the system, had belonged to the global techno-media civilization, had enthusiastically accepted the views and methods of modernism and had moulded them into original narrative worlds.

Leaving aside the central modernistic movement which always cultivated an extreme social critical attitude, another literary movement came into being in the seventies and became even more intense in the eighties. It was no longer interested in the fact that its existence was socially conditioned. Its unique escapism found its legitimation in the maxim »writing literature for literature's sake«. At first this distinctive escape into inner imaginative worlds, accompanied by linguistic brilliance and neck-breaking fantastic switches, can be traced in a variant of ultramodernism, later referred to as »the new Slovene prose«. The autoreferential tendencies in literature were finally pushed to its extremes by the metafictionists at the end of the eighties. The metafictionists, similarly to the sociocritical modernists, can also be seen to be closely linked with the contemporary searchings in world prose. To put it generally, what we speak about is testing in practice Barthes' famous statement about modern literature as »the literature of exhaustion«. The great romanesque adventures are gone, what remains are prosaic drafts, simulations, and the sea of ironically inserted quotations. In place of a novelist resembling Hemingway's characters who on his adventurous expeditions records the material for his creative pieces of work, a writer - an intellectual - gets in the spotlight for the first time in the Slovene literary iconography. He sits in his study and observes the world outside from the distance doubting that anything shocking can still happen in this world. An Academy member with a broken pen.

And what happened in the nineties that were marked by a distinctive break in the social sense? With a few obvious exceptions, those socially engaged prose writers remaining on the scene continued with the narrative models based on the neuralgic relationship between the individual and the ideologically united social structure. Most of their younger contemporaries, who had before indulged in playing with words

and within-literature adventures, now either continued replaying old patterns or abandoned their literary creativities; only few of them tried to find a way to detach themselves from these re-depositing, alluvial strategies. However, in the nineties the creativity of the writers born after the year 1960 was in full swing, though some of them had been writing before. The abstract year of 1960 could be the limit, arbitrary and unnatural as it may seem, because it proves to be useful as to the interpretation and orientation. These young authors have been established as extreme individualists and their poetics as differing and autonomous. However, they have never tried to form any kind of manifestos, nor have they tried to find the characteristics they have in common, which can be explained by their aversion to similar gestures in the past. However, despite the risk of such an enterprise, a certain frame for these absolutely genuine narrative articulations could be attempted. A provisional model could be set, the sensibility, differently coloured, yet common to all, could be roughly outlined.

In the nineties the unified centre of social power was dispersed and the numerous consequent tiers of power started more or less aggressively to restrict the individual's freedom. To younger prose writers, having been young men or even teenagers before, the new situation becomes the only reality fundamentally determining their experience of the world. Their existential or creative position could no longer be given sense by any kind of resistance to the single and omnipresent authoritarian strategy having been personified by the communist ideology and its numerous applications in everyday life. On the other hand, they must have realized it is impossible for them to retreat to a completely isolated island to enjoy comfortably in their aesthetic games and intellectual push-ups. They cannot go on unaffected by the reality around them, which seems to be too dense and even neurotic, and which tempts them as well like an unknown land full of possible adventures. This is manifested in their prose by the fact that these younger narrators once again indulge themselves in telling stories. However, such a narration is never a cunning activity supported by a mass of information taken from the literary tradition. No, it proves to be once again a seemingly naive passion to tell a story which may be the only way to frame the chaos of our lives. It often seems that these young story-tellers were telling us extended anecdotes in a bar, on a

lonely beach or in a crowded street. The sweet innocence, however, is only a deluding masque, maybe a kind invitation to listen to and to read. The younger prose writers certainly do not want to build hermetically closed towers, the keys of which are given to the chosen ones only.

The fresh literary landscapes seem to exist very near to us; if at a crossroad we chose to turn left instead of right, we would bump into their heroes and heroines. Suddenly there appears to be a surprisingly great number of such streets, bars and other ordinary settings, which have become very important - some are even personally mythological. It has been said and repeated so many times that reality itself is the most fantastic of all - and here the power of this statement becomes fascinating through numerous variations of an ordinary living room so familiar to anybody, or through numerous points of view inspecting the single and eternal living room from different perspectives. And it is through these points of view - the seemingly naive literary processings - that the banality of the room can be transformed into a genuine mythology which for a moment succeeds in moving the walls and giving the setting absolutely unexpected spaciousness. The stories woven by younger prose writers are leisurely told and with no wish to grasp the whole world by the point they make. The feeling that the society has become a phantom is responsible for a sort of narrowed narrative terrain. A writer represents only those spheres of the society that are within the range of his sight. In the past the whole structure of the society could be rightly guessed and the integral metaphor of the world could be formed only on the basis of a local pattern as one of the numerous prints of the global structure. This would seem utterly suspicious now. The more firmly the heroes of the nineties stand in the world, the more of the world escapes their field of vision. The world has become a thicket full of traps and surprises. And it is a kind of inborn blindness that seems to make the articulation of younger writers less metaphorical and more metonymical in its relation to reality. The field of vision is narrowed but it is extremely illuminated. Everything else that remains in the dark bursts into the illuminated strip with a sudden jerk like a meteor or a flying object. The narrative reality sails like a ship across the unpredictable waters. Firstly, it seems to be still; secondly, it seems to be losing its course, and thirdly, it seems to be caught by the hurricane.

From this point of view even the ever present literary themes are seen in a slightly different way. It seems there are no great tragedies, no absolute endings, no comprehensive enlightenments... Whenever a megalomaniac conclusion threatens to be made, the irony prevails. The latter, however, does not annihilate human feelings or knowledge. It just helps to ground them a bit and make them relative. Every defeat or victory, every depression or euphoria, they are only partial outcomes of a longlasting battle whose final outcome will come as a complete surprise to anyone regardless of his/her wisdom or experience. As there is no single, no actually metaphysical source of energy which would be the focal point of the whole narrative world, so there are no monumental beginnings or outcomes of a hero's wanderings. This, however, does not imply that emotional crises, for example, in the new prose of the nineties are only computer games or culturally accepted codes, which could no longer make deep cuts. On the contrary, one of the central if not the only focal theme of the narrative microcosms becomes love in its most different forms and stages: from a passionate fuck, a casual flirt, a fatal infatuation, a dull routine to tiresomeness, a depression, hatred and coldness. And the very preoccupation with love and its many disguises shows that this prose is not solipsistically marking time and it is not about unambitious scrapings asking to be recognized on account of their cute glitter hiding a huge void below. The importance of love themes proves a constant inclination towards and obsession with another person, it proves the fanatic search and pursuit of that person, which at times resembles rage and at times disinterested lingering. It seems that another person promises a sort of authenticity, the real warmth in one's life, or even the one that is sublime... It seems that the highest form of personal freedom is born in affectionate embraces. We speak about the freedom which is next to love most frequently mentioned by this prose. Despite the changed social circumstances the extent of freedom available is the same as it used to be, and the imperative of literary heroes is no smaller than it used to be. What seems to be changed in the new climatic conditions are the strategies of surrounding the freedom and the obstacles that need to be overcome. Dissipation, drugs, wild speedings, a night discussion, wanderings, violence - and dozens of other states could be the way

to secure a patch of free land. Maybe somewhere unexpectedly, somewhere in between two moments. Under the masque of faked leisureliness the younger prose writers of the 1990s turn out to be tough guys, fighters who will not be easy to defeat. Despite all the traumas these times are their times, the times they are adjusted to like predatory animals which master the laws of the jungle and show no mercy when stalking their prey, and ignoring other stronger beasts which may devour them behind the first rock. Therefore, for the time being their trump card is a life of ease and gaiety. A lot of untravelled ways still lie ahead of them. Decisive battles will be there waiting for them sooner or later. For today's observer, most unusual and fascinating literary matches will be played by some of them.

New achievements of the younger prose writers can be eagerly anticipated since some of the most outstanding ones have already created original and distinctive narrative worlds charged with an unusual and surprising energy. Their efforts up to now have seemed to find the purest form in short prose, although some interesting and ambitious novelistic attempts cannot be ignored. Let us fly over the phalanx of - in my opinion - the most representative names of the short-length genre.

Maja Novak carries us into a seemingly crystally clear landscape where everything that happens is in harmony with solid rational laws. However, below the smooth surface a restless worm of decay grows, it slowly becomes fatter and extends its room of manoeuvre. And then suddenly, to our faked surprise, its megalomaniac wish to break the chilly grace bursts out. The pressure is so powerful that the foundations of the world are shaken in the cataclysmic delirium, the houses fall apart, the roads dance wildly, and the long-tamed insanity floods everything. If things develop slowly before exploding in the prose of Maja Novak, then everything is put into the turbulent gear in the prose of *Andrej Morovič*. Its heroes are greedy predatory birds, eating into whatever they could find, preferably into sexy bodies. There seems to be no end to the gobbling down and drowning in delicious bites. The instincts of pagan idols find a promising land in the colossi of metropolises. Whereas Morovič's characters look forward to any novelty, the prose of *Jani Virk* presents things quite differently. His heroes resemble medieval troubadours who have lost their

way and found themselves in the times they do not understand. The concrete blocks of flats turn into frightfully mysterious castles with magic belles behind their windows. The knights may be dreamy, with their eyes fixed on the glittering female silhouettes or simply on the sky above, but they never forget the logic of swordplay. On their thorny way to their princesses they swiftly pull out their blades, they are relentless but never melancholic warriors. However, their profit is, in the nature of things, next to none, since the femmes fatales keep evaporating from their embraces. In contrast to Virk's tender-hearted boxers, *Andrej Blatnik's* characters belong to a much more peaceful species. Blatnik's prose represents a refined documentation of the feeling of urban void in every possible nuance. The bodies seem to float in a vacuum, where the skin rarely touches another's skin, and where a small gap between two people is in fact an infinite distance. Words are silenced, they are dying away into nothingness, and what is heard are the worn-out clichés preventing more fatal misunderstandings and establishing a more bearable co-existence. The weak flames of passions and desires remain tightly closed in hermetic capsules. The lads of *Mart Lenardič* are born to vegetate with dignity, to lie around and sit around, and in the best case to wander leisurely around. Besides the undeniable pleasure they take in drinking beer, they are vividly interested in at least one other thing in their life: women. The latter keep waking them up from their lethargy, and consequently their unbelievable chasing abilities are awakened. Formerly clumsy men are suddenly full of tricks, they use cunning tactics, they show decisiveness to act swiftly and a pinch of necessary madness. However, the magnificent successes do not seem to fulfill them with blissful egomania. They are like fish in the water when they empty another mug of beer sniggering at their own slightly bizarre adventures. We can be grateful to *Tomaž Kosmač* who has succeeded in transforming the endless revelries around the small provincial town into a real phantasmogory with numerous unexpected and almost surrealistically conceived collisions of quite normal and banal scenes. A never-ending journey is conjured up from these endless circular visitings of the same old places. The narrator is always an ironically distanced and indispensable extra, whose ecological orientation prevents him from hindering the spontaneous flow of events by sharp cuts. *Mobor Hudej* is more of a man of action.

Again there is no abundance of unexpected and shocking events in the world of his prose, yet his heroes are real fans of adrenaline states. They find themselves in the middle of such states by accident or they provoke them - it depends on how we see it. Their potential is best revealed here. There is an echo of an angry young man, of a true street warrior, who does not give up so easily, and who after a small fight and from a safe distance can hardly hide the inborn pleasure for making trouble displayed by the frowning look of satisfaction on his face. *Dušan Čater's* heroes seem not to take much pleasure in their blood pressure running high after fighting with society. However, if they cannot completely avoid the conflict, they mostly know how to excellently evade it and still come out as heroes. Their usual tactics are a bit different. Provocations would be released in a benevolent and slightly teasing way. Most people present would not be even aware of them and they would think that they have had such a good time together and that they have even profited from the conversation although later they would not be able to repeat anything. Those few, however, who would be able to recognize the articulated provocations, would form a merry alliance. The heroes of *Aleš Čar* are consciously aware of their sinking into the state of hibernation, the state of zero point. However, in the course of their vegetation there is always something that radically derails them. Most often this is the closest person to them - their lover. And at that moment the idea of vegetating together seems to become pointless, and suddenly the remaining vital power is awakened and tries to activate the situation. Even if the price to be paid has the form of radical provocations, of instantly invented stimulants, which are to revive desire and other most powerful emotions. A long-lasting building up of tension is suddenly resolved and manifested in the wild dance of hot bodies and spinning heads. The youngest author of this anthology is *Polona Glavan*. She charts the contemporary urbanism with a refined irony as well. The world of seemingly infinite possibilities is often turned into the landscape of silenced articulations and of failed encounters. The list of names could be filled in with many other young talents, but it appears that the above-listed have shown to be creatively most potential in the field of short prose. Yet we have to be aware that undiscovered stars sitting on the bench may still join the match.

The young lions of the Slovene short prose have not started out of nothing. They were infected by the modernists with their hunger of freedom-diggers, and by the imperative to wholeheartedly inspect the themes poking at the labyrinths of the underskin landscapes. The ultramodernists and metafictionalists have contributed to the package by supplying their easy-going and unburdened attitudes. The legacy has been tailored by the younger prose writers; the personally coloured novelties have been added in accordance with the time and the world. Therefore, we have got a dozen authentic narrative landscapes which will survive as top witnesses of the Slovene transition. These are testimonies which can be characterised as reckless, melancholic, resentful, rational, neurotic... in short, testimonies with a pedigree.

Translated by Irena Zorko